

Back to the Future

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[0 : 00] It tells you on the screen, but I'll tell you anyway. This morning's reading is from Isaiah chapter 2, so it's the whole chapter. It's been found on page 687 in your Bibles. This is what Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains. It will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways so that we may walk in his paths.

The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

[1 : 12] You, Lord, have abandoned your people, the descendants of Jacob. They are full of superstitions from the East. They practice divination like the Philistines and embrace pagan customs.

Their land is full of silver and gold. There is no end to their treasures. Their land is full of horses. There is no end to the chariots. Their land is full of idols.

They bow down to the work of their hands, to what their fingers have made. So people will be brought low and everyone humbled. Do not forgive them. Go into the rocks, hide in the ground from the fearful presence of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty.

The eyes of the arrogant will be humbled and human pride brought low. The Lord alone will be exalted in that day. The Lord Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted.

And they will be humbled.

[2 : 36] People will flee to caves in the rocks and to holes in the ground from the fearful presence of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty when he rises to shake the earth. In that day, people will throw away to the idols of silver and idols of gold, which they made to worship.

They will flee to the caverns in the rocks and to the overhanging crags from the fearful presence of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty when he rises to shake the earth.

Stop trusting in mere humans who have but a breath in their nostrils. Why hold them in esteem?

This is the word of the Lord. Well, good morning, St. Silas.

My name is Martin Ayers. I'm the senior pastor here. And it would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open in Isaiah. We're looking at this section, Isaiah chapters 2 to 4 this morning. And Ian, thanks for reading. Ian read chapter 2 for us as we look at that. I've changed the outline since preparing it, so the notice sheet won't be much help to you. But the points will be on the screen as we look at this together today.

[3 : 51] And let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray together. Some words from Psalm 119. O Lord, open our eyes that we might see wonderful things in your law.

So, Heavenly Father, as we come to your word, help us, like the writer of the psalm, to treasure your word, to hide your word in our hearts, and through your word to see Jesus more clearly.

For we ask in his name. Amen. One of the talking points this week, certainly on Radio 5 Live, which is my radio station of choice, once you got past Rangers and Celtic doing well in Europe, and the Rugby World Cup, Rugby World Cup, one of the big talking points was Lewis Hamilton becoming an equal warrior.

I don't know whether you saw this. Lots of controversy about it, given his profession. But the Formula One world champion, he said that he watched the documentary. He didn't say what it was. Maybe Planet Earth 2 or something.

And he's trying to change. He's urging people to change their lifestyle radically because of climate change. So he's ditched the private jet that was quite famous. And he won't allow anyone in his office to buy plastics anymore or bring them into his home.

[5 : 14] He wants everything recyclable. And instead of flying abroad for his holiday this summer, he went to Bedfordshire. And he wants to be carbon neutral by the end of the year. Now, why is he doing that?

I guess it's because when you trust something, it changes your behavior. He's trusted this documentary. He's trusted warnings about the future. And that's shaping how he wants to live now. It's bringing about change in his life. But changing your lifestyle can be difficult. And the reason it got to be a big talking point was people were saying, well, how is Lewis Hamilton going to preach to the world about climate change when his whole job, you know, the number of flights he does around the world, the vehicles he races, the cars he races.

There's quite a lot that would need to change for Lewis Hamilton. But with his eyes on what the future looks like, trusting this word from documentaries and the like and science, he's trying to make changes.

Well, in a similar way, as Christians, we find it difficult to change. We find change a complicated, drawn-out process in our lives. We're called by God to turn away from our selfish desires, our desire to live selfishly for us, and instead to lay down our lives in joyful obedience to God.

[6 : 34] And the transformation that God calls us to is as stark as night and day. So in Ephesians 5 verse 8, he says this to Christians. He says, For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

Live as children of light, for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth. And find out what pleases the Lord.

Do you see what's going on there? As you become a Christian, as the Bible would have it, you've been brought from darkness into the light of God's truth and God's salvation and a relationship with him.

And so you're to live out that light, to live as children of the light. But we find that difficult. We find being distinctive difficult when the people around us are living for completely different things.

And we find it difficult because we find it hard to trust God, don't we? To let go of our lives, the control, and hand over control to another.

[7 : 35] To say to God, thy will be done over my life. And when we sin, fundamentally, there is an issue of trust going on. When we sin, what we're saying to God is, I don't trust you.

I don't trust that your will is better for me than my will at that moment. Now, the people of God in Isaiah's time, they're having trust issues. Okay?

They didn't trust God. And because they didn't trust God, you could see it in their lives because they turned their backs on God. And the cash value of these chapters of Isaiah, chapters 2 to 4, is we get compelling reasons that God gives his people through Isaiah to trust him so that they will respond with lives of obedience.

Three reasons he gives them. Three reasons we can take into this week ourselves. Three reasons to trust God. And because we trust him, to obey him. We started our series in Isaiah last week.

Just a word about Isaiah. He's a prophet, a messenger from God, to God's people about 700 years before Jesus came. And God's people were living as a nation state around Jerusalem.

[8 : 42] So they'd had this time of prosperity. But now they've got a big problem. There's a region to the north of Israel, Assyria, that's building a war machine. They're becoming a superpower, an empire.

And it's threatening the region. So if you look at the map on the screen, you can see there the big yellow area. Just up north you can see Assyria and its capital Nineveh. And then the green, the smaller green nation just on the east side of the Mediterranean, even that's not Judah.

That's the northern kingdom that had broken off. And the bit of God's people we're interested in in Isaiah is that tiny little red bit, Judah, around Jerusalem. feeling vulnerable because of what's going on up north with the Assyrian Empire, sweeping down, bringing conquest and devastation, heading into the land around Jerusalem, sacking the cities, taking things away.

But what they have to understand, the people in Isaiah's time, is what will happen for them with Assyria is really determined by how they approach God.

What's their attitude to their God who saved them? If they'll trust him, he'll show himself to be trustworthy and he'll keep them in the land. If they won't trust him, and you can see that in their lives, then there will be conquest and exile.

[10:01] They'll have to leave the promised land. So they're being asked, will you trust God and walk in his light? Just as we're asked day by day by God, will you trust me and walk in my light?

And our first reason to do that is in verses 1 to 5 of chapter 2. It's that the mountain of the Lord is unbeatable. So God takes us to the future. He gives us a vision of the future.

And look at the start of verse 2 there. In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established. So this is Old Testament language to describe a future that we're still waiting for today, that's beyond what we can imagine.

We use the language of heaven, don't we, commonly? Really, the Bible would more commonly talk about a whole new creation, the new earth, the new heaven. This world put right when Jesus comes in glory, the kingdom of God.

And we're looking here at that future in Old Testament language. So the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of mountains. It will be exalted above the hills.

[11:05] In other words, one day in the future, there won't be any rival kingdoms anymore to God's kingdom. And who will be there to enjoy that?

Well, verse 3 is a beautiful picture, isn't it? Verse 3, many peoples will come and say, come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob.

So imagine you're looking down at this mountain, maybe you're in a helicopter, looking down at the mountain of the Lord. And from a distance, you can see what looks like streams going up the mountain, defying gravity.

And then you get closer and realize they're not streams of water, they're streams of people from every nation, coming together because they're coming to the living God. And look at the people's joyful trust in God as they come together.

They say, as though it's with relief, at last, they say, he, God, will teach us his ways so that we may walk in his paths. So God is king and his good word is being obeyed.

[12:09] And that law goes out from, it says from Zion, that's another word for the temple mount, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. The vertical relationship between humanity and God has been put right in the future.

We're listening to him, we're joyfully obeying him. And when that happens, it brings peace among the people. So in verse four, he will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples.

And then he follows that with words that have become folklore in the Western world, haven't they? For us, we see them on war memorials, but they're a promise from God to us. Verse four, they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Nuclear weapons disarmed, no need for them anymore.

So the question is, who are we trusting to put the world right? Lots of the time, it's politics, isn't it? Which is why we get so angry.

[13:19] It's why we get so disillusioned with politicians. We feel let down because we put our hopes in politics to put the world right. And I remember with a few friends when Barack Obama became president of America.

Some of you will be at the other end of the political spectrum, I know that, but it's a good example of wherever we stand, of how we put our hope in politics. And a couple of my mates were so excited about Barack Obama becoming president.

They flew to America for the celebration of his inauguration as president. And they were just swept up in this euphoria. This is it, real change, not just for America, but for the whole world.

A new approach to foreign affairs. And then gradually getting disillusioned as the years went on.

And you look back now and think, did Barack Obama's tenure really make the world much better?

Has it really changed things for ordinary people around the world? It's futile. We put our trust in education, don't we? We think, if only we could educate everyone better.

[14:19] But, you know, people can be extremely well educated and very unpleasant people, can't they? We know that. It's obvious. We put our trust in technology.

But for all its wonderful benefits in dentistry and healthcare, which we thank God for, it's technology that has given us weapons of mass destruction. And the internet, for all its brilliant things, is a place for massive fraud and the dark web and revenge porn and trolling and horrific displays of the human heart.

And there will be some people whose hope for a brighter future in Scotland, certainly, would be that religion is done away with. Maybe you think, if only we can get rid of religion, that's the dangerous thing.

But know what God says to us here is that the glorious future, to put our hope in, comes not because there's no religion, it comes because there's true religion, because there's authentic worship of the living God, the God of the Bible.

That's what will bring utopia, heaven on earth, the new earth. The people of the world will unite one day in joyful worship of the one true God, so that it's God's word that goes out and rules from his holy mountain in verse 3.

[15:42] And by that word, he brings peace to the world in verse 4. It's a promise to us of a glorious future. It can only happen supernaturally.

God is going to bring it about and ultimately, it's going to be fulfilled when Jesus comes in glory. But already, as we live, we live now in the time the Bible calls the last days.

And as we wait for Jesus to come in glory, we're already seeing glimpses of the fulfillment of this promise in the church around the world.

I know we're far from perfect, but we could ask around this morning for, we could do this, we're not going to do it, for people to shout out what nation you're from. And even in our own little church, we see the nations coming together, gathering under God's word.

And right now, this morning, our mission partners who we support are in places like the Simons, are in Zambia, Andy and Rachel. They'll be in a church gathering in a Zambian community.

[16:44] Yvonne Mildred will be in one in Ghana. Rod Thomas, who we met earlier this year, will be in Sendai in his little Christian fellowship there. God drawing the nations to himself, gathering under his word as an anticipation of the big thing that he will do on the last day.

So the application after these great promises comes in verse 5, just over the page. Isaiah 2 verse 5, come descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

You see the connection? He's saying, if you trust this promise for the future, that we'll be joyfully brought together from every nation, praising God and living under his word forever, as we yearn for that future, let's walk in his ways now.

That's what we'll spend forever doing. Let's walk in the light of his ways now. So that's our first point. The mountain of the Lord is unbeatable. But Judah, these people in Isaiah's time, they had failed to fulfill that vision that God had given for his people and God therefore warns them through Isaiah of impending judgment on the nation.

So that's our next incentive to trust the Lord. It's that the day of the Lord is unavoidable. God promises in chapter 2 a dreadful day that is coming if his people continue to reject him as their God.

[18:14] And as with lots of Old Testament prophecy, as you read this, there are different fulfillments of it. So for them, in the immediate point in history, there was that Assyrian empire that could sweep down and conquer them.

And so they're being threatened with exile from the promised land, an exile that ultimately came a generation later as the Babylonian empire came in. Now there's a detailed description of how awful that would be in chapter 3 of Isaiah.

But Isaiah uses language about the exile they could face in their time that points us forward to the final judgment day for all of humanity, the day of reckoning for our world, when Jesus is going to hold everyone to account for how we've lived.

So if you have a look at verse 10 of chapter 2, it's difficult stuff, isn't it? But verse 10, he says, Go into the rocks, hide in the ground from the fearful presence of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty.

The eyes of the arrogant will be humbled and human pride brought low. The Lord alone will be exalted in that day. See, it's just the inevitable impact of the Lord, the perfect God, coming into the presence of unclean people.

[19 : 33] You know, sometimes people say, don't we say, you know, when I meet God, as though we've got no fear of him. But actually, on our own, without Christ, we should be terrified of coming into the presence of the holy, majestic God.

And so he picks it up again in verse 19, you see very similar words, verse 19, people will flee to caves in the rocks and to holes in the ground from the fearful presence of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty when he rises to shake the earth.

The same language in verse 21, they will flee to caverns in the rocks and to the overhanging crags from the fearful presence of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty when he rises to shake the earth.

You can see there, can't you, why when Peter's in the boat with Jesus and he realizes who Jesus is as the miraculous catch of fish comes in, Jesus tells him to put the net on the other side, they bring in the fish and Peter immediately says, go away from me, Lord, for I'm a sinful man.

He realizes, if I'm in the presence of the divine, I'm in trouble. And soberingly, in Revelation, the apostle John takes up this language from Isaiah about the day of judgment, the day of reckoning, the day of justice.

[20 : 51] Revelation chapter 6, the rich, the mighty and everyone else hides in caves and among the rocks of the mountains and they call out to the mountains and rocks, fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.

We find it very difficult, don't we, to think about judgment day but the truth is that we long for justice in the world. Think about the public inquiries we have in our society where people feel something has not been brought to justice and for years it can rumble on.

After the Hillsborough disaster, justice for the 96, years and years of inquiries as families couldn't rest about the death of their loved ones until they'd seen a sense of justice about what happened. We've had the horror this week, haven't we, of those families in China and Vietnam waiting for news about whether it was their lost loved ones who were in that lorry, that freezer lorry and reports coming in that it's just one part of a huge international operation and we've got to work together with other nations.

There's this fear that we can't bring to justice the evil that has gone on. We might arrest the lorry driver but we can't find who is at the top of these really despicable evil acts trafficking people.

[22 : 14] We long for justice and the good news here in Isaiah is that there will be a day of justice that God sees everything and he'll hold us to account and the wrong things that people have done will be held up before the presence of the majestic good God.

They'll be brought into the light of his truth. But it's a day to be sober minded about for all of us. Now what had Judah done wrong to get on the wrong side of that coming judgment of God?

Well three things seem to emerge in chapters 2 and 3 of Isaiah. Decadence, arrogance and idolatry. So we see the decadence in chapter 2 verse 7.

Their land is full of silver and gold. There is no end to their treasures. And if you just look down at chapter 3 Isaiah describes the women of the land. This is not because it was just the women.

He talks about the men as well. But it's very striking the description of the women in the land in chapter 3. He talks about them flirting with their eyes, strutting along with swaying hips.

[23 : 21] They've got ornaments jingling on their ankles. And he lists their ostentatious jewelry in verse 18. So he talks about bangles and headbands and crescent necklaces and earrings and bracelets and veils, headdresses, anklets, sashes, perfume bottles, charms, signet rings, nose rings, tiaras and shawls are in there, the mirrors.

It's decadence, it's vanity, it's ostentatious. And people are being trampled on in the inequality and Judah doesn't care. Decadence. And that's probably connected to the arrogance.

So in chapter 2 verse 12 he says, the Lord Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted and they will be humbled. See they're self-sufficient people.

They still go to the temple to worship but in reality they don't think they have any need for God because their wealth has made them proud. And then idolatry.

So in verse 8 of chapter 2 their land is full of idols. They bow down to the work of their hands to what their fingers have made. They've turned other things into God.

[24 : 33] Putting in their trust in other things for security, for prosperity and only God can really give them that. So folks, how much more could some of that be said of the church today in the western world?

The decadence. Failing to be distinctive in a society where you know we go to the supermarket and our vegetables are being flown in by air because we want the same vegetables in every season. Buying up our fast fashion while children are in sweatshops around the world. Then the arrogance just falling into the habit of trusting our wealth and not trusting God because we've got wealth. And so then when it comes to God disagreeing with us we won't take God at his word. We think we're unchallengeable as a people. We haven't got the humility. And what about idolatry? Seeking after our own glory. They were making their own things and worshipping them instead of worshipping God. Just as we might focus on making a name for ourselves in our lives or our children making a name for themselves instead of desiring that God's name is