

The faithfulness of God

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[0 : 00] Now hear God's word. God is saying to his people here, You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.

Before me no God was formed, nor shall there be any after me. Let me just read that last bit again because I won't really be addressing it in the message, but it's important.

Before me no God was formed, nor shall there be any after me. In simple terms, when God speaks of something being formed, God is the only former.

You know, God created us in his image, and idols are created. So when you see God there with a lower G, he's speaking of idols, that there never has been an idol that has been created before the self-existent God.

The temptation is for God's people is that if God doesn't work for them, they go to an idol. Now the idol could be money, it could be security, it could be a building, it could be anything.

[1 : 37] And so the whole issue here in Isaiah is one of idolatry, that God is trying to get his people from having turned to idols to turn back to him because the key issue is that God's people have not trusted him as they should.

And one of the biggest dangers for God being involved in your life all the time is that your trust in him is put to the test.

And Isaiah, the people in Isaiah, Israel, have the temptation of if God doesn't work, we will turn and go somewhere else.

Now that's just not a problem for God's people back in the day, that's a problem for God's people today, that we're not quite used to the fact that God has the right to say no.

And when God says no, we go and ask something else. Now, you know, I've got children and I've, you know, I begin to notice this.

[2 : 48] You know, and it took us a while and now there's the very famous phrase, and what did your mom say? Or what did your dad say? Because children who hear the word no go to somewhere else where they might get a yes.

But because children are sinful, just like their parents, they can lie. So they will come to you and say, well, yeah, mom said it would be all right. Oh, well, go ahead then.

And then you find out that mom said no such thing. Well, the same type of condition exists within all of God's people and in God's people here.

The concern of Isaiah this morning is, or to put it in the form of a question, is how do you as God's people respond to the situations you find yourself in?

And all of us will have a whole different group of situations. Some of those situations, we never thought we'd ever be in. We never thought we would ever have to deal with it.

[3 : 57] And then suddenly, we're having to deal with it. And when you're a Christian, and you're not quite used to the fact that God has the right to say no to you, you know, that it's really difficult, especially when there may not be any reason for God, that we can see for God saying no when he's perhaps said yes to another person for exactly the same prayer.

We see this with people being healed. Some people get a no from God, and some people get a yes. Well, there is an answer for why that happens, but it's not necessarily an answer that we're all comfortable with, especially for the person who gets the no.

But if we can just boil it down to the simple principle, and the principle is this, that God has the right, because he is God, to say yes, he is faithful and loving, but he also has the right to say no.

But what God does here is that he wants to restore his people back to the place where they trust him, because their trust in God has just diminished to such an extent that they begin to place their trust elsewhere.

And we see this in the life of Job. Though Job was proven to be faithful to God, it was Satan who said to God, the only reason he loves you, the only reason he is faithful to you, the only reason that he lives a good life before you, God, is because he has everything.

[5 : 40] And God says, fine, take it all away from him. You're not allowed to take his life, but take it all away from him, and let's see what he's really trusting in. And of course, Satan took everything away from him, his children, okay, even the relationship that he had between him and his wife went, and yet he remained faithful.

He may have, you know, Job looked up to God, going, why on earth is all this happening to me? Well, we know God's purposes because we've read the book of Job, but Job never finds out.

You know, the only question that he gets sort of near to being right is who are you, oh man, you know, as Paul would put it, to question God. God. So God here wants to restore his people because their trust in him has diminished, and so God promises that he will restore his people, but this is why he does it, and this is why he can say yes and why he can say no.

Everything that God does and the whole reason why God is going to restore his people here to be a faithful witness, to be a people who really trust in God, is not for their sake, but actually for his own glory.

That God wants to display his glory throughout the world, and if his glory is displayed through his people and his people are poor witnesses, then God needs to take care of the situation.

[7 : 10] B.B. Warfield said, in the final analysis, God has to take final responsibility for everything in his creation. And so even the faithfulness of my Christian life and the faithfulness of your Christian life, that if it is going downhill, that while it is my responsibility to follow God, in the final analysis, in the final end, God must take ultimate responsibility for my witness.

