

Isaiah (Part 1) - Introduction

by Ron Bailey

The book of Isaiah is a source of eternal truth and revelation that continues to speak to us today, and it is through the Spirit of Christ that we can understand its significance and relevance.

Duration: 1:14:42

Scripture: Deuteronomy 32:7-8, Deuteronomy 32:15, Isaiah 48:1-4, Isaiah 48:9, Isaiah 48:12, Isaiah 48:18

Topics: "Isaiah"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes that God does not shy away from hopeless cases, despite our limited resources and narrow hearts. He highlights how God speaks to nations and individuals, making great promises even when he knows they may not come to fruition. The sermon references Isaiah, who lived during a time of conflict among nations, and focuses on a specific incident involving a girl named Rez and her strained relationship with her father. The speaker also mentions a passage from Ephesians and Isaiah 14, illustrating God's involvement in the affairs of nations.

Transcript

Okay, shall we just have a word of prayer and we'll make a start. We just want consciously, Lord, to come before you again and lift our hearts to you and declare our dependence upon you. We do pray, Lord, for that special help of your spirit which will open this book and show us our Saviour.

Lord, we give ourselves to you and pray for your blessing upon this time. Amen. Someone said to me earlier that if nothing else, he said, we have a great sense of anticipation.

I think that's because of all the things that have been said indirectly about me during these last couple of meetings. I really don't know where I got this reputation for erudition from. It reminds me of a story told about a lady, a negro lady in the deep south of North America who had a reputation for being very wise and being able to give very good counsel to different people.

And on one occasion, someone asked her how it was she had this ability. And she said, well, she said, when you had no education, you just have to use your brains. And that's really the principle we shall have to work on.

I tell you, it was only the posh houses that had gutters where I came from, so you couldn't even play in the gutters where I came from. I want to center my thoughts really on some of the things that are said in the

book of Isaiah. Someone asked me earlier on what I was going to do, and I said, I thought I would be in Isaiah.

And he said he'd just come back from Romania where there was a specialist on Isaiah who had spent many years doing all kinds of charts trying to work out what a specialist on Isaiah would be called, a kind of an izeologist or something like that. Well, I'm not one of those, but there are parts of the book of Isaiah which I really think can be very helpful in enlarging our concept of God. I reveled in what we were listening to last night and at other times.

There aren't many people who talk to us about God. There aren't many preachers who talk to us about God. Lots of ideas, and truths, and salvation, and what should happen, and where we should go, and how we should be, but there aren't many people who talk to us about God.

And it's a delight just to be able to do that. And one of the purposes of people like Isaiah for us is the way in which God can continue by his spirit to enlarge our understanding and enlarge our concepts of who God is. Many others here will know the book of Isaiah well.

And if I try to put it a little bit into its context, it's just because when you put a thing into its context, often it can help you. It can mean quite a bit more if you put it into its context. For example, um, I will quote something to you.

This is almost probably a direct quote. If I can remember it, it's something like this. Have you remembered that the car has to go in tomorrow? Now, there's only one person here who just looked up.

There's only one person here who will understand that quote, and it's because there's only one person here who understands the context, who knows who it was said by, and when it was said, and what car was being referred to. It was something that Naomi said to Tom yesterday. And of course, the quotation makes no sense at all to us, because we don't know what the context was.

We don't know who said what. But when you do know the context, then you begin to understand some of the implications of those kind of statements. Let me just begin in a very slow and gentle way to say something about prophecy, and about the way that prophecy has come into being.

If you turn to the writings of Peter, 1 Peter chapter 1, in verse 9 he makes reference to our salvation, the salvation of our souls, and then in verse 10 he says this, Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come to you, searching what or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed that not unto themselves but unto us they did minister the things which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you, with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven, which things the angels desire to look into. It's a fascinating little comment that the Spirit of God brings us at this time about the way in which prophecy worked.

Peter also says in his other letter that no prophecy comes by private interpretation. Prophecy is not the opinions of men. It's not the result of Isaiah's meditations, his contemplations, and then saying, well I think probably God is thinking like this.

They're not private interpretations. It was the Spirit of Christ who was speaking in them of sufferings and glories which would follow. And one of the things that Peter says here is that the prophets themselves

were very aware that they did not understand the full implications of what they were saying.

The prophets themselves did not know the full implications of what they were saying. In fact, what it says here is that they searched and inquired diligently. Those are metaphors from mining.

They dug and they delved. The words that God had given to them, they sought to understand. They knew that God had said things, the implications of which were far greater than they could really see.

They knew that there was truth beyond the horizons of their own situation. They knew they were saying things that had a far greater relevance than just the context in which they spoke. And when they asked God what the relevance of these things were, one of the things that was told them was this.

Verse 12, it was revealed to them that not to themselves but to us they did minister the things which are now reported to you by them that have preached the gospel to you. And it goes on. Verse 12 tells us, if you have eyes to read it and a heart to receive it, that the prophecy of Isaiah was written to you.

According to verse 12, the Isaiah was written to you. There are all kinds of parts of the Old Testament which have a far greater relevance to you than they do to the people who originally spoke them or wrote them, and the people who originally heard them. Let's go back to an Old Testament prophet.

Let's go back to Hosea. Hosea chapter 11. This, perhaps, will just illustrate a little bit something of the nature and the wonder of this book that God has given to us.

