

How to Make God

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Preacher: James Lapping

[0 : 0 0] Like Martin said, on page 730 from the book of Isaiah, beginning chapter 43, verse 22, through chapter 44, verse 23.

Yet you have not called on me, Jacob. You have not wearied yourselves for me, Israel. You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices.

I have not burned you with grain offerings, nor wearied you with demands for incense. You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me, or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices.

But you have burdened me with your sins, and wearied me with your offenses. I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.

Review the past for me, let us argue the matter together. State the case for your innocence. Your first father sinned, those I sent to teach you rebelled against me.

[0 : 5 8] So I disgrace the dignitaries of your temple. I consign Jacob to destruction, and Israel to scorn. But now, listen, Jacob, my servant, Israel, whom I have chosen.

This is what the Lord says. He who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you. Do not be afraid, Jacob, my servant. Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.

For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground. I will pour out my spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams.

Some will say, I belong to the Lord. Others will call themselves by the name of Jacob. Still others will write on their hand, the Lord's, and will take the name Israel. This is what the Lord says.

Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty. I am the first, and I am the last. Apart from me, there is no God. Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it.

[2 : 0 1] Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come. Yes, let them foretell what will come. Do not tremble.

Do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No. There is no other rock.

I know not one. All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind. They are ignorant to their own shame.

Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit nothing? People who do that will be put to shame. Such craftsmen are only human beings. Let them all come together and take their stand.

They will be brought down to terror and shame. The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals. He shapes an idol with hammers. He forges it with the might of his arm.

[2 : 58] He gets hungry and loses his strength. He drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker. He roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses.

He shapes it in human form, human form in all its glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars or perhaps took a cypress or oak.

He let it grow among the trees of the forest or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is used as fuel for burning. Some of it he takes and warms himself.

He kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it. He makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire.

Over it he prepares his meal. He roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, Ah, I am warm. I see the fire. From the rest he makes a god, his idol.

[3 : 56] He bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, Save me. You are my god. They know nothing. They understand nothing. Their eyes are plastered over so that they cannot see.

And their minds closed so that they cannot understand. No one stops to think. No one has the knowledge or understanding to say, Half of it I used for fuel. I even baked bread over its coals.

I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood? Such a person feeds on ashes. A deluded heart misleads him.

He cannot save himself or say, Is not this thing in my right hand a lie? Remember these things, Jacob, for you, Israel, are my servant. I have made you.

You are my servant. Israel, I will not forget you. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud. Your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.

[4 : 55] Sing for joy, you heavens, for the Lord has done this. Shout aloud, you earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forest and all your trees.

For the Lord has redeemed Jacob. He displays his glory in Israel. Great.

Thanks, Martin, for leading. Thanks, Haley, for reading. Long reading there. Well read. Thanks. Alan, for the prayers. Fantastic. Joe and the team on music. Great. Very encouraging.

And well done for making it this evening to St. Silas. It's good to see you here. You're in the right place. And I hope we have a good and fruitful time in God's word tonight. So let me pray for us as we start.

Father, we know that we know you through your word. We know that we can know who you are as God and how we can be right with you through what we are taught in your word.

[5 : 55] Help us to listen to it now. Help us to hear it. Obey it and apply it to our hearts, minds and lives. In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, as Martin alluded earlier, on Sunday evenings at St. Silas, we've been going through a little series in the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah.

Now, if you're new to church this evening and maybe you haven't looked at much of the Old Testament before, it's a bit strange, isn't it? I mean, for instance, not many of us read poetry at home.

I know a couple of us might like to read poetry. So poetry is unusual. It's written 3,000 years ago, thousands of years ago. How can that be relevant to us today?

Some of the language is difficult. So we read there, what on earth is a fragrant calamus? Still trying to figure it out. That's awkward.

All the characters in the reading, they're quite obscure. So we've got Jacob, we've got Israel, we've got the Lord. Who may that be? Who are they? But I want to suggest to us that what we have looked at in the Bible this evening, as weird as it is, is relevant to us today, this evening, in Glasgow.

[7 : 19] Whatever your situation is in life. So what do I mean by that? Well, in this passage, Isaiah answers two very important questions for us.

The answers of these questions shape and motivate how we live, where we find our joy and happiness. And they give to us our meaning in life, like no other questions that we know.

So the first question there is, what do we think God is like? And the fancy word for that is, what is our theology? How do we understand who God is and what he is?

And the second question is, then, how do we worship God? How do we approach this God? And now you might be sitting here and thinking, well, I don't have a theology. I'm not interested in God.

Be real, James. This isn't relevant to me. But here's the catch. Even if you think there is no God, or you only have a vague understanding or sense of God, that is your understanding of God.

