

Glorious Vision, Painful Reality

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks, David, for reading. It is a graphic and challenging passage of the Bible, isn't it? But we're committed at St. Silas to seeing the whole of the Bible as God's Word for all times, and so we don't cherry-pick bits that we like. We're just trying to let the Bible set the agenda and come to it and hear what God's saying to us. So let's ask for God's help. Let's bow our heads and I'll lead us in a prayer. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

Lord Jesus, we praise you. Once the suffering servant, now the risen King, the one who opened the minds of your disciples to understand your Word. We ask that you would open our minds this morning, that we could understand the Scriptures, and understanding them, we would see you more clearly. And seeing you, we would know how to respond. For we ask for your name's sake. Amen.

Sometimes there's a really big difference in life between someone's vision of something and the reality on the ground. I grew up near a town called Darlington in England, and there was this guy, George Reynolds. There's just been obituaries about him, actually, last week. He was this rags-to-riches guy locally. He'd been in prison, then he made a fortune from kitchen worktops or something. And then he bought the football club, and he said that it was this lower league club that was never going to do anything. And he promised trophies and European football and Premier League signings. And he built a 25,000-seat stadium for this football club. And he went out into the middle of the pitch to rapturous applause as people thanked him for what he was building. And then it turned out that he didn't have any more money after he built the stadium. And one day, he got stopped by the police on the way out of the ground. And they opened his car boot and found a quarter of a million pounds in cash.

And he got arrested for tax evasion, and he went to prison. So the vision was glorious, but the reality was a very different story. And the same can be true for the church. You might have experienced that yourself. The Bible gives us this incredible vision of the church as God's new community and the hope for the world. But on the ground, when we actually engage with each other as real Christians, the reality can be very different. And that can be deflating, discouraging. It can even put us off Jesus altogether. Now, in this section in Isaiah that we're in together, we see that contrast between vision and reality. But what God says to us today is that it's when we're willing to see that the problem is in us, to admit that actually we're part of the problem, that God offers tremendous hope to us. Last week, we had this glorious vision from Isaiah chapter 56 of how things should be among the people of God, how things should be. That God's people were to live righteous lives with God at the center of their lives and seek social justice, so loving their neighbor as themselves. And that as

God's people live like that, they shine as lights in the world, like stars in the night sky. And the world is drawn in because God wants to gather the nations to Him. He wants His community to be a house of prayer for all nations. This is glorious vision last week. And then this morning, we get brought back down to earth with this picture of how things really are among the people of God. The first audience for this prophecy are around the 6th century BC. They're back living around Jerusalem as the people, but they're waiting. You know, it's hundreds of years yet before Jesus will come as Savior, and we hear how things really are. And it's sobering because what Isaiah says to them, God could say to any generation of God's people, including our own. It might be true in any generation of the people of God. So our first point this morning is the shocking way the people treat the Lord. The shocking way the people treat the Lord. And from verse 9 of chapter 56 through to verse 10 of chapter 57, we get this devastating description of the behavior of the people of God. There's very graphic language used because it's depicting the people running off and dabbling with the pagan worship of the people around them. And God describes that in terms that are like

sleeping around, because God's people are meant to be in a relationship with Him that's like a marriage, where they're faithful to Him and He to them. But instead, He sees them running off after these other gods, and it's like they're having affairs. They're sleeping around. And we might look at that and think, well, this isn't me. You know, I never go to a temple and worship another god. But the Bible has a deeper view of worship than that, and so a deeper view of idolatry than that. That whenever we build our lives on anything except God, we're worshiping something. That when we love something in our heart more than we love God, we're worshiping that thing.

[5 : 33] We worship whatever we love and serve and trust to give us, what really only God can give us. And what keeps us on the hook here, as we read Isaiah 57, is that these were not people who had given up on the God of the Bible altogether. They were still known as the people of God. They went to the temple in the same way that we might turn up at church. And I guess for lots of us, that might be the kind of danger that we're in, that this week, maybe lots of us are not likely to say, you know, I give up.