Hosea chapter 11. When Israel was a child, then I loved him and called my son out of Egypt. As they called them, so they went from them.

They sacrificed to Balaam and burnt incense to graven images. It's not, perhaps, a very edifying two verses, but the reason I read it is because if you look at the first verse and then say to yourself, what did this mean to Hosea? What did this first verse mean to the man who originally uttered it or wrote it? When Israel was a child, then I loved him and called my son out of Egypt. And if you think about it, it's not complicated.

You'll come to the conclusion, I'm sure, that Hosea is thinking about the Exodus. He's thinking about the time when God called Israel to be his nation, and God spoke of Israel as his son. God said, Israel is my son, my firstborn son.

Israel must be set free so that he can serve me. And here he says, when Israel was a child, then I loved him and called my son out of Egypt. And if you had said to Hosea at the end of the meeting, or whenever it was he uttered this prophecy, if you had said to him, what did you mean by that sentence when you said, when Israel was a child, then I loved him and called my son out of Egypt? I have no doubt at all in my mind that Hosea would have said, well, I was referring to the Exodus.

I was referring to the time of God's choice of the nation when he brought the people out to become his people. Well, let's turn to Matthew in that case. Matthew, who constantly goes back to the Old Testament, here in Matthew chapter 2. I'll read from verse 12 because that will be enough for us to catch the sense of it.

Verse 12. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, this is the wise ones, they departed into their own country another way. And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the

Lord appears to Joseph in a dream saying, arise and take the young child and his mother and flee into Egypt and be thou there until I bring thee word, for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night and departed into Egypt and was there until the death of Herod in order that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet saying, out of Egypt have I called my son. Now, how about that? That means that we have the opportunity of understanding the prophecy of Hosea better than Hosea did. That might sound staggering, but it's true.

You and I have the opportunity of understanding the prophecy of Hosea better than Hosea did. I don't suppose, I know it's speculation, but I don't suppose for a minute that Hosea, if you had said to him, do you really think you were speaking about the Messiah, I'm sure he would have said, well no, I was just referring to the exodus when they came out. But Hosea was saying more than he knew.

You see, it was God speaking by Hosea. It wasn't the private interpretation of Hosea. He was speaking things, and it's when we come into the New Testament that we begin to get a definitive exposition of some of these wonderful passages of Scripture.

Not just what they meant in their time and their context, but what they meant in an eternal context. It speaks, we just read in Peter, of the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit of Christ is the eternal spirit.

He's spoken of like this in Hebrews. I'll try not to get too close to Hebrews. I was thinking when we were driving down in the car and just sharing a little bit about the things that were on our hearts that we might share.

But really, it's counterproductive, you know, to say to people, I'm thinking of doing this, so please don't you think about it, because it just has the opposite effect. It's like the story that maybe some of you recall that Edgar Parkins used to tell. Now Edgar was a master at storytelling, so I can't compete with that.

But he told a story that had something to do with some African country in which there was kind of a witch doctor who had a special brew or medicine that was guaranteed to cure anything. It didn't matter what you had, this concoction would cure it. But there was just one proviso, and the witch doctor said when you use it, it will cure anything as long as when you use it, you don't think about red monkeys.

Now you can work out exactly what would happen, of course, couldn't you? As soon as you reach for it, the first thing you think is, so it's not going to work. So, once you begin to say, I'm going to think along these lines, please don't do anything along that line, immediately, most of your thoughts go along that line. But in Hebrews, it speaks of the Lord Jesus, and it uses this phrase, it says that it was through the eternal spirit that he offered himself for that spot unto God.

What happened on the cross, we've already touched on it this morning, what happened on the cross, although it was at a point in time, and at a geographical location, you can put it in its context in those senses, in another sense, it was outside time. It was an eternal event, an event which doesn't grow old, it never becomes jaded. Things that are just purely historical become tired, they grow weary, and the memories of them slowly begin to fade away.

I remember hearing a historian who once said that if you want a sense of history, or in order to have a sense of history, you have to have a sense of loss. That's a bit profound for early in the morning, but it really means that it's when you begin to realize that something is beyond you, and you can't get it back, and there's a sense of loss, that people usually begin to get interested in their history. When their parents

are getting old, or their grandparents have died, they begin to think, oh, I wonder what granny used to do when she was little, or this kind of thing.

You see, if you have a sense of loss, it often creates a kind of a sense and an interest in history. The marvellous thing is that I have no sense of history at all about the cross. I have no sense at all of loss.

It's not growing tight. I have to constantly remind myself that it was 2,000 years ago, because in my spirit it seems as though it's now. Like Wesley's hymns, even now we see him die, even now.

There's something that happens in the spirit that doesn't grow old. It doesn't get weary. It doesn't get jaded.

It doesn't become stagnant. It is alive, and what happened on the cross was that the Lord Jesus offered himself through the eternal spirit to God, and the consequence of that is eternal. Now, eternal does not just mean it goes on forever, like some preachers.

It doesn't mean that. Eternal means, really, outside time of a different nature altogether. From eternity to eternity thou art God.

It's an entirely different dimension, but it's a dimension that touches time at certain places in God's orderings. And that's why it can speak of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ as being from the foundation of the world. That's why he can say those kind of things.

