

Thursday Evening English

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Date: 25 August 2016

[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the second part of Scripture that we read. Prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 66, reading again at the beginning of the chapter.

Thus says the Lord, Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What is the house that you would build for me?

What is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord.

But this is the one to whom I will look, he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word, and so on.

Thus says the Lord. The Lord is a phrase that is repeated many times in this book of prophecy.

[1 : 02] And it is the characteristic introduction that Isaiah uses to communicate the mind of God.

If you ask me exactly when did the Lord say this, I cannot tell you. I don't know the precise answer. Apart from the fact that he communicated this message through the prophet Isaiah. The background to the message appears to be the returning people of Israel from Babylonian captivity, and their intention to rebuild the temple that had been destroyed.

And this, of course, raises the topic or the subject of worship and who is to be worshipped.

Were those who were to return asking that question, did they have their own concept of God, as we frequently tend to have?

[2 : 17] The implication, I believe, is given in the pronouncement here, would appear to indicate that that is so.

But whether they were asking the question or not, I'm not really sure. But I'd like to bring three thoughts before you from this passage.

First of all, the eminence of God. Secondly, the esteemed of God. And thirdly, the example of mere external worship.

Firstly, the eminence of God. When we gather together for the corporate worship of God, and I say that deliberately, the corporate worship of God, do we have a concept, a vision of the one, or who God is?

I think at the outset, it is worthwhile to ask ourselves that question. Because as I said in my introduction, it appears from the context here, that those who are being initially addressed by Isaiah, or by God through Isaiah, had a wrong view of the temple, and even more importantly, a wrong concept of God.

[3 : 49] Right through this book of prophecy, by Isaiah, there is an emphasis on the exalted and immense nature of God.

That may arise and be derived from the vision which the prophet saw when he received his call to service.

We read this evening, in chapter 6, of the vision received by the prophet in the year that King Uzziah died. I saw the Lord, says the prophet, sitting upon a throne high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

And that seems to have set the tone for the place and conception of God in the life of the prophet Isaiah.

And yet, in that vision, where he was elevated, as it were, to the very throne room of heaven, there is no attempt to describe the Lord himself.

[5 : 04] It is rather the supremacy of the rule of God that is depicted for us. His glorious majesty and splendor is set before us by the prophet.

The elevated place of God and the holiness of God, as one writer expresses it, divine holiness is preeminently the unsullied and immaculate ethical purity of the God who is opposed to sin and evil in all its manifestations.

He is absolutely and unspeakably holy. And given the vision that the prophet received, it is little wonder that the prophet was compelled to cry out with a deep awareness of the contamination of sin in his own life.

Woe is me is the cry of the prophet. For I am lost. I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

Now that self-assessment was not intended to open the door to the pit of despair but rather to propel the prophet to seek the blessing of forgiveness and acceptance.

[6 : 40] And every time I read that chapter, the sixth chapter of Isaiah, it transports me back to a day more than fifty years ago in January 1966.

Perhaps for many here you weren't born then. But in January 1966 I came as a schoolboy to the local school here.

It was the time of the prelims for hires and when I came into school we were told that school was being dismissed.

The reason for the school being dismissed one of the teachers had suddenly passed away. His name was William MacLeod.

He was an elder in this congregation. He was the Sunday school superintendent when I attended Sunday school.

[7 : 53] He was my Latin teacher and my Greek teacher. So I held this man in the highest esteem and to be told that he had been removed suddenly out of life.

I found difficult to cope with. I found it difficult emotionally, rationally and in many other ways.

And when I went home, I went round the circular route round the creed with which many in Stornoway in those days would be familiar.

I came home and I took out the family Bible. And this was the chapter at which the family Bible opened. And with tears streaming down my face, I said to God, send me.

Now, I was not a converted person then. In my own estimation, looking back, I was not.

[9 : 09] But that was the prayer that I had, such was the impression that this man of God had made upon my life.