I don't believe in Jesus. I don't believe He's Savior and Lord of my life anymore. We might not say that. We're happy to come to church. But actually, functionally in our life, we still, we live for the gods of our age. We live for money and sex and power. And we hurry after those things, because that's what we really think will make us happy. So it starts with this depiction of the people in grave danger in chapter 56, verse 9. Come, all you beasts of the field, come and devour all you beasts of the forest. It's a picture of spiritual danger, and the picture is of God's people as sheep, sheep, and the beasts coming to devour the sheep, so that you think, well, where are the shepherds who are meant to look after them? And then we hear about the shepherds in verse 12. Look at verse 11. They are shepherds who lack understanding. They all turn to their own way. They seek their own gain. Come, each one cries, let me get wine. Let us drink our fill of beer, and tomorrow will be like today, or even far better. So they're not instructing the people about God and the realities of fearing Him and living in fear of Him, because they're complacent. They scoff at that, and they're just down at majestic wine, stocking things up for a hedonistic life. And we might think today about how that would apply if we're looking at the church today, and we see leaders who scoff at the idea that God actually is offended by sin, and that He will judge the world for that. And if the leaders are saying that, no wonder then people don't respond to the warnings of judgment in the Bible.

So the people are missing the signs that there's a problem between them and God, and one of those signs is that the number of faithful people is going down as righteous people die. And what's actually happening is God is having mercy on those people. When a faithful, God-fearing person dies, God is actually saving them from the evil of this age and taking them to be with Him. So we see that in verse 1 of chapter 57, the righteous perish, and no one takes it to heart. [8 : 24] The devout are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. It's quite a perspective, isn't it, on what's going on when a faithful Christian dies.

But the unfaithful people of God, they don't stop to think about that and think, have we got a problem here between us and God? And so what follows is a description of their divided hearts as they still worship the God of the Bible in the temple. You'd see them in church on a Sunday, in other words, but actually they dabble in pagan worship. And the key point for us is that the language is deliberately revolting. Isaiah is describing the practices of Canaanite pagan worship at that time that he found most disgusting and revolting to try and wake up the people at how offensive it is to worship other gods instead of the living God. So in verse 5, we read that they have sex under trees because of superstitions about fertility in the land. Verse 5, you burn with lust among the orcs and under every spreading tree, and then you sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags. So it's not necessarily that Isaiah's first audience for this, Israel is guilty of all those things. It's more that we should feel revulsion when we hear that the people of that part of the world at that time sacrificed children to made up gods. We should feel revulsion at that, and we should feel the same kind of revulsion about the idols in our own hearts, about saying that we love God, but actually turning to other things instead. And at the end of verse 6, the Lord asks, in view of all this, should I relent? Should I hold back from bringing justice when people have fallen this badly? And we're reminded in verse 10 that it's not good for us to follow idols. They make you weary. Verse 10, you wearied yourself by such going about, but you would not say it is hopeless. People in our culture think that being a Christian would take away their freedom. Often that's the case. Lots of people in Glasgow would look at the church and think, well, if

I turn to Jesus, it would take away my freedom. God says it's the other way around, that actually following the generous God of the Bible is true freedom. And it's when we turn from Him and look for satisfaction elsewhere that we find we never rest. We're hurrying after other gods, trying to keep them happy, because we think they've made promises they haven't made. And we need to come home to the God of the Bible. So how do we spot this in ourselves? Well, have a look at verse 11 of chapter 57? God asks, whom have you so dreaded and feared that you have not been true to me and have neither remembered me nor taken this to heart? Who have you feared that you would be like this?

So to search our own hearts for signs of false worship, we could ask ourselves, what am I really afraid of? What do I fear? It's when we're afraid that we look for security in something. Could you reflect on what you are afraid of and therefore what is it you take security in so that you're not afraid? And is it the Lord or is it something else replacing Him? So that's our first point, the shocking way the people treat the Lord. So how does God respond? That's our second point, the Lord's predictable response. And it's in verses 11 to 13. The thought of God judging false worship is really unpopular today. But here in Isaiah, we see that it's when God doesn't do anything about our behavior that we just carry on. So look at the end of verse 11. He asks, is it not because I have long been silent that you do not fear me? Do you see what he's saying? We might think, how could a loving God judge people He's made? But we might also think, if there's a God, why doesn't He do something about the wrong behavior in our world and in His church? And the Lord here connects those two things and says,

[13:07] He has to judge and He has to speak against wrong behavior and warn of judgment because it's when God is silent and forbearing and patient that people just don't fear Him and we go on and do whatever we like. So the Lord instead promises a judgment is coming. If you have a look at verse 12, I will expose your righteousness and your works and they will not benefit you. And then what use will the idols we worship be when God judges? He says, verse 13, when you cry out for help, let your collection of idols save you. The wind will carry all of them off. A mere breath will blow them away. In other words, there is a day when we'll all meet God and the true reality will sink in.