And things that happen in eternity, you can see them any time. You can see them before they happen, and you can see them after they happen, because they always are. Things that are eternal are always as they ever were.

Let me go back a little bit to Psalm, Psalm 22. There are many psalms like this. This is a psalm of David, and again, I hope it will just begin to help us to understand something that is happening in the Old Testament, and why we should not relegate the Old Testament just to an Old Testament way of looking at things.

If you do that, you end up locked in history, and all you end up with is a list of facts and information, and maybe one or two lessons. But you won't have the living life of God. You won't have the continuing revelation of his Spirit making things real to you.

This is Psalm 22, a very well-known psalm, in which David begins by saying, my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Very familiar, of course, because they're the words that the Lord Jesus spoke on the cross. And some people who perhaps haven't thought this right the way through would say that Jesus was quoting these words on the cross. He wasn't.

David was quoting the words from the cross. Now, if you want a timeline, it's a useful one if you want it. David is a thousand BC.

He's a thousand years before Christ. And yet, a thousand years before Christ, David heard something and repeated it. And what he heard was this word, this testimony of the Spirit of Christ that was within him.

This is what Peter says, isn't it? He says that it was the Spirit of Christ in them that was testifying of things that would be concerning sufferings and glories. What David heard was the testimony of the Spirit of Christ. There's a verse in Revelation chapter 19 which says, the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of

prophecy.

Sounds a kind of a vague, obscure, mystical verse. And it means many things. You can use the word testimony in the sense of bearing witness to someone, speaking the truth to someone.

And prophecy was certainly that. But you can also use the word witness or testimony in the sense of your recounting of your personal experience. And it is the testimony of Jesus, in this sense, which is the spirit of prophecy.

If we read a little bit farther on into Psalm 22, you'd have words like this. Verse 14. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint.

My heart is like wax, it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a pot shard, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws, and thou hast brought me into the dust of death. For dogs, that's what the Jews call Gentiles, for dogs have compassed me.

The assembly of the wicked have enclosed me. They pierced my hands and my feet. And you and I know that this is not David's testimony.

This never happened to David. He never had his hands and his feet pierced. It goes on, I may count all my bones.

They look and stare upon me. They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture. This isn't David's testimony.

We know whose testimony this is, and this is the testimony of Jesus, which is the spirit of prophecy. This is the spirit of Christ in David, speaking things which are eternally true. From that eternal moment--that sounds like a contradiction in terms--but from that eternal moment, David heard this chronologically a thousand years before the time, but he heard it in the spirits.

Things happened in David, and in all these Old Testament prophets, that were beyond their understanding. They weren't the result of their hard work. They weren't the result of their meditations.

They were the result of something bubbling up inside them. That's another way that David expresses it. I think it's Psalm 145, is it? Psalm 45.

While we're here, we'll have a look. Psalm 45. This isn't called a song of David, and it wasn't, but whoever it was had exactly the same experience that David would have had.

The A.V. says, my heart is inditing a good matter, but probably in your margin it says, bubbling up, or something like that. My heart is bubbling up with a good measure. I speak of the things which I have made touching the King.

My tongue is the pen of a ready writer. All right, if his tongue is the pen, who is the writer? If his tongue is the pen, who is the writer? This isn't a result of his own brain work. This is something that's bubbling up.

This is the Spirit of Christ that's within him, testifying of eternal realities. And you get that kind of thing happening all the way through the prophets, and that's why they are eternally relevant. It's an interesting thing, and I'm not advocating it, I'm not saying that it's the only way that God wants to speak to us, but probably the strongest words of comfort that God has brought to you in your Christian pilgrimage have

been from the Psalms and from Isaiah.

Is that right? Well, I won't kind of test the meeting, as I used to call it, but probably the strongest words of encouragement have come from places like that. And it's not because you are reading some historical document that gives you some vague kind of consolation, it's because the Spirit of Christ is still testifying, still speaking. These words still have lasting power, they've not grown old.

You must have had the experience, I have it constantly, where you read a passage of Scripture and you think, I've never seen that before. Sometimes you come to a verse, and you must have read it 20 times in your lifetime, but you come to it and you think, I've never seen this, I've never seen it. There's a life that comes into things, not just the book, but the Spirit using the book.

This is a very, very powerful instrument, and like all instruments, it can be used wrongly. The greatest blessing, the greatest heritage that the Jewish nation had was this book. That's what Paul says.

He asks a question, he says, what advantages then are there to circumcision? And he says, much in every way, but chiefly, that to them were committed the oracles of God. This is their greatest treasure, and their greatest tragedy. Jesus said, you search the Scriptures, because in them you think you'll find eternal life, and they testify of me, and you won't come to me that you might have life.

Their greatest treasure, and their greatest tragedy. Interesting, isn't it? But, in the hands of God's Spirit, this book, and the words of this book, as God addresses them to our hearts, can bring life again and again, and transform situations of all kinds. So, Isaiah isn't just locked away in the Old Testament.

I sometimes think that I would like to get a Bible which had kind of rings on the back of it, so that when you got to the Old Testament, you just kind of kept on turning around, and you went to the into the New Testament, and when you got to the end of the New Testament, you just went automatically into the Old Testament, as though it was just kind of a circular thing. I think it was Augustine who used to say that in the Old Testament, the new is concealed, and that in the New Testament, the old is revealed. They're not at one another's throats.