And so you find Isaiah deeply impressed by the vision that was given to him of the supremacy of our sovereign God.

And as you go through the book, you will find this recurring again and again. Chapter 40, for example, the question is posed, to whom then will you liken God?

What likeness compare with him? Do you not know? Do you not hear? Was it not told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. The incomparable God of Israel, the great creator God, the self-sufficient in wisdom, supreme in power, unique in dignity, supreme in authority.

[10 : 22] And again in chapter 57, you find his majestic position coupled with his absolute holiness. For thus says the one who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy, I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, to revive the heart of the contrite.

And so in this chapter 66, in this first verse of the passage that we have read, this position or this supremacy of God is reinforced by the self-description that the Lord gives to the prophet.

Thus says the Lord, heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. In some places it is mentioned that the ark is his footstool.

The practice when royalty were seated on elevated thrones was to have a small stool for their feet. And here when the prophet or when God through the prophet is stating, heaven is my throne and the earth my footstool, God through the prophet is bringing us face to face with the immensity of God.

How do you get your head around this? The whole earth, with its puffed up importance, functioning as a mere footstool for a great God.

[12 : 02] You remember how the psalmist expresses it, for the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, the heights of the mountain are his also.

And you remember at the time of the consecration of the temple, Solomon recognized that no earthly house, no matter how ornate and the first temple was very ornate, but nowhere near

capable of accommodating God.

Solomon was pleading for the presence of God to grace the temple. But will God, says Solomon, indeed dwell on the earth, behold heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built.

And so in this context here, you have this almost, for want of a better phrase, this delicious note of irony, theological irony, in the rhetorical question that is posed.

What is the house, says God, that you would build for me? What is the place of my rest? And it seems to me that implied in this question is the very fact that this was the intention of those who were addressed to have a God who is much less than the iconic, supreme, majestic God of revelation.

[13 : 44] A God who can be accommodated in an earthly building. A God who is but a shadow and not even that of the supreme majestic one who has brought the very universe into being by the word of his power and who continues to sustain it.

This God is not only the God of creative power, but he is the God of redemptive power. He is able to transform spiritually dead men, women, boys and girls and imbue them with the vitality of spiritual life.

And grasshopper man, because that is the comparison that is made in this book, grasshopper man, puny grasshopper man, would seek to diminish the supreme majestic power of the sovereign creator God, the God of redemptive power, and confine him to a created building.

Now, I don't believe for one moment that God is criticizing the people for building a temple, or for renewing the temple building.

That's not the point. The criticism is aimed at the conception that they have of the God whom they are seeking to worship.

[15 : 31] worship. And it's all very well to suppose that this merely applies to Old Testament Israel, having a defective view of the majesty of God, or that it applies to apostate Israel.

I think not. Is there not the same danger today that we want, for want a better phrase, to shrink God, to make him, as it were, fit into our conception of God, a pliable, small figure, manipulated by impotent grasshopper man, a God who becomes so unlike the living and true God, as revealed to us in Holy Scripture, to make him virtually unrecognizable as the God of revelation and the God whom we are commanded to worship and acknowledge.

So let us ask ourselves tonight, how big is our God? God, how big is he? Is he as big as the God of revelation?

The God who is set before us in the Scriptures? Or are we worshiping a God created by the fertile imagination of man?

A God reduced, diminished, God made small who is not at all the God of truth.

[17 : 30] The eminence of God, heaven is my throne and the earth is my fruit store. Oh, does the immensity of God, does it fill your soul with awe and wonder?

does it stir you with love and adoration? Bringing you to worship of this eminent, glorious, supreme God of revelation.

And that brings me to my second point, and that is this, the esteemed of God. But this is the one to whom I will look, he who is humble and contrite in spirit, trembles at my word.

Humble, contrite, and trembles. The triple description that is given to us here does not, in my view, refer to three different type of people, but is descriptive of the person who is a true worshipper of the living and the true God.