I don't know whether you've ever had this experience, please don't feel you need to if you haven't, of being in a nightclub when it closes. I remember this, how you'd go into a nightclub at a certain time of night and there was this atmosphere because of the smoke and the lights and the really deafeningly loud music and there's vodka and tequila and lager and there's all kinds of behavior going on in that atmosphere because inhibitions have gone. And then at the end of the night, the lights get switched on and suddenly in the bright light, it looks ridiculous. The whole thing just looks terrible. And you think, what's everyone doing with each other in here? There's this sudden dawning of reality. It makes people come to their senses as the music stops and the lights come on.

Well, how much more will we feel that sense of the light coming on when the Lord appears, the good God, and true reality in all of its holiness, all of its otherness collides with human behavior? If we just jump ahead, just look at how the Lord is described in verse 15.

It says, for this is what the high and exalted one says, he who lives forever, whose name is holy. In just a few words, how different the Lord is from us. He's the high and exalted one, the uncreated creator. He's not bound by any space. He's high and exalted. He's he who lives forever. So he's eternal. He's not bound by time. Time is a dimension that he created. He's eternal. He is the one whose name is holy. That is, he's set apart and perfect, and he's not tainted by any impurity. And this is judgment day. This is standing before a God like that. So there's a writer about this book, Isaiah, a writer, Oswald, who says this about the great uncovering that God promises in verse 12. He says, in the final glare of unveiled reality, all the vast expenditures of human skill, intellectual and physical, that have gone into creating the religions of humanity will be shown to be a monumental waste, and their creators will be left stripped naked in the terrible white light of the glory of the creator.

It's this idea of seeing goodness that you think you've looked for your whole life and realizing it's terrifying because it exposes our flaws. And the right response from us at this moment in Isaiah is despair. We saw that from Isaiah himself. In Isaiah chapter 6, he sees the Lord and he says, water me, for I am ruined. That's how it will be for any of us who think that God will be pleased with me because of how I've lived. I'll back myself when I meet him. It will be a shocking day.

[17:18] But we move on to our third point. So we've heard about the shocking way that people treat the Lord. Our third point is the shocking way that the Lord treats the people. So have a look at

the turning point in verse 13. It's just, if you're looking in the church Bibles or a similar one, it actually is halfway through that verse that God suddenly says, but whoever takes refuge in me will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain. So even now the Lord is saying, if you turn from your idols and come to me for refuge, I will give you. And verse 13 is him saying, I will give you the fulfillment of all my promises.

For them, then it was about the promised land, inherit the land, possess the holy mountain. And that's fulfilled for us in our times through the glorious future God's promised. He calls it the new Jerusalem, that there is treasure in heaven that can never perish or spoil or fade, kept there for people who trust God today. And he promises a safe path through the coming judgment to the world when he's put it right and God's holy city is in his new creation. And it's not because we earn it, but because we knew we couldn't earn it. So we sought refuge in God. And we've turned to him and said, look, I'm part of the problem here, but will you have mercy on me and rescue me? That's the promises. Then we hear about the presence of God. Have a look at verse 15. Think as we read it again about the two astonishing places where you find God makes his home. Verse 15, this is what the high and exalted one says, he who lives forever, whose name is holy. I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. Only in the Bible would you get this. Only the God of the Bible is like this, the transcendent, uncreated, perfect creator of all things, living in a high and holy place. And he also lives with the contrite and lowly in spirit, literally the crushed and lowly. So we heard last week that Joe Biden's first official visit as president of the US will be to the UK. It'll be to Great Britain. And I'm sure when he comes, he'll be staying in a nice place. They will find a very fitting place for the president of America to stay. When we, Glasgow, host COP26 later this year, there's going to be dignitaries from all around the world to talk about climate change in Glasgow. There'll be all kinds of thought, weren't there, about what kind of hotels and suites and places will be suitable for the dignitaries who arrive in Glasgow. But how laughable it really is to think that we could build a worthy place for the living God to feel at home in our world. People have tried that for centuries, to give a glimpse of God's glory through the cathedrals that we've built that have taken whole lifetimes for people to build. But it is laughable to think that really they're worthy of the creator God. And yet God says here, if we want to find him, we'd be as likely to find him in a shanty town in Brazil as we would anywhere else. We look for the crushed in spirit who've taken refuge in him. That's where he'll be.