They're not in contention. They are different ways that God has spoken. Supremely, of course, God has now spoken to us in a son.

In divers' plays, in divers' times, in other ways, God had sought to express himself through his prophets, but now, in these last days, he has spoken to us in a son. Now, at last, God has a perfect means of expression, a way of making it clear to every heart just exactly who he is, and what he's like. God used all kinds of different people.

He used people who were simple herdsmen, like Amos. He used people like Isaiah, who many people say, and certainly Jewish tradition says very strongly, was a cousin of the king, cousin of King Uzziah. They reckon that Uzziah's father and Isaiah's father were actually brothers.

It can't be proved, but it's a very old tradition, so there may be some kind of truth in it. There are one or two places in the book of Isaiah where you get the sense that the king would have known Isaiah's children by name. So, maybe there was a close connection.

Let's turn to Isaiah chapter 1. Perhaps you've noticed when you've read the scriptures just how often the Bible is date-stamped, how often you get some reference to the date. It was during this rain, or it was after

this earthquake, or it was at this point in time, and that's because the context really often does give a tremendous relevance to things. It's not necessary.

It doesn't have to be this way. While you're looking to the first part of Isaiah, I'll just look for another verse so that I can quote it exactly. I recall many years ago now being at, when I was in Birmingham and I was at a college, and there was a Christian sister at this college who had only recently become a Christian, and she had had difficulties with her parents at home.

She was a Liverpudlian girl. I can remember her very, very clearly. And she'd had difficulties with her parents, and particularly with her father.

And she was always getting into arguments and contention with her father, who thought that the decisions that she had made were nonsense. So, there were constant rows in the family, and she was often very, very distressed by these rows that went on, these quarrels. And on one occasion, after a very strong quarrel, she went upstairs to her own room, very, very distressed, and just opened the Bible at Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 22.

I'll read it for you. This is what she read. She read that you put off concerning the former conversation, the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts.

And it was a source of great encouragement to her, because she was sure it was telling her that she wasn't to worry about this conversation that she'd had with her dad. Now, that is not good exposition, but God can use his book like that. God can use his book like that all the time.

All the time, God has the right to take a verse out of context and use it in whatever way he wants to, but you don't have the right to do that. You have a responsibility, really, to try to understand just what God is saying in a more plain way. This is Isaiah chapter 1. The vision of Isaiah, the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

Isaiah began his time of prophecy at a sad time for the nation of Israel. Now, God had made them his own people, he'd made them one, but after the reign of Solomon, some of the cracks that were already in the system began to open out, and in Solomon's son's reign, the time of Rehoboam, the nation divided into two parts. And the northern part of ten tribes became known as Israel.

God said, this is Israel. And the remaining part was given for David's sake to Rehoboam and became the nation of Judah in the south. So, you had a split nation, and God sent some prophets to one nation, and some prophets to another nation, and sometimes the prophets spoke in the way that God saw things in his heart, still regarding everything as one, but with an understanding that things were not as God had intended them to be.

Well, here, Isaiah was a prophet during the time of these kings of Judah, that's to say, the southern kingdom. If you want some dates, it's roughly, this is just very roughly, about 750 BC to about 700 BC. That's very rough and ready, but it's enough just to kind of get it into some kind of picture.

This was when, during that whole period, of 50 years or something like that, God gave the prophetic word to Isaiah. So, what we have as the book of Isaiah was not written at one sitting. It was written over a period of 50 years, and part was added to part, and the Spirit of God constantly building the revelation and increasing truth, and sometimes it's very local, sometimes it's just referring to things that are happening there at that day, but there are other times when it lifts, when it really takes off, and you begin to describe

something which is on the earthly level, and almost imperceptibly, you suddenly discover you've become airborne.

Let me just show you an example of that, if I can find it quickly. It's in Isaiah chapter 14, Isaiah chapter 14. God had a lot to say about other nations as they touched his nation at this time, and this begins like this in verse 4, that you shall take up this proverb against the king of Babylon.

All right, now that seems very straightforward, isn't it? We're talking about the king of Babylon. I'll explain a little bit about these superpowers in a minute. They shall take up this proverb against the king of Babylon and say, how has the oppressor ceased? The golden city ceased.

The Lord has broken the staff of the wicked and the scepter of the rulers. He who smote the people in wrath with a continual stroke. He that ruled the nations in anger is persecuted and none hinders.

The whole earth is at rest and is quiet. They break forth into singing. Yea, the fir trees rejoice at thee and the cedars of Lebanon saying, since thou art laid down, no axman has come up against us.

Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming. It stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth. It hath raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations.

All they shall speak and say unto thee, art thou also become weak as we? Art thou become like unto us? Thy pomp is brought down to the grave and the noise of thy vials. The worm is spread under thee and the worms cover thee. Well, what is all that about? It's a picture that Isaiah is giving of the end of the Babylonian empire.

There were different superpowers in those days as there are in our days and this is a prophecy of the time when the superpower of Babylon would come to an end and it's personified in its king, the king of Babylon. And you've got this picture of hell itself, Hades, and all the other kings that the king of Babylon has conquered and put to death, they are in Hades and now as he is dispossessed of his authority, he comes down to Hades and they all stand up to watch him and they say, now look, you're exactly the same as we are now. What happened to us is exactly the same as what's happened to you.