The person who has a right relationship inwardly and secretly with God. The focus is not on a building, however ornate, however much it might be used for worship.

[19 : 03] The focus is on the inner life of man and the relationship that man enjoys with this elevated, glorious being who is God.

Where there is that specific attitude of self-consciousness that is sensitive and responsive to the loftiness, the holiness, the eternal glory and divinity of God.

Do you remember the distinction that is made for us in the scriptures when Samuel was sent by God to anoint a future king of Israel?

And you remember how he was sent to the family of Jesse in Bethlehem? You might remember that Samuel was somewhat uneasy and apprehensive about the mission that was entrusted to him and probably with good reason, humanly speaking, because you remember what he says, to God if Saul

hears it, he will kill me.

Samuel was in no doubt of the hostility of Saul to the intentions that he was carrying out. And when Samuel sees the stature of the eldest son of Jesse, his name was Eliab, he considers that his mission has been brought to a successful conclusion.

[20 : 46] Surely this is the Lord's, the Lord's anointed is before me, is the thought that passes through the mind of the man of God. Given his fears, he might have been a tad too anxious to get his mission over with.

But God indicates to him that this son Eliab is not his choice. And you remember why God tells him he is not his choice.

The Lord said to Samuel, do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature because I have rejected him. The Lord sees not as man sees, man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.

And here we see how the person who is esteemed by God is the person whose inner life declares that the God who is revealed in Scripture, the majestic God of revelation, is the object of worship in the life of this person.

The immensity of God is grasped at least in a measure on this person. Humble as one who relies solely and absolutely on God.

[22 : 13] Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that bare recognition of the immensity of God and the littleness of man is sufficient in itself to produce true worship.

But when a person has been touched as Isaiah was, with the call of fire and the consciousness of sin forgiven, imparted to him, so that person comes to inwardly delight in the infinite perfections presence of God, then there is that reverential fear that leaves a man or a woman or a boy or a girl humble in the presence of God.

And there is happiness associated with the life of such a person who is trusting in the God of revelation. Blessed is the man or happy is the man who makes the Lord his trust.

Now, the humility that is spoken of here is not the type of servile, self-righteous humility.

The call to humility pervades the whole of Scripture. And that tells us that humility is not something that we have by nature.

[23 : 47] You know, sometimes we describe people as being humble. Well, there is humble and humble. And the humility that is spoken of here is a humility that comes through the infusion of grace into the hearts and lives of men and women and boys and girls.

The word that is used here for humble has connotations of poverty or penury in the Hebrew. By nature we are proud and God finds human pride absolutely and totally repulsive.

pride is a reason a real reason I believe why there is unbelief in our world. The arrogant refusal of grasshopper man to bow before a great God and receive the marvelous gift of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Sadly, pride is a trait of our fallen human nature. We are all afflicted by it and left to ourselves we would be the center of the universe.

We trust ourselves and our own resources. If we succeed, for example, we boast look at what I have achieved and if we don't succeed, oh well, I didn't have the resources, what could I do?

[25 : 39] There is that tendency of pride in our hearts. Scripture reminds us God opposes the proud but he gives grace to the humble and grace when it comes into your life it bursts your bubble, doesn't it?

burst that bubble of pride and the conception that you have of yourself as someone who is worthy and deserving of the attention of the supreme God and you discover that when grace comes in and bursts your bubble that you are totally undeserving of the least of all of God's mercies. grace. And even although your bubble might be burst yet pride although broken still seeks to raise its head does it not?

Time after time even in the life of the believer who is in receipt of grace. grace. Some of you perhaps all of you for all I know may have heard of a man by the name of William Carey.

