

Where Is God When Life Goes Sideways, Part 1

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

You can go ahead and flip with me to Isaiah 40. Isaiah 40, chapter 40.

We're going to begin a new series this morning, just in light of everything going on, as much as I'd like to keep trucking through Acts. We're going to look at this wonderful chapter, a new series called Where is God When Life Goes Sideways?

Where is God When Life Goes Sideways? Because it's gone sideways for all of us. So you can go ahead and flip to Isaiah 40. If you just flop open to the Psalms and go to your right, it's the next really, really big book there.

One of my favorite sports writers, Jason Gay, began his sports column this week with the following words. He said, I'm not great at this.

[1 : 06] I'm not great at most things, including, of course, writing this column. But I'm particularly not good at this. The right now. The big Q. The long wait.

The shutdown. Lockdown. Whatever you want to call it. Let's be clear, though. We've locked it down. He continues, my family and I are obeying the rules, staying home, socially distancing, full stop.

We've sealed it off. We keep to ourselves, do puzzles, play Candyland for as long as it's going to take. But I'm not one of those people finding their best selves in quarantine.

Do these people really exist? Or are they just on Instagram? I mean, this is so stressful. He writes, I've yet to use this opportunity to perfect my risotto or to learn the electric guitar.

I have not taught myself how to draw a hippopotamus or schooled the kids in conversational French. I can barely get the mail. I spend too much time looking on the phone.

[2 : 10] I mean, it's day nine. Or is it day seven? I'm not sure anymore. Is it Monday or Tuesday or Thursday? The kids, he says, are basically feral now, chasing each other around the house with hockey sticks.

The cat is online trying to rent a car so it can drive its way out of here. The poor cat, he was tired of us before all this started. But the issue is, he continues, these are miracle problems.

My family and I, we're extremely lucky that these are issues. Because we know they're not really issues at all. I think the many, many people who feel genuinely unwell, unsafe, and unsettled at what's coming, they're worried about getting sick, losing a job, and maybe that's already happened. Maybe like Jason Gay, you're not finding your best self in isolation. Maybe all the extra time around the house hasn't led to learning new skills, knocking out the honey-do-lif or deep conversations. Maybe you're looking at your phone too much. Maybe all the uncertainty, though, has begun to wear on you. Maybe your fuse has gotten shorter and your patience thinner. Maybe you've played every board game in the house and just look at your kids with nothing else to offer.

[3 : 30] Maybe you find yourself growing more and more frustrated. Because every day seems the same, like Groundhog Day. But you're stuck indoors.

Maybe the ripple effect of COVID-19 has begun to make waves in your life. Maybe your income that seems so steady has begun to drop. Maybe the virus has infected people you know or gripped you with fear.

Maybe the predictions that we're not facing a coronavirus blizzard, but rather a coronavirus winter has moved you from frustration to despair. What if this virus, as some predict, keeps going from worse to worse?

What if the clients never rebook? What if normal doesn't return? Maybe you've begun to wonder, where is God? And what is he up to?

Has he lost his mind? Has he lost a grip? That's why we're going to begin this series. To try to discover where God is, and we're going to unpack this wonderful chapter.

[4 : 38] I can only read parts of it this morning, but I love every bit of it. Let's look at verse 12. Isaiah writes, Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and marked off the heavens with a span, and enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?

Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, and what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?

Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales. Behold, he takes up the coastline like fine dust.

Lebanon will not suffice for fuel, nor its beast enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before him. They are accounted by him as less than nothing, and emptiness.

To whom, then, will you liken God? In what likeness compare with him? Verse 25, To whom will you compare me, that I should be like them, says the Lord.

[5 : 51] Lift up your eyes on high, and see who created these. He who brings out their hosts by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power, not one is missing.

Why do you speak, O Jacob? Say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel. My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might, he increases strength.

Even you shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted, but those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles.

[7 : 02] They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint. May God bless the preaching of his word.

Where we're going today is that when everything is shaken and found failing, we can finally see our unshakable hope in God. When everything is shaken and found failing, we can finally see our unshakable hope in God.