And then it says this in verse 12. Remember, this is a proverb against the king of Babylon. Verse 12, how art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning.

Now, how did we get from Babylon to heaven? This is one of the things that happens often in prophecy. You begin at a certain level and without warning it suddenly takes off and you're at an entirely different height. You're operating with different things.

You have begun to touch principles which are working out on the earth. You've begun to touch practical, down-to-earth, solid flesh-and-blood issues, but behind those flesh-and-blood issues there are spiritual powers. And as you begin to address the earthly, you begin to identify the spiritual powers that's behind them, and the word of God goes to the source of things and not just to the manifestation which is in flesh and blood.

Behind the king of Babylon there was another power. Behind the king of Babylon there was another power. And Isaiah, speaking in the spirit, begins to speak to the king of Babylon and then addresses the power that's behind him and says this.

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning? How art thou cut down to the ground which didst weaken the nations? For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven. I will exalt my throne above the stars of God. I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation in the sides of the north.

I will ascend above the heights of the clouds. I will be like the Most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

They that see thee shall narrowly look upon thee and consider thee, saying, Is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake the kingdoms? We're back on the earthly level of things now. It's as well to keep this kind of thing in mind when you read the scripture, that at times when it begins at one point and without warning will suddenly move into another dimension of things, onto another level of things. Well, Isaiah was living at a time of tremendous conflict amongst the nations.

Last night, Rez just jokingly said that we'd left Mr. North the maps to preach on. I like to kind of preach on the maps, so you'll have to preach on the preface to King James or something like that. If you've got a map at the back of your Bible, or if you haven't, just try to keep something in your mind.

We've already spoken about the division of God's people into two parts, the northern, which was Israel, and the southern, which was Judah. And around these times, if you had gone northeast from Israel, the land of Israel, you would have come to the heart of what was known as the Assyrian Empire. Its capital was Nineveh, and at one time it was one of the great superpowers.

It was a very cruel superpower. It had a time of weakness, and during that time of weakness, there was an opportunity for some of the kings in the northern kingdom of Israel to be their own men a little bit more. They could make different kinds of decisions, and they could strengthen their borders against attack.

But then, there was a kind of a revival, not a spiritual revival, but a kind of political revival in Assyria, and there was an Assyrian general whose name was Pol, who took the throne, changed his name to Tiglath-Pileser III. They liked catchy names in those old days. And he became a real pain for everyone who was around, and one of the things that happened was that he strengthened the land of Assyria and its empires, and the people who had had a measure of freedom before, now came again under the shadow of these superpowers.

They could only really do what the superpowers allowed them to do. And this was the state of things when Isaiah was beginning his prophecies. So, things were very uncertain.

They were very uncertain for the northern kingdom of Israel. They were pretty uncertain, too, for the southern kingdom of Judah. And as you go through the first part of Isaiah, up to chapter 39, you've got a series of words that God brings concerning the nations.

Let me just see if I can find a verse in Deuteronomy which will explain a little bit, perhaps, about the way that the Bible works. Deuteronomy chapter 32. Les said last night, this is a very short book.

It's not a big book at all, and it does not pretend to be a chronicle of world history. That's not its intention. It's really a highly selective view of key incidents in the world's history that have a spiritual relevance.

It is a God's-eye view of history. It's God choosing particular things of particular relevance and giving us a record of them. You know, the Bible tells us that very plainly.

It tells us that in John's gospel. John says that if he had made an account of all the things that Jesus had done, well, the world itself wouldn't be sufficient to contain the books that it would need. But these are written, he says, for a specific purpose.

These have been selected so that you would know that Jesus is the Son of God and that believing, you would have life through his name. So, there was a specific selection process going on by the Spirit through the ministry of John to produce the gospel of John, and that is true of the whole Bible. It doesn't pretend to gather all of history together.

It really is very, very selective, and there's a verse here in Deuteronomy that I don't understand the full implications of, but it's amazing. It says this, Deuteronomy 32, and verse 7. This is when the people were poised to go into their promised land, and Moses repeats the law to them a second time, hence the word Deuteronomy, which means the second law, the second giving of the law. Chapter 32, verse 7. Remember the days of old.

Consider the years of many generations. Ask thy father, and he will show thee. Thy elders, and they will tell thee.

When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel. Now, how about that for a verse? I'll read it again, shall I? Verse 8. When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel. Now, I'm not going to explain it, because I don't fully understand it.

I do understand this, that it means that this nation was God's reference point. Israel was God's earthly reference point, and you know that Israel, the land, is the reference point for this book. If this book says north, it doesn't mean north of Exeter, it means north of the land, which is God's reference point.

It's this reference point, and everything that has reference and relation to Israel, and God's purposes worked out in that people, will come into the Bible story. But things that don't have relevance to Israel, and that point of geography, don't come into the story. So, there's nothing about the Aztecs, or the Chinese, or even the mighty empire upon which the sun never sat.

That's the British empire, for any foreigners amongst us. There's no reference to these things in it, because they did not touch this particular thing. This is highly selective.

This is the story of salvation. This is God tracing redemption and reclamation. This is God working to reverse the processes of sin, and bring in his purposes.

So, everything that God did in these days, he did with reference to Israel, and when a nation touched Israel, God had something to say about it. And God used these nations, he used them to chastise Israel. Sometimes they went over the top with their chastisement, and then God chastised them for chastising Israel too strongly.