And so what God is saying to his people here is, I'm going to restore you so that I can be glorified on earth through you. And that gives me great encouragement for the church throughout the world that's in quite a terrible state in terms of its witness, that it's no good for a pastor to look to the people in the congregation.

It would be even worse for the pastor to look to himself to change things. What a terrible situation that would be. The only place that we can look for restoration is God who promises it.

And he promises it that he might be glorified. Last week, Francis preached in the evening from Ezekiel. And it was interesting because I already had this passage in mind.

Francis wouldn't have known this. And he read from Ezekiel the reason why God is going to work in his people's lives. And he says, if you remember Ezekiel 36, that I am not doing it for your sake, but I'm doing it for my sake.

[8 : 48] I'm not doing it for your sake, but I'm doing it for my own glory. And so the whole issue of salvation, God saves people for his own glory.

So that when he saves those people, they would be a faithful witness in the world of his glory, of his love, of his faithfulness. The trouble is, however, is that God's people wonder.

It's no wonder he called us sheep. And we drift from God so very, very easily. And I had a frightening experience once. I rolled my jeans up.

I never had any shorts on, so I rolled my jeans up. It wasn't, the frightening experience wasn't, oh, I saw my legs for the first time and how scary that was. But I rolled my jeans up and I had a t-shirt on and we had this little dinghy.

And I had it on a rope and sort of tied it around my ankle and just put one of my brothers in it. This is going back years ago. And I thought, well, what would it be like if I just sat in it with him and I paddled because I never had any oars and I paddled out to the boy and I thought, well, you know, I could swim back and I could probably help him swim back.

[10 : 02] And so I'm going out and I had no problem. But getting back in, it frightened me because it was only when I looked did I see actually how far from the shore I was.

And God's people drift like that. It's only when you turn and look do you actually begin to see for the first time how far you have drifted from God.

And so I started paddling myself back into shore. However, the reason why I drifted so quickly outwards is because I realised there was a very slight wind, not too much to feel but enough to move that rubber dinghy out to sea.

So I wasn't up against an unbeatable force but it moved me in a direction further from the shore than I anticipated to go. And trying to get back in was very difficult.

And so what do you do when you can't get back to the place where God wants you? Well you can't do anything. God has to do it for you. Now Israel made a mistake and that is they got the order of things the wrong way around.

[11 : 16] They thought that God comes into the world for them. And the same Christians can often get this the wrong way around. But we tend to think that Jesus came into the world for us.

But the Bible never starts like that does it? The Bible starts with God creating a world and then putting us in it. So we came into the world for God.

God did not come into the world for us. And that's the order that you are to remember. That's the thing that you're to keep in your mind.

When you get the order the wrong way around you tend to think that your interests are primary. When actually the reason why God created us and created a world and put us in it that God came first is what was God's interests in doing that?

Well it was for his own glory. And the reason why Christ comes into the world is so that he can restore us back into the glory of God because we have fallen into sin and fallen from glory.

[12 : 21] everything that Jesus does is to get us back to God. Everything that Jesus does is to make us the real human that God created us.

Because since the fall we are subhuman. Though that sounds frightening. We are not what we are meant to be. And so Jesus did not come into the world for us.

Though that is true because he we sinned. It started with God creating us in a world for him. That's the order that we are to remember.

And so God's people here a little bit of background have not acknowledged God in all their ways like they should and as the proverb says they have failed to trust God. They have turned to idols and so their trust has diminished over time.

It's just got worse and worse. But what's the real sort of dig here? And I don't know how you would take this if you were Isaiah. But God said to Isaiah this is going to happen.

[13 : 28] Now remember Isaiah is given to a ministry of what? He has to go ahead and tell people exactly what God wants to tell them and God has told Isaiah they're not going to listen.

Now imagine having a ministry like that. I want you to go out and proclaim but I want these people to hear but they're not going to listen. Can we not just then leave it God?

No. Because their culpability will shine through in not listening rather than mine in not telling. So God tells his people.