The age of seventy he was writing a letter to his son and in his letter he wrote along these lines Ayami said this day seventy years old a monument of divine mercy and goodness though on review of my life I find much very much for which I ought to be humbled in the dust my direct and positive sins are innumerable my negligence in the Lord's work has been great I have not promoted his cause nor sought his glory and honor as I ought not withstanding all this I am spared till now and

am still retained in his work

[28 : 10] I trust for acceptance with him to the blood of Christ alone now these were the words of a man who worked without respite with scarcely a tenth of the resources of support he required man who translated the Bible into many languages and dialects the humble man the humble man the person in need in the penury of need relying on the Lord for help and protection humility the humility that is spoken of here is the humility that is characterized by John the Baptist where the heavenly bridegroom has absolute priority in his life and where you find

John saying he must increase but I must decrease is that must in my life and in yours because devotion to Christ brings a humble desire for his glory alone well let us ask ourselves do we know something of that the kind of humility that marked Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus constantly desirous of being at the feet of Christ as she drank in the teaching of the Lord the kind of humility that is seen in the extravagant outpouring of loving devotion in her anointing of the Lord to be humble is to be Christ like indeed it is only in

Christ that we can ever be truly humble if we are genuinely occupied with the one who was meek and lowly in heart if we are constantly beholding his glory in the mirror of God's word then we shall be changed into the same image from glory to glory even as by the spirit of the Lord the humble man has an acute self awareness of sin and he is esteemed by God but there is another characteristic he is contrite or she is contrite in spirit and the word that is used here in the Hebrew very interestingly is only used two other times I believe in the Old Testament and intriguingly both times it is used to describe the lameness of

Mephibosheth you remember he was the sole survivor of the house of Saul and normally in times when another king came to the throne every member of the previous king particularly if they were of a different lineage were eradicated that was the practice this was the sole survivor he was a crippled person the sole survivor of the house of Saul and to this man David showed covenant love for the sake of Jonathan it's a very touching and moving story in the Old Testament one that is very suggestive and this facet of the character of the true worshipper who is humble is a description of a person who is no longer running in a direction of their own choice by nature we want to do things in the words of the old song we want to do it my way don't we not

God's way because God's way cuts across my way and your way but the person who is contrite in spirit is under new management so to speak under the controlling and motivating power of a new affection a person who has been brought to recognize his or her own sinful inadequacy and seeks grace to be subservient to the Lord you know when you are lame perhaps some of you literally have experienced lameness you're not as fit as you used to be you're not able to walk as fast or to run as fast as you used to run you're hripling along and there is that implied in the word that is used here contrite in spirit a sense of inability in spiritual matters you remember

[33 : 49] Mephibosheth's self description of himself when he appears before David full of apprehensions and David reassures him of the purpose of his being brought into the palace and you remember Mephibosheth self description and self assessment of himself what is your servant that you should show regard for a dead dog such as I a dead dog repulsive lifeless worthless fit only to be buried or thrown out is that not true how the believer often feels in the service of your Lord contrite in spirit so conscious of the way that sin leaves you disabled spiritually your contrition of spirit leading you constantly to seek the application of the cleansing blood of the lamb oh how grateful you are for the efficacy of the cry of the shed blood of the lamb within the veil that is able to cleanse from all unrighteousness and the third characteristic is this humble contrite in spirit trembles at my word trembles not trembled at my word but continues to tremble at my word in in other words it is speaking of a sensitive longing for obedience it is the mark of the true devout worshipper of the supreme god those who wish to be searched by the truth in order to have a closer walk with their lord and life spurgeon makes the observation that certain people are seeking sweets as he expresses it and comforts but god's wise children do not wish for these in undue measure now we are constantly told how harmful sugar is

I cannot tell you whether that is true or not because I don't have the knowledge to make a pronouncement but we are constantly told by those who are our betters in medical knowledge that sugar is not healthy for us and surely it is for bread that we come to God not for sugar it is for feeding healthy eating that we come to God God and it is to those who have these characteristics who are humble and contrite and who trembles this is the one says God to whom I will look to whom I will look with approval to whom I will look with esteem upon whom I will fix my eye expressed it like

this low at thy feet my soul would lie here safety dwells and peace divine still let me live beneath thine eye for life eternal life eternal life is thine well with what love and care and delight God looks on the lives of those to whom these characteristics belong happy says the Bible is the man who fears the Lord always the man who goes in the company of this great God humbly meekly trembling at the truth and that is the person who ultimately will go through the portals of glory and who will put their crown at the feet of the Lord Jesus to him who loves us freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom priest to his