And there's all this kind of pattern of things that were happening. Now, God was going to use the people of Assyria. He was going to use it as part of his purposes.

And Isaiah has these prophecies that speak about Assyria, and about all the nations that are around, and the effects that these things will have. At this time, there was an old empire which had almost been

forgotten. It was so long ago that no one really gave much importance to it, and that was the old empire of Babylon.

But it was at this time, there was an old empire which had almost been forgotten. It was so long ago that no one really gave much importance to it, and that was the old empire of Babylon. But it was long gone.

It had now been superseded by the superpower of Assyria, so no one really had much to think about that. But, when you get partway through the book of Isaiah, Isaiah begins to speak about Babylon, because God has a purpose that he's going to work out with Babylon. He's actually going to use Babylon to overpower Assyria.

And so, you've got this pattern of things. If you read Isaiah, and you read the Old Testament, you discover, like the old preachers used to say, that history really is his story. That's what it is.

It's God working out his purposes. God working all things according to the counsel of his own will. Not forcing his will upon people, but in a wonderful way, being sovereign, and at the same time, allowing men to make his choices.

Let's go a little bit farther on into Isaiah before we even begin. I'm not going to get into the early chapters of Isaiah very much at all. I want to get into a section of them which is sometimes called the Servant Songs.

There are a series of prophecies which have to do with someone in particular, and that's really what's on my heart. But this is just kind of a long, slow introduction to it. Isaiah chapter 48.

I'm reminded of a preacher who once said that his sermons always had a beginning and a middle and an end, but not always in that order. And I think it's going to be a little bit like that this morning. We've kind of come to a different place.

This is Isaiah 48. Where shall we read from? Let's read from the beginning. Verse 1. Hear ye this, O house of Jacob, which are called by the name of Israel, and are come forth out of the waters of Judah, which swear by the name of the Lord, and make mention of the God of Israel, but not in truth nor in righteousness.

For they call themselves of the holy city, and stay themselves upon the God of Israel. The Lord of hosts is his name. I have declared the former things from the beginning.

And they went forth out of my mouth, and I showed them. I did them suddenly, and they came to pass, because I knew that thou art obstinate. Who's he speaking to? Just remind ourselves.

Verse 1. O house of Jacob, which are called by the name of Israel, and are come forth out of the waters of Judah. Verse 4. Because I knew that thou art obstinate, and thy neck is an iron sinew, and thy brow brass. I have even from the beginning declared it to thee.

Before it came to pass, I showed it thee. Lest thou should say, my libel hath done them, and my graven image, and my molten image hath commanded them. Thou hast heard, see all this, and will not ye declare it? I have showed thee new things from this time, even hidden things, and thou didst not know them.

They are created now, and not from the beginning. Even before the day when thou heardest them, lest thou should say, behold, I knew them. Yea, thou heardest not.

Yea, thou knewest not. Yea, from the time that thine ear was not opened, for I knew that thou wouldst deal very treacherously, and was called a transgressor from the womb. That's a poignant comment.

God says here of his people, halfway through verse 8, I knew that you would deal very treacherously. If you got to the end of the Old Testament and came to the book of Malachi, the second verse of Malachi sums up all God's dealings with his people. And God says very simply, I have loved you.

That's it. That's the explanation to everything that had happened to them. That's God's testimony to them.

In spite of all their misunderstandings of what was happening, God's testimony is, I have loved you. But three or four times in the book of Malachi, you'll find the word treacherously used. God accused his people of treachery.

They had acted in a disloyal way. They had committed high treason against the one who was to be their king. They had gone against him, but none of it had taken God by surprise.

I knew, he says here, halfway through verse 8, I knew that you would deal very treacherously. It tells me something very wonderful about God. It tells me that when God makes a promise and begins a thing, he doesn't do it half-heartedly.

He doesn't hold back. Even though he knows sometimes that there will be no fruit as a result of what he is doing, he doesn't hold back. He still gives.

He still gives. It's an amazing thing. Because our resources are limited, and maybe because our hearts are narrowed too at times, if we look at a hopeless case, we tend to kind of shrink away from it.

And we say, well, I know what's going to happen here. There's no point in my getting involved in this. I haven't got the time or the energy to waste on this.

This is dead in the water from the start. It's hopeless. No way.

God isn't like that. God speaks to nations, and he speaks to people, and he makes great and glorious promises, and sometimes he knows from the beginning that those promises will never come to full effect in the lives of the people to whom he speaks. Does that surprise you? When the nations divided, Israel and Judah, and became two parts, the northern kingdom came under the rule of a man named Jeroboam.

If you know the Old Testament, you'll know that often it says, Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin. And he constantly took the people of Israel in wrong directions, and as that nation began, so it continued. And through all its line of kings, they constantly went off in other directions.

But when Jeroboam first took the kingdom, God spoke to him, and promised great things to him. God said to Jeroboam, I will make a covenant with you that is like the covenant that I made with David. The sure covenant that I made with David.

It's in the book of Chronicles, you'll find it. God makes this amazing promise to this man. Now you can say, well, what are the implications of this? What would have happened if Jeroboam had fulfilled the conditions of the promise? Because God had said, well, you've got to walk before me, and you've got to keep my word.