Everything that God is about to do in order to restore his people to be faithful witnesses is so that his glory would be seen through these people.

And it is exactly the same with God's people in the church. The reason why God would restore his people in the church is because the church is the witness of God on earth. And if the witness is bad then what does it say about God?

[14 : 33] And what does it say when the church can't restore themselves? Well we need God to act. And the moment God does begin to act and restore us back to faithful witnesses for his own glory so that the world would see his glory through his people.

A few things begin to happen. The first is this. That when God restores you as a person individually and as a church the first thing that begins to happen is that you actually begin to start acknowledging God all over again in all your ways.

That doesn't mean that you just start acknowledging God on a Sunday. It doesn't mean that you only acknowledge God when you pick up your Bible or even when you pray. It means that even when you're out on the street walking wherever you are going you're acknowledging God.

It means that you can't even begin to make a decision without thinking how will this reflect on the God to whom I belong. And the reason why that is important is because through all of this God is asking a very simple question that he wants you to answer.

He knows the answer to it but he wants you to ask it. And the question is this. What does God expect the world to see when the world looks at you? What does God expect the world to see when the world looks at you?

[15 : 58] Now if you're ready to answer that the answer is this. The glory of God. The faithfulness of God. The steadfast love of God.

Secondly, you'll begin to trust in God again. The level of your diminished trust will reverse. You will start trusting in God rather than trusting in what everybody else trusts in out there.

Some people trust in money. Money is a good store of wealth in terms of it can protect a person from quite a lot. It can't protect a person from hell.

But it can pay for medical bills. It can keep a roof over your head. It can pay for food. It can do quite a lot. But it's not an ultimate source of trust because God is.

And so what does it look like when the world looks at God's people and God's people are trusting in the same things as their unbelieving neighbors? Well I'll tell you what it looks like.

[17 : 02] What the world sees is that your God can't be trusted because if he could you'd be doing it. So when we trust in the same things that the world does rather than trusting in God what that communicates to the world is that your God that you claim to believe in can actually be trusted in everyday life because if he could you would be doing it.

So what does God expect the world to see when the world looks at you? God is about to restore his people.

And then thirdly identity. Now I never noticed this perhaps as much as I've noticed it this past couple of weeks. One of the things that Isaiah wants to point out is that identity and witness go hand in hand.

But the way that it goes hand in hand is in quite an unusual way. When you witness not only will it reinforce what you believe because there's not too many people in the church who says things that they don't believe because we don't want our unbelieving friends picking us up on it.

So we sort of perhaps edit the gospel you know lest we get asked a question about it. The second thing that our witness will do not only will it really reinforce what we believe because if we're saying it then it's then God says that by saying it it then cements it in your own heart and mind.

[18 : 45] That if you say it then you really must believe it or at least that begins to happen. The second thing that it does is that it challenges you as to whether or not you really believe it.

Have you ever quoted a verse of scripture to somebody else for encouragement and then questioned whether or not you believe it yourself? Ever been in that situation?

Where a verse comes to you and you think this is what this person needs to hear but you don't say it and the reason you don't say it is because it isn't striking your heart with certainty?

ever been in that situation? So witnessing speaking the word of God is a great challenge to us as to whether or not we are really committed to those truths whether or not we are really believing it and it is a terrible thing for a Christian to feel that they want to say what the Bible says but can't because they're not sure whether or not they're believing it and so we need to be restored out of that unbelief.

We need to be restored out of that distrust in God. There's nothing worse for your Christian faith than to one not believe the things you say and secondly not say them because you don't believe them.

[20 : 09] You don't witness you see there's a more importantly after the witness or as importantly I should say this raises the question of identity and therefore if you're not speaking or you're not witnessing then your identity is not seen.

I've often said that if you took a group of Christians and placed them in a building like this which just so happens to be called a church but we all know that the church is God's people but you take a group of Christians us lot and you dump us here in the church and then you get someone out there to say what do you see?

and they come in and they don't you say come on just tell me what you see and they say I see a group of people they're singing hymns they're praying they're praising God they must be believers it's a church right and now you take the same group of believers and I lift you up and I stick you in the middle of Asda and I ask the same person what do you see?