[8 : 27] That is your theology. That's your view of God, whether you like it or not. And you will live your life in accordance with that view.

So to give you a bit of steer as we look at this, Isaiah is going to address these questions. And he's firstly going to speak about a wrong way to approach God. And then he's going to highlight the right way to approach God.

And then secondly, Isaiah is going to look at the next question. That is, Isaiah is going to show us who God is by contrasting him to the absurdity of who God isn't.

And finally, Isaiah is going to tell us how God has made it possible for us to worship God in the right way. And how he shows us what he is like.

So what is the wrong way to approach God? And that's our first point there, the foolishness of false worship. Now, the spiritual state of Israel in our reading is given in the very first verse of our passage.

[9 : 29] I wonder if you'll look down and look at it. Verse 22. Yet you have not called upon me, Jacob. You have not wearied yourselves for me, Israel.

Now, on the face of it, it seems as though God, quite frankly, has got his facts wrong. Because people at that time were still offering sacrifices. They were still going to the temple, offering up the pigeons, offering up the sheep, offering up the bulls and cows, and calling upon God and calling upon his name.

So what is going on in this passage? Well, the only thing that's worse than being an agile no friends and having no friends is having that friend who only phones you when they want something from you.

You might be able to empathize with that. Yeah. Who doesn't value you, but only uses you to see what they can get out of you. So yes, the people were doing lots of sacrifices at that time.

They're calling upon the Lord's name, but only to get things. Their worship was a burden to them and not a joy. Anyway, it wasn't done out of love for God, but out of an obligation and duty to see what they could get.

[10 : 46] You can imagine how it went. Well, God is so demanding. I've got to go sacrifice again today. I have to keep all these rules. But if I do this, well, maybe then I'll get that Mercedes.

Maybe then I'll get that special someone. And that is a lot like how we treat God today. We think of God as a genie.

We rub the bottle. God pops out. We make the wish, and God gives us what we want. And we serve him reluctantly, and we think about him reluctantly. We're rather like those schoolboys who drag their feet off to school when we think about going to God.

Now, false worship is burdensome. It's burdensome for you because you don't want to do it, and it's burdensome for God because you make demands of God that he doesn't really want to honor because they don't treat him as he deserves to be treated, as someone who is to be loved and adored.

But look at what God says about right worship of him. So verse 23 and 24. I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense, but you have burdened me with sins and wearied me with your offenses.

[12 : 06] And because false worship is done so begrudgingly to earn our way with God, God says, it's as if it doesn't even exist in verse 23 and 34.

You see, false worship is to miss the entire point of true worship of God. Now, let's turn and look and see what true worship of God is going to look like.

So the freedom of true worship. That's our second point there. Now, look instead. So true worship, verse 25. Isaiah writes, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I remember your sins no more.

You see, God says, I don't ask you to do things to try and earn your acceptance before me for the things you have done wrong. I give you full forgiveness.

I forget and forgive everything you have ever done wrong. You don't have to earn your way to gain my acceptance. And so what is God asking here?

[13 : 11] He's saying, Well, you don't have to try and earn your way into my good books. Don't you see that you've been fully and freely forgiven out of my mercy? I've given you the greatest gift I could ever give you, unconditional forgiveness, that you might be mine, that you might say, I belong to the Lord.

You can imagine a couple who go down to the orphanage. They see someone there that they'd like to adopt into their family. They go through all the efforts of filling out all the paperwork.

They go through all the interviews. They get a nice house where the child can come live. As soon as they have signed off on the paperwork, it's settled. They've adopted the child. The child comes home.

They get there. What does the child start doing? Starts polishing the floor. Starts polishing the boots. Starts painting everything. They're only three. And they've got the bucket. And they're going like, And they're like, Well, what are you doing?

What are you doing? What are you doing, my daughter? What are you doing, my son? And they say, Well, I'm working so that I can stay in your family. It's completely back to front, isn't it?

[14 : 19] The deed is done. You are in. You belong. God has given you as much as He is ever going to give you. There's no more that He can give you. So what's the difference between false worship of God and true worship?

Well, false worship says, I do this to serve God as an obligation, and it's a burden. True worship says, I've been given everything by God already, And therefore, I worship not as a burden, but as a joy.

So if you see yourself as a slave of God, as someone who's always going to have to work to earn your way into God's presence, and gain God's acceptance, then the Christian life is going to be a struggle for you.

You're always going to be nearsighted as to what God has given you, a full forgiveness of sins. You're always going to be insecure in your relationship with God.

But if you see that you belong to God, out of His mercy, well, that changes everything. It changes everything in your life, how you treat others, all your outlooks.