We're going to break this out very simply. First point is the problem, our despair. The problem, our despair. You know, like this moment right now, when life goes sideways, it always seems as if the Lord is nowhere to be found.

Our text locates us right in the middle of the book of Isaiah, and in the middle of one of these moments. If you flip back one page, and we don't want to do that right now, but Isaiah 39 ends with, or concludes with a prophecy that the day is coming when all in the house of Israel will be carried away to Babylon.

And in 586 B.C., one of those important dates you need to know, that day came. The Babylonian army rolled into town, overtook them, and carried all who were left standing away to Babylon.

[8 : 23] And there they sit, kicked out of the promised land, driven away from the temple and daily worship, captains of the Babylonians, a wicked nation that does not fear God with little hope for change.

That's where we find them. You know, they need someone to intervene. They need someone to come and rescue them and set them free. But their problem is more than their need for help.

Their problem is theological. Their problem is how they've begun to think about God. Look in verse 27. He says, Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, My way is hidden from the Lord.

Am I right? Disregarded by Him. The conclusion of this speech, he's quoting their words back to them. They've been saying, My way is hidden from the Lord.

What they're concluding is the Lord doesn't see. He might have seen when we were in the other land. He might have seen when we were in the land of Israel, but he doesn't see anymore.

[9 : 32] He doesn't see here. But they continue, My right is disregarded by my God. They're in chains in a wicked nation. And they conclude that it's not just that their case, their right doesn't turn

out the way they want.

They conclude that it's been overlooked, ignored, and disregarded by God. Their problem is more than their need for help. Their problem is the Lord who doesn't notice and doesn't care. Their problem is more than slavery. Their problem is they've begun to question everything they know. How could this be? They might be saying, We're God's people. We're the apple of His eye. We've been chosen from all the peoples of the earth. We're the ones who are to be a great nation. The ones whose descendants are to be as numerous as the stars. How could this happen to us? What we're looking at is not merely the upending of their lives, but the upending of their faith. What we're looking at, and in so many ways, what we are feeling is a crisis of faith.

[10:43] Now, it didn't happen all at once. It began with a trickle like most leaks. It began with disappointment as they watched the burning and looting of their earthly treasures.

It continued to discouragement and further down from there. Paul Tripp helps us understand what is going on here. He says, It isn't a sin to be discouraged.

We all deal with difficult surprises because of God's plans for us are often very different from the plans we have for ourselves. We all face enemies that are bigger in size and ability than we are. We will all be tempted to wonder why a good God would bring things into our lives that don't seem good at all. But it's important to understand it's not a sin to be discouraged. What you do, though, with your discouragement is deeply and spiritually important.

See, the worst problem of every problem is not the problem itself, but what we do with the problem. The worst problem of every problem is not the problem, but what we do with it.

[11:51] Far too often we focus on the problem. You know, it could be something simple like a muscle ache or a strain that I feel more recurringly now as I'm getting older and I can begin to think about that too much.

Or it could be just financial trouble where your mind is constantly turning with the problem.

Whatever it is, when we begin to focus on the problem, it becomes bigger and scarier and more impossible to overcome.

And before long, left unchecked, the difficulty leads to disappointment and then to discouragement and then to despair where we become numb and ready to give up.

We might be saying, what does it matter if I blank anymore? What does it matter if I read? What does it matter if I pray? What does it matter if I fight for purity? What does it matter if I drink in moderation?

What does it matter anymore? If God really loved me, why would He ever blank? If I had the job, spouse, income, house, family they had, I could trust God.

[13:00] That is despair. And that's where the Israelites were. And it's very important to see that despair is never neutral. Despair speaks horizontally.

It says, my life stinks. This is too hard. Their life is better over there. But underneath, it always points the finger at God and says, you did this. You did this.

Do you not see how this hurts? Do you care? Reminds me of the disciples in the boat with Jesus in the middle of the night and they wake Him up in the midst of the storm and they just say, do you care?

Do you care? You want to say to them, how could you ask that? And yet we ask the same thing again and again.

See, despair blinds us from seeing the power and love of God. Thankfully, the Lord doesn't leave the Israelites there.

[14:01] He begins to shake it up so that they might see who He is again. Point two, the solution.