God and father to him be glory and dominion forever amen oh would you not wish to be numbered among the esteemed of God those who are assured of the divine favor when persecuted by their brothers as you find it in the context here your brothers who hate you and cast you out for my name sake have said let the Lord be glorified that we may see your joy but it is they who shall be put to shame the esteemed of God the eminence of God and finally briefly the example of mere external worship note how the prophet sets this out he speaks of all the legitimate offerings that were prescribed under the Mosaic law the slaughtering of an ox or a bull the sacrifice of a lamb the grain offering or the memorial offering of frankincense all as I said legitimate offerings under the Mosaic law and the thrust of this verse verse 3 I believe is this we can have the rights of worship but if our hearts are not right with God we might as well be engaged in pagan ritual because you notice where these legitimate offerings that were prescribed under the Mosaic law are given up you notice the contrast that is made he who slaughters an ox like one who kills a man who sacrifices a lamb like one who breaks a dog's neck a dog was regarded as unclean like one who presents a grain offering like one who offers pigs blood makes a memorial offering like one who blesses an idol and so on we can have the rights of worship but if our hearts are not right with God we might as well be engaged in pagan ritual and paganism and ritualism equally offensive to

[40 : 59] God so that no matter what the ritual is no matter how orthodox it might appear on the surface it's no different to idolatrous worship where there is no heart subservience and adoration of God in our inner life and you notice how they are assessed those who have chosen their own ways and their soul delights in their abomination they made their choice they have no respect for the one who states heaven is my throne and the earth my footstool and the reason is this because says God when I called no one answered when I spoke they did not listen there was no response there was no obedience when what the sovereign God said fell on deaf ears there was a total disregard for the message of truth they made their choice and they were deaf to the voice that spoke with authority and with power and of course the counter implication is this that the humble the contrite and those who the one who trembles do listen and give ear their constant refrain is this let me hear what

God the Lord will speak why because like Job of old they treasure the words of his mouth more than the portion of food is that true of you and me that we treasure the word of God more than our daily food how sweet says the psalmist are your words to my taste sweeter than honey to my mouth through your precepts I get understanding they chose says God and you notice he says I also will choose and the consequences are extremely dire for the people who ignore the call and the speaking of God despite almost slavish adherence to the ritual of worship but the heart far away no inner devotion no commitment to the

Lord like others who are spoken of in the Old Testament and the New Testament this people honors me with their lips but their heart is far from me in vain do they worship me and so the prophet sets out for us the extensive nature of the divine judgment that befalls them it is surely a sobering and solitary reminder to ourselves with regard not just to our acts of corporate worship but to our acts of worship in general in our daily interaction with God for whom heaven is his throne and the earth merely his footstool oh let us one and all give ear and obedience to the authority device that addresses each of us as individuals who are accountable to him so that we are not found among those who have chosen their own way and to turn a deaf ear to the voice of the most high flagrantly disobey his teaching

God will ultimately vindicate his own for they are his workmanship may we have our portion with them tonight and have our portion with them then the eminence of God heaven is my throne the earth my footstool the esteemed of God to this one will I look who is humble and contrite in spirit trembles at my word on the stark example of mere eternal worship that leads to men and women death to the voice of God unresponsive to the teaching of God where are we this evening let us pray oh eternal one we thank thee again this evening for thy truth help us always to see thee as

high and lifted up help us always to see the immensity of
God and the smallness and insignificance of man help us to see our need of thee to avail ourselves
of the provision of thy grace in Christ that we might be found amongst the truly humble and contrite
in spirit trembling always not thy word in Jesus name we ask it amen