I see people just like me so witness what you do where you are what you say shows your identity it identifies you as to whom you belong what you believe where you're going let me just give you an illustration of just how important this is and how quickly it can change this is an illustration from a news article that came out a couple of weeks ago and it was about pension funds now I didn't read it because it said pension funds I read it because there's something else that it said but when I started reading the article it was about pension funds and I thought this is second line in it's pretty boring but the title looked good so I continued to read I read beyond the boredom and I got down and it was said that firms have to make sure they have enough pension funds in order to pay the pensions of their workers when they retire one firm that they brought to the attention was cancer research and cancer research had to invest the money that they had into pension funds and whatever and by law pension funds have to be invested in the stock market because that's the only way you get a rate of return and interest money back and so cancer research has got all these employees scientists doctors and the like throughout the world which they have to pay pensions for that are now coming up to retirement and so cancer research took 211 million pounds sterling 211 million pounds and invested it in the stock market but that wasn't the issue the issue was what they invested it in and they invested it in British and American tobacco cancer research 211 million pounds invested in

British and American tobacco to pay for the pensions of the people who work for cancer research now if you're like many others you will at least at this point begin to see cancer research a little bit differently even if it is only a little bit differently and the reason you're beginning to see them differently is because of what you have witnessed it's because of what you have heard and now their identity at least in your eyes has changed a little so witness and identity go hand in hand in the eyes of the world and this is all about remember what does God expect the world to see when the world looks at you God knows you are his people God knows that but the world needs to know that and so witness and identity is incredibly important to God because God knows that you're his God knows that you're his people when you sin God knows that you're his people when you turn your back on God and you go your own way

[24 : 14] God knows that you are his people when you turn to idols but the trouble is that's not the issue the issue is what does God expect the world to see when the world looks at you and when you do all of those things you are no longer identified as the people of God and that is what God is trying to restore in his people here and so our prayer needs to be Lord restore us he says in verse 10 you are my witnesses declares the Lord and he has already said in verse 1 that we are his people the trouble is is that we are not good witnesses witnesses and we need God to restore us to be good witnesses so that his glory would be displayed in the world that is his now a very important principle is this God's people even today are never left to figure out what God means believe it or not and the reason we're not is because God does one thing over and over and over again he doesn't need to change it and it's this

God speaks first and he acts second so when God says something is going to happen we are left in anticipation ready for it to happen the actions always follow the promise so if God says he's going to do it then we're waiting for God to do it the actions will follow and so when it begins to happen we know what it means because God's already spoken about it okay when God begins to act we know what he's doing because God has already told us what he's going to do in the New Testament it tells us that the world is arriving at a conclusion not an end but a conclusion and the conclusion is where God sorts everything out is the summary it's the final analysis everything is dealt with and we know it's going to happen because God has spoken and everything that we see happening in the world is coming to a conclusion it's encouraging so let me draw it to a conclusion now with the main point and the main point is this that God is about to restore his people to be faithful witnesses here in Isaiah and this is what we should pray for in our church that we need

God to do for us what he did for his people then and the reason we need God to do it is for the same reason he did it here so that God's glory would be displayed to the world through his people so that when the world looks at God's people they actually see what God wants them to see that he is faithful steadfast love and trustworthy that God's people actually begin to trust him forever so the application is fairly simple remember remember remember that God is treating your life in such a way that he knows exactly what the world needs to see through your life faithfulness and trust in him and so we really need to pray because we're we can't do it ourselves because we can't pick ourselves up we can't pull our socks up spiritually we're just not strong enough to do it even with all the good intentions that we have we fail at the hurdles of action and so we need to ask

God to restore us and the reason why God will restore us and I'll finish with this is because God does what's in his own interest and you just so happen to be God's interest okay God does what is in his best interest but you happen to be God's best interest that is why we can be confident that God will restore us and we ought to pray that that happens not only personally but we ought to pray that that happens as a church here the church in Scotland and the church in the world that should be our prayer and with that we'll close amen