Behold your God. Point two, the solution. Behold your God. I mean, Isaiah in this chapter is just loaded with questions and he really only says one thing. Behold your God. You look down in verse nine, he says, behold your God.

Verse 10, behold. Again, behold there. Rather than merely wiping their tears and patting them on the back, the Lord comes with his own questions and the whole chapter is loaded with them.

You probably noticed as we read these questions stop us in our track. They push everything away. They're all relative pronouns. Who, whom, who, whom. They're all meant to rivet our attention with the living God who alone possesses unshakable power and steadfast love.

They command our attention away from everything else to the Lord. So, in verse 28, he says, have you not known?

[15:09] Have you not heard? The, the Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He doesn't feign or grow weary. His understanding is unsearchable.

He, he's from everlasting to everlasting. That, that in the original language that just, all those words just sandwiched together. It's the, the Lord. This is who he is. This is what he's all about. He's the everlasting God.

All the nations which we read about that are nothing before him, they're nothing because they come and go but he always remains. He's, he's eternal. He lives outside of and above time and this is where we get in the deep end really quick.

Time is something he created for our universe but not something he's bound or constrained by. You know, we live in the experience of time in a succession or sequence of moments and minutes and hours but God does not.

Everything in time is present before him. That's what he, he's trying to tell these people. He's trying to tell these Israelites that everything that's happening in your life is present before me. I see the whole picture.

[16:14] Nothing is past. Nothing is future. He does not see life and time the way we are and the, the takeaway for us, the takeaway for them is that his attention never wavers and his affection never shifts.

He, he, he does, he's not multitasking. He's all in. Everything in our lives is immediately before him. John Calvin says this is enough to trust God forever.

Does he care? But he's also the creator of the ends of the earth. You know, the, the Lord's not just a nice guy who keeps a good lookout. His attention and affection are matched with unlimited power. If you look back some of the best verses in here, verse 12, you know, who has measured the waters in his hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span or enclosed the earth in a measure or weighed the mountains.

It's taking us back to Genesis 1 saying it's all his handiwork. The waters that rush and rage that, that, that poets fear he, he creates in the hollow of his hand.

[17:20] The heavens which stretches as far as, as we can see, as far as our eyes can see, fit within the span of his thumb and his pinky. The land and the mountains were, which seemed so vast and so monstrous, he measured them out.

It's kind of like he's cooking. He's measuring a cup here and a cup there. You're impressed by this. Nothing in creation though is random. Nothing's left up to chance.

Nothing's spinning out of control not even the details of your life and the circumstances of your despair. It's the Lord. Since it was written in 1981 how Kushner's book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* has been read by millions and voiced the questions of God in tragic moments.

Towards the end of the book, Kushner concludes the Bible and I quote, life, force us to choose between a good God who is not totally powerful or a powerful God who's not totally good.

It forces us to choose these moments. It forces us to choose between a good God who's not totally powerful or a powerful God who's not totally good. He continues, God wants his people to live peaceful, happy lives.

[18:40] But sometimes he can't bring it about. It's too difficult even for God to keep cruelty and chaos from claiming their innocent lives.

Now with all due respect to Kushner these verses are saying the exact opposite. He's saying to the Israelites in the depth of your despair I'm not aloof.

I'm reigning. God's not a good guy with his hands tied. He is so good and yet he wields unrivaled power throughout heaven and earth and Isaiah continues he's wise.

Look down there in verse 13. Who's measured the spirit? What man has shown him counsel? Whom did he console? Who made him understand? Who taught him the path of knowledge or taught him the path of justice or taught him knowledge or showed him the way of understanding? You know, who can help him out? Who can tell him what he doesn't? No, all the wisdom of the world is a drop in the bucket. It's minute. It's pitiful. All the PhDs do not add a mere minute information to the Lord.

[19:52] His attention and affection are matched with unlimited power and perfect wisdom. His wisdom is unsearchable. His wisdom is not merely great.

It's unsearchable. It's unable to be completely searched and understood. I mean, so many things in our lives are plain and clear but some things are not. Some things the Lord keeps to himself.