[15 : 31] So having looked at what true worship looks like, let's look at what Isaiah says about how our theology, that's how we understand God, shapes our worship in the rest of our lives.

So the next point there, the God worthy of worship. So earlier on in Isaiah, on Sunday evenings, Isaiah tries to show us why we should worship God over idols, because of His bigness.

He points out how awesome God is, how big He is as creator, His extraordinary is. Remember how we looked at that? But in this passage tonight, Isaiah tries to show us how we should worship God, worship God, because of, by contrasting the bigness of God to the absolute absurdity of idol worship, of worshiping something that is not God.

It's an insanity. It's an absolute absurdity. But first, let's look at who God is. So verse, so verse 6 to 8 there. In these verses, God is basically saying down, this is my house.

That's what He's saying. He's throwing down the gauntlet. He is saying, I am big. I am massive. And look what He says there. That's awesome. This is what the Lord says. Israel's king and redeemer.

[16 : 50] The Lord Almighty. That's the first time in Isaiah that He uses that phrase. What it means is, I am king of heaven's armies. All the burning, all the seraphim and cherubim, all those angels with fiery wings.

He's the king of them. He commands them as a warrior. I am the first. I am the last. Apart from me, there is no God. You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me?

No. There is no other rock. I know not one. So what is God saying what He is like? He's saying that He is utterly unique, extraordinary, that He is the measure of everything in creation, in and outside of creation.

Everything is defined by being compared to God and who He is. He is the sole meaning provider in life. You're never going to get your meaning outside of God.

It's only to be found in God. And He is saying that He alone is God. No other God exists other than Yahweh, the God of the Bible.

[17 : 54] Now here is the thing. When we think about God, or say we don't believe in God, or say that we're ambivalent towards God, or we think that we're unsure about God, very often it's not this idea, this Bible idea of God that we're reacting against.

We're reacting against a small view of God, of saying God is something less than He is. It is not this super awesome God that we are rejecting, but a lesser God, a caricature of who God really is.

And similarly, when we struggle in the Christian life, very often it's because we don't understand the bigness and awesomeness of God.

Now next, to this understanding of God, Isaiah presents for us a caricature of small gods and idols that we very often in our own lives follow to our shame.

So next there, the foolishness of false gods. Now, who is he speaking to? It's not just that Isaiah is speaking about bowing down to carved idols there.

[19 : 04] So imagine the African religions, or the Norwegians, or the old Scandinavians, or the Inuits, or going down to the British Museum and you see all those little idols there.

It's not just those, but as Martin alluded to as the start of the service, he's speaking about treating a creative thing as something that's going to give us infinite meaning.

treating that thing that has been made as something that is worthy of our trust and obedience and worship, that is only worthy to go to our creator God.

And trusting a creative thing is to give that thing, your life, an ultimate meaning and satisfaction that only God can give while ignoring the true God of the Bible.

So in summary, the summary of these verses, of this idolatry verse that we looked at there, and of the people who worship them, is verse 20. So I wonder if you'll just turn to 44 verse 20 there.

[20 : 05] I'll just read it for us again. Such a person feeds on ashes. A deluded heart misleads him. He cannot save himself or say, is not this thing in my right hand a lie?

So what is he saying? Well, he's saying a life that ignores God and worships something else is like feeding on ashes.

Everything turns in your mouth to dust. It's dry in your mouth. Life loses all its whimsicalness, all its satisfaction.

Life becomes a carnival of the absurd. Rather than joy and satisfaction of true worship of the right God, of the true God, life becomes a feeding of ashes.

So I had a great uncle who had a great life, fantastic life. He accomplished everything I wanted to do in life. An amazing life. Did great adventures, successful lawyer, reached the big time.

[21 : 06] His last words when he passed were, I'm sick of living. He didn't know the Lord. He had made something else his idol and life became a feeding on ashes.

So secondly then, a life which ignores God is tragically unaware of its own emptiness. Look at the second phrase there. A deceived heart that turns, turned him aside.

So when we worship created things, we become so enamored, so in love with that thing that we become enslaved to it. We start serving that thing. We think we control it.

That thing starts controlling us. So I had another uncle who made an absolute wreck of his life because he became so enamored with the created thing that he railroaded his life because of that.

I can't imagine that when he was a boy and he was thinking about the life that he had lived in the future, dreaming about what it was going to be like, that it was going to turn out how it did turn out.

[22 : 08] But what he hadn't realized was that he had become enslaved to this idol and that idol controlled his life. He couldn't get free of that. His heart had become deluded.

So then thirdly, a life that ignores God needs power from outside itself to set itself free. So final phrase there in verse 20. He cannot deliver his own soul. That is, we become like our idols, the objects, whatever it is we worship, whether it's money, success, we become like that thing.