He dwells among the lowly. Just as Jesus said, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. God comes to be with us when that is our attitude. Those who are totally overlooked in the world, who are lowly in spirit, but take refuge in the Lord. God makes his home with them. And as he makes his home with you, he revives you.

Did you see that word twice? He revives the spirit of the lowly. He revives the heart of the contrite. So that's his presence. We've heard about his promises and his presence. And then we hear about his peace in verse 19. Peace, peace to those far and near, says the Lord, and I will heal them. And the Bible word peace is a big word. It's the complete fullness and soul rest that we were made for and our hearts long for. God promises it here to anyone who will admit their sin and turn to him for refuge. And he draws a contrast between that and the people who won't turn back and where that leaves them. Verse 20, the wicked are like the tossing sea which cannot rest, whose waves cast up myron mud. Verse 21, there is no peace, says my God, for the wicked. Not just there speaking about the judgment in the future, but even in our times, while we choose life without God, there is a restlessness to that, if that's the way we go. Again, we might think it looks liberating not to have to take up this great purpose God gives us as his people of displaying his righteousness to the world. Oh, well, I don't want that. I just want to live my own way. But actually, when we do that, we end up like we're clinging to driftwood on the tossing ocean, moved about by the waves, restless, like someone adrift in a storm, and there is no peace, because it's God who can give us peace. [23 : 13] And in verse 19, he says, if you're one of God's people, wherever you are, whether you're nearby or far away, there is peace and healing. That's the Lord's attitude towards his people today.

And it's shocking when you think about how he's described their behavior. We see the shock again in verse 17. It's so stark, isn't it? Verse 17, I was enraged by their sinful greed. I punished them and hid my face in anger, yet they kept on in their willful ways. And I'm expecting it there to say, I've seen their ways, and I will judge them. I will condemn them. I'll give up on them.

He says, verse 18, I have seen their ways, but I will heal them. I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners. I've seen their ways, but I will heal them. We should find it hard to believe God's grace is like this. And as we grasp it, what a difference it could make. What difference does it make to your Monday, your Tuesday, your everyday life to know that the one person who can truly say, I have seen your ways, who knows you absolutely inside out and through and through, who knows the deepest motives of your heart and can see, verse 17, I've seen your ways, I've seen your sinful greed.

And he can say, verse 18 of you, I have seen their ways, but I will heal them. How could we ever be afraid to approach a God like this, a God who knows us right down to the bottom and loves us? How could we lack self-esteem when the living God has resolved to give us this, to give his promises and his presence and his peace to us, even as he's seen our ways?

And how can he do that? Well, it's thanks to the work of his servant that we heard about in chapter 53. It was there that we heard the Lord made an offer of peace and an offer of healing to fallen people.

[25 : 23] And the clue is in this word contrite in verse 15 of our passage. Verse 15, he says that he dwells among the contrite and lowly in spirit, and it's literally the word crushed. And it's the same word that was used in Isaiah 53 about the servant, that he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brings us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

In other words, the Lord can turn from his righteous anger, he can turn that anger away from us because he's dealt with it as his servant was crushed at the cross. For our peace, he endured punishment. For our healing, he was wounded. So it's not just that the Lord heals us, it's that the only way he could do that is by taking on himself the great cost of Calvary. So what is our response?

We've heard the people's shocking treatment of God and his predictable response. Now we've heard the Lord's shocking treatment of the people. And finally, just notice the people's natural response. Have a look at verse 18 again. So verse 18, he says, I have seen their ways, but I will heal them.

I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners, creating praise on their lips. Our only worthy response is praise on our lips, that we've turned to the Lord for refuge, and we hear his promises of a future inheritance, of his presence with us now, of his peace.

And our response is adoration and praise, the praise of worship on our lips, that overflows in a desire to tell our friends, to tell the world that this is our God and of his astonishing grace. Amen.

[27 : 32] Just a moment of quiet to reflect on God's word, and then James will come up and lead us in a prayer.