That's one reason these times are so difficult. We want a God who clears all the hard stuff with us up front. We want a God who calls us only to do what we understand. We want a God who basically does our bidding but not today. not now. Why? I don't know but he's wise.

It's unsearchable. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments and inscrutable his ways.

[20 : 57] Isaiah continues, the Lord is for us. He's everlasting. He's the creator. He's wise and he's for us.

Look in verse 26. He says, lift up your eyes on high and see who created these. He brings out their hosts by number calling them by name by the greatness of his power and because he is strong in power not one is missing.

He's saying look up to the heavens. Now the Babylonians were astrologers who made their decisions by the movements of the stars but Isaiah says every star and every movement is from the Lord and yet we know the stars better than them.

We know the surface of the sun is a mere 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit. We know its center is 27 million degrees Fahrenheit. Its diameter is 870,000 miles 109 times larger than the earth and it's just an average star in the solar system.

Our solar system is inside a galaxy called the Milky Way which is 104,000 light years across. And a light year is a little less than 6 trillion miles.

[22 : 18] And inside the Milky Way it contains 100 billion stars which would take 3,000 years for us to count. If that weren't enough astronomers just keep finding out more and more and beyond the Milky Way galaxy years ago they found the Great Wall which consists of more than 15,000 galaxies with millions of stars in each of them.

And what Isaiah is saying just go ahead and look up and see. See all you can. He's saying can you hear what they're saying? His power is supreme.

His power is sovereign over all. That's what they're saying up there in the sky when you look up and see them. But it's not all that they're saying. It's an argument from the lesser to the greater.

That's why Isaiah is throwing it in here and at this point in his speech he calls each star by name.

He holds them all in space and he doesn't lose a single one and these are only his stars.

How much more are you? Will he really lose track of you? Is what Isaiah is saying. Will he really let you go? No. No. No. If a star is not missing neither will any of his people and if that's not enough we have an even clearer and more certain assurance of his attention affection limitless power and steadfast love the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[23 : 45] Love we hang the truths of Romans 8 in our living room and that's great I'm all for it but we need to hang them in the core of our heart. Romans 8 was written to settle it once for all for your storm tossed soul that God is for you.

These truths are meant to quiet forever the questions of despair truths designed to anchor the soul and uphold us to the end. If God is for us who can be against us?

He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? And again you just see these questions as if Paul Paul is following Isaiah's example wanting us to point our attention to the Lord who you can't even describe you can just ask these questions about tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword should any of those things separate us from the love of Christ?
does he see?

does he see? does he care? does he care? he sent his son for you Tim Keller sums it up well we do not know the reason God allows evil and suffering to continue and why it seems so random but now at least we know the reason is not it cannot be because he doesn't love us it cannot be because he doesn't care I heard a story several years ago about a Scottish minister in the 1600s one day near the end of his life as he's getting frail he came down to eat with his family to eat breakfast with his family he sat in silence around his family and suddenly he says to the daughter hold my daughter hold my master calls me he asked for a Bible and his eyesight is failing and he says to his daughter cast me up the 8th of Romans as his daughter read he repeats the words we just read

[26 : 08] I'm sure that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord he turned to his family and said God be with you my children I have breakfasted with you and shall sup with my Lord Jesus tonight and putting his hand on the page of Romans 8 he said I die believing those words do you still believe them do you believe that love is

on the other side of despair do you believe that all that he's doing is up to good do you believe that nothing will separate you from this when everything is shaken and found failing we see the unshakable hope found not in our circumstances or in our salaries or any of these things but in the Lord so he concludes or we conclude point three the promise wait and hope wait in hope the passage ends wonderfully and you guys saw that we look down there again verse 30 and 31 even youth shall faint and be weary and young men shall fall exhausted but those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength mount up with wings like eagles they shall run and not be weary they shall walk and not faint you know verse 30 gets right to the point the mightiest among us will fall they'll give out they'll fall down exhausted the young men you know it would say to all the young men in this room and include in you too will grow older and slower and rounder you know but verse 31 promises us that those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength you know it's not merely that he will encourage us he has so many ways encouragement it's huge it's wonderful one of my friends calls it like filling up the tank sometimes we need the tank filled up and someone comes and encourages us and it's huge but that's not what he's saying he's saying the power of the Lord will change us he'll exchange our strength for his that's what renew means there he his power is not for himself he gives power to the faint he'll strengthen us deeply to walk through what we could never imagine without caving in