And if you do, all these promises are yours. And by implication, if you don't, none of them are yours. Turn please to Jeremiah, chapter 17.

Sorry, chapter 18. Jeremiah, chapter 18. The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words.

Then I went down to the potter's house, and behold, he worked a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter. So he made it again, another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.

Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter, saith the Lord? Behold, as clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel. At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom to pluck up and to pull down and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have pronounced turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom to build and to plant it, if it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good wherewith I said I would benefit them.

That's a world-long statement of God's policy. God speaks in promise and speaks in all the generosity of his heart, and there's nothing false about it. He's not pretending.

He really is willing to do all that he says he will do, and all the resources are at the disposal of those to whom he speaks. But if they turn from his way, the things that he has promised will not come. They will not come about.

And the promises that God gave to the people of Israel are really quite amazing. Glorious promises. And all the time in his heart, God says, I knew.

I knew that you would be treacherous. I knew. I knew that in spite of my saying this to you and this to you, I knew what would happen.

But he didn't draw back. You see, he has a large heart. And if he speaks in judgment to a nation or to an individual, for that matter, while there's life, there really is hope.

While there's life, there's hope. To me, one of the most remarkable stories in the Old Testament is of a king who came after Isaiah. The last king that Isaiah prophesied during his reign was Hezekiah.

And Hezekiah had a son whose name was Manasseh. And Manasseh was the most wicked king that either Israel or Judah ever had. Manasseh plunged into sin and into idolatry with tremendous vigor and energy.

In fact, the Bible says that he was worse than the nations that God had dispossessed when he gave the land to Israel. And God had said, of those nations, the land is vomiting you out. It can't take any more the way that you're behaving.

Well, Manasseh repeated their actions, and worse. He sacrificed his son in fire to one of the heathen gods. He went from one degree of wickedness to the next.

And in the end, as a result of God's threat to him, Manasseh was taken away captive to... It's a bit complicated, so I won't tell you where, because it would confuse you if I told you where he was taken to.

But he was taken away to another city as a captive, and the intention of the king of Assyria was that for the rest of his life he should be there in bondage, he would be in chains, and that would be the end of him. This is the most wicked king that the nation had ever had.

And the Bible tells us that when he was in this city, a captive, he turned to God, this most wicked king that they ever had. He turned to God, and he repented. And God said, alright, take him back.

It's staggering. This man destroyed the nation. He left such a legacy as could not be put back together again.

And yet, individually of him, God says, alright, take him back. And he went back, and he began a kind of a reform, tried to put some of the things right that he had done. Amazing, God's generosity, God's love.

We almost sang a hymn last night, Who is a pardoning God like thee? God's willingness again and again to forgive. The disciples couldn't fathom it. In the days when the Lord Jesus was upon the earth, they said, well, how often then can I be reasonable? Seven times? And he said, not seven, but seventy times seven.

Let's just turn to Matthew. It's Matthew 18 for a moment. Matthew 18.

So much of this chapter is about forgiveness. So much about what he has to say about binding and loosing is about forgiveness, if you have the eyes to see it. Verse 21.

Matthew 18. Then came Peter to him and said, Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Until seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee until seven times, but until seventy times seven. Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.

When he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him which owed him ten thousand talents. But for as much as he had not to pay, his Lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife and children, and all that he had in payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me and I will pay thee all.

Then the Lord of that servant was moved with compassion and loosed him and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out and found one of his fellow servants which owed him a hundred pence. And he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou ow'st.

And his fellow servant fell down at his feet and besought him, saying, Have patience with me and I will pay thee all. And he would not. But went and cast him into prison till he should pay the debt.

So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were very sorry and came and told unto their Lord all that was done. Then his Lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt because thou desiredst me. Shouldst not thou also have compassion on thy fellow servant even as I had pity on thee? And his Lord was wroth and delivered him to the tormentors till he should pay all that was due to him.

So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses. The amounts that are used in this story are really quite fascinating. There's a way that you can work out your own conversion system of values for the Bible.

It's very difficult just to kind of say, well what does this represent in pounds? But because of the story that Jesus told about a man who went and hired people to work in his vineyard for one penny for one day's work, you've got a kind of a basic unit or a building block to try and work out some other things. In other words, it was a fair day's wage for a labourer in the vineyard to have one penny. So if you want to work out the purchasing equivalent of that, in modern terms you need to know roughly what a labourer would get for one day's wage today.

Now that's a long time since I was a labourer so I don't know, but probably let's say just roughly so that we can get some idea. Let's say thirty pounds. Are there any employers here? Is that roughly about right? Or more? Alright, well let's stick to thirty and then you can increase it.

Let's say thirty. Well, a hundred pennies, which is what the second servant owed to the first servant, a hundred pennies is a hundred days' work at about thirty pounds a day. That's to say it's about three thousand pounds worth in purchasing value in today's terms.

But if you want to put it another way around, it means that if you worked for about four months of a six-day week and taking one off for a rest, it would take you about four months to discharge your debt of a hundred pennies. Okay? That was the second servant. He owed about three thousand pounds.

The first servant owed ten thousand talents. That is an equivalent of 1.8 billion pounds. 1.8 billion pounds.

You would have to work about four months to discharge your debt of a hundred pennies and you would have to work 191,236 years to discharge your debt of ten thousand talents. Give me time and I will pay, he said to his master. I have no idea how he got into that kind of situation.

1.8 billion pounds he was in debt and he was forgiven. One moment he had a weight of impossible measure upon him. 1.8 billion pounds he owes one second and the next moment he is a free man with not a debt to his name.

This is God. This is God's continual generosity. Who is a pardoning God like thee? Or who has grace so rich, so free? I have loved you.

I have loved you. That is what he said to his people. Again and again he came to them.

Again and again he said, I rose up early and sent my servants to you. He is referring to his prophets. Again and again when they turned their back on him, he sent them another one.

Patiently, constantly, loving them, loving them, never turning his back upon them. But I knew, he said, I knew what you would do. I knew you would act treacherously.

That verse was made mention of last night in the end of John chapter 2. When there were some who saw the miracles that Jesus did and believed on him. And it says, I'll read it just again so we can read it accurately. The end of John chapter 2, verse 23.

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name. When they saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not believe in them.

What I've done is I've simply translated the same word by the same word. Because the word that is translated believed in verse 23 is translated commit in verse 24. It's exactly the same word.

They believed in him, but he didn't believe in them. This isn't cynicism. This isn't cynicism, it's just he knew what was in them.

I knew. I knew how you would behave. His love is open towards them if they turn and repent.

Even the adverse things that he said, he will repent and change. While there's life, there's hope. Even if you get into debt to the tune of 1.8 billion pounds, he's willing.

He's ready. He loves, he avails himself, but there is a sense in which he does not believe in men because he knows what's in men. I'll tell you who he believes in.

He believes in himself. He believes in his ability to do all that's necessary in men and women, to present them faultless before his presence with exceeding joy. He is able.

Sorry, that's Hebrews as well. Well, and it's Titus and other places too. He is able.

He is able. Literally, he has the power. Man doesn't have the power.

That's why he doesn't put his confidence in men. But he has the power. That's why he puts his confidence in himself and his workings within men.

And men who will respond to him, men who will give themselves to them, he is able. I love the way the Scripture expresses things. The Scripture doesn't get tied up with answers to questions like, is it possible to live a life that is free from sin? Is it possible to live a life that's pleasing every day? It doesn't get tied up with those questions.

It says, he is able to save to the uttermost those that come to God by them. He is able to keep from falling. Notice the focus all the time.

He, he, he. These are the questions we ask. Can I? Will I? Do I? This is the question he asks.

Is he able? How many times do you think it uses the word, behold, in the Bible? Behold really means, are you looking at what I'm saying? That's what it really means. It's a word that's used so often in the Bible that you hardly notice it. You just, well, it just always says behold, doesn't it? But behold really is God attracting your attention.

He's saying, now look. You see, if I think you're kind of going to sleep, and I said, now look. And people kind of say, oh, now what's he going to say? Well, I think it's over 1,200 times in the Bible that the word behold is used.

And the reason that God has to keep saying it is because we're always looking at the wrong things. We're always distracted. There's a verse in Isaiah, maybe we'll look at it another time.

When God says to his people, don't be dismayed, and the revised margin version gives exactly what it means. That particular word for dismayed means don't keep looking all around. Don't keep looking over there and looking over there.

Don't look over there. Look unto me, you ends of the earth, and be saved. If God can get us to look at him, it's salvation.

I have an old Bible at home that someone was going to throw away, and I couldn't bear to see it thrown away. So, I ended up with it. And it has some of those old watercolor pictures, I think they were from Harold Copping.

And one of them that it's got in is the story that comes from Numbers, when the people of Israel had sinned against God, and he had sent amongst them fiery serpents. And they had bitten them, and people were dying, and they cried to God. And God said to Moses, well, make a fiery serpent, make a brass one, and put it on a pole.

And anyone who looks away to it, they'll be saved. That was the promise. And this picture of Harold Copping, you've got in the kind of the background, you've got long, low tents of the Israelite people.

And you've got here and there bodies that are lying about, and some snakes slithering around. And in the distance, you've got this pole with the bronze snake wrapped around it. And in the foreground, you're looking in kind of the opening to one of these tents.

And there's a man, I suppose he must be maybe 60 or something like that, and his wife. And they are cradling in their arms their son. And their son looks to be, I would think, in his late teens, in all the vigour of his youth.

And he's dying, and his life is ebbing away. And frantically, because there are no words for this, but frantically the father and the mother are pointing. Pointing.

There's no solution. There's no other antidote. There's nothing in man.

There's nothing. But if you look away, there's salvation in a look. Let's pray.

Isaiah means Jehovah saves. Jesus means Jehovah is the Saviour. Lord Jesus, we do just come in these moments, Lord, now and again and again and again.

We lift our eyes to you and our hearts to you. Thank you, Lord. There is salvation for now in you.

No matter how we got to where we are. No matter what kind of debt we've got into. No matter how many times we've squandered our inheritance.

Thank you, Lord. You're still saying, come. You're still saying, behold, your God will come.

We lift our hearts to you, Lord. Do help us these days and the future days to have this upward look, Lord. Not to be distracted by the things that are around, by the circumstances, by the rising and falling of the superpowers, by the things that are outside our control.

But give us, Lord, that instinct to look up and away. Lord Jesus, looking unto you. Lord Jesus, thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Amen.

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