And what are they like? Verse 18, they know nothing, they understand nothing, their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, their minds are closed so they cannot understand.

They can't help themselves even if they tried. And when we worship created things, that's what we become. We become like that deaf, dumb, blind idol.

And rather than saving ourselves, rather than finding our meaning, rather than finding life, we become someone who needs to be saved, who needs to be rescued, very much like those idols that we've made.

[23 : 20] Now, because we've become enslaved to idols, we need the God who truly and freely redeems. And that's our next point. So look down with me at verse 21.

In verse 21, I'll just read the start of it and then towards the end of it. Remember these things, God says, I will not forget you. Now, what are the things that Isaiah's heroes are to remember?

Well, they are to remember the foolishness of idols. Why? So that they remember to flee from that absurdity, from that foolishness, and flee to the true God who created everything.

And notice what God promises to do in verse 22. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist.

Return to me for I have redeemed you. God does what our false worship and our false gods can never do and don't have the power to do.

[24 : 23] God saves us. He rescues us. So you see, where Isaiah's original hearers and us, we might wonder, has God forgotten us?

Has he abandoned us? Left us to our troubles in life? God says, you've got it wrong. I have not forgotten you. But in our blindness and in our nearsightedness, we have forgotten God and we have turned to things that are not God.

But despite this, despite this rejection of the true God, creator of the universe, God promises to redeem us. And redeem there is really just a fancy word to say, to buy something back at a cost.

So God promises to pay the cost that our sins, our rejection of God deserves for ignoring Him. And then finally there, we're going to look at and consider how it is that God manages to redeem us.

So the Son who paid for our redemption. Now, I wonder if you've noticed a big problem in our reading tonight. And that is, so how does God judge Israel's false worship but still promise to forgive all sins?

[25 : 40] How does He at the end of chapter 38 promise to destroy Jacob, scorn Israel, but also promise to give them all the blessings of chapter 44, 1 to 5?

How does He condemn idolaters in verse 20 and then in the very next verse promise full redemption so that, well, even all the atoms in the universe rejoice at God's people being saved?

Well, a little later in Isaiah's prophecy. Isaiah writes about a servant who does worship the right God in the right way.

But he writes that this servant, instead of enjoying that salvation that he earned for himself, he dies and takes the punishment that we deserved for our rejection of God and worshipping created things rather than the creator.

So Isaiah writes, I'm just going to put this on the screen behind us there. He writes, but he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds we are healed.

[26 : 51] We are all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way. The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Well, the New Testament makes it clear that this servant was God's own son, Jesus. And that's whenever, that even though he was God's son and was God and obeyed God perfectly during his earthly life, he was crucified by the Romans in Jerusalem and died.

And that dying, he died the death that we deserve for rejecting God. Saying no to the obvious God of the universe, the one who is obviously in charge and instead choosing to put creative things over us.

So when Jesus died, God gave us everything that we might belong to God and be called children of God to work for our salvation. So what's that going to look like?

Well, imagine a 13-year-old me, hard to do, a couple of years ago, not that many, orcs, playing rugby, rugby field. A lovely summer's day in Natal, you know Natal's the land of rugby.

[28 : 05] South Africa's not doing great at rugby at the moment. They were doing great at the last. In the middle of the match, 13-year-old me, there's this little scrum going on. And I was one of those kids who always knew the rules better than the referee.

And I was quite vocal in pointing out to the referee when he got things wrong. So on this occasion, ref, he's offside, came this voice, my voice, from out the scrum.

And to my shock and horror, the ref blew the whistle, stopped the match. And he said, who said, sir, who said, he's offside?

Well, I knew, I knew what was going to come. I was going to get chucked off the pitch, away from my friends. I'd have to take the long walk back to the pavilion, or back away from everyone. All my friends would laugh at me.

And I sat there in silence. Lo and behold, another voice piped up. My arch enemy, the boy I hated the most at school, Joshua Reynolds.

[29 : 13] Sir, that was me. There are only two people on that pitch who knew it wasn't Joshua. Me and Joshua. Joshua took the punishment that I deserve for telling the referee how he should do his job.

Similarly, Jesus took the punishment that you deserve for you telling God to shove off so you can run your life your own way. Jesus took that punishment so that you could be with God forever and know how to worship the right God in the right way, trusting Him fully.

Let me close for us in prayer. Father, we thank you for these awesome promises in Isaiah, Lord.

We consider your word. We consider the good news of Jesus. Help us to think how we might respond to us. Help us to humble our hearts. Help us to draw to speak to you and ask how we can know you better through this.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.