I have a friend right now on the on the edge of so many things stage 4 cancer fighting for this the exchange that happens long after all the strong have refused to trust in the Lord and they fall the weak weary broken despairing will rise up and soar like eagles running without tiring walking without giving up because of the hope that's found in the Lord so what do we do now how do we where is God how do we anchor ourselves in these days first I just want to say three things in application first is we rest we rest we refuse to believe God is either all powerful or all good we confess the Lord is both we refuse to give in to despair even in the face of coronavirus we rest in his power

John Piper says the secret the secret to walking this out is this knowing that the same sovereignty that could stop the coronavirus and doesn't is the very sovereignty that sustains the soul in it indeed more than sustains sweetens with hope that for those who trust him his purposes are kind even in death the Lord is sustaining everything and all powers bow to him yesterday morning I was walking around our neighborhood praying and thinking and you know all the sunshine and the beautiful weather has been doing good for my soul so I was out walking I just noticed the birds were abuzz and the trees singing and I thought I want to be like them I think that's what it means to rest the birds are not worried about coronavirus they're resting in the Lord and so too must we while the world is in unrest we offer and we stand in the promise of rest second we wait we wait hope that is seen is not hope for who hopes for what he sees if we hope for what we do not see we wait with patience we wait now right now it seems like all we're doing is waiting inside you know the other night we were with our family outside and my kids were playing house and whatever however you play that that's what they're playing and one had one house

Ren had her house Rev had his house and Rev said all you have to do is knock if you want to come by my house and Ren said all you have to do is knock if you want to come by my house because I'm always home right now because of the coronavirus and I loved that it was even in their play but that's what it feels like right we're just waiting on this coronavirus which we can't see and don't know what's going on but this waiting is different Ray Orland says waiting is what faith does before God's answer shows up waiting is what faith does before God's answer shows up it's eager it's confident it's on the tippy toes edge of your seat it's filled with faith it believes that the best is yet to come it says I don't know what's going on here but the best is yet to come and this type of waiting refuses at least two things it refuses to run ahead it refuses to take matters into its own hands it refuses to take over it refuses to run ahead of the

Lord but this type of waiting also refuses to conclude that the Lord is done it refuses to conclude whatever's going on is over it refuses beloved despair finally we pray after all this we pray we need God to do a miracle if we're going to walk through coronavirus without a sack of regrets we need God to do a miracle whether we're on the precipice of financial collapse or whether we're on the precipice of spiritual decay we need God to help prayer is what we do when we acknowledge God's sovereignty and our complete dependence upon him and I want to challenge us this week we had prayer day the other week but I want to challenge us this Wednesday we do have family night at the end of the night but I'm going to put out a

[33 : 40] Google doc Google spreadsheet you can sign up for an hour and you know if you have the time and if you got the discipline pray for the whole hour but if not just pray for interspurty throughout that hour just sign up for an hour sign up for two and pray pray with your family pray with your spouse pray with a friend zoom somebody and pray that we as a people would pray because we need the Lord to walk through this in a way that honors him and there's a thousand temptations so where's God when life goes sideways God's plotting and working for his people with things that are far greater than we could ever ask or imagine let us hold the faith let us pray

Father in heaven we thank you for these few minutes and the opportunity to bow ourselves before you we cast ourselves upon you Lord we are a people that are so needy God whether our need is financial or whether it's the fraying and the difficulty this is introduced in relationships in the home or whether it's just the loneliness we feel and the longing to be together with other people or whether it's just the feeling that nothing we do matters anymore nothing that we read no amount of prayer no amount of reading and discussion we do matters Lord we pray that you would come and meet us but we pray that you would do that work that only you can do in exchanging our strength for yours so that we can soar in the strength of God and press on with courage we cast ourselves upon you and we pray for grace and help you've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens Tennessee for more information about Trinity Grace please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com Trinity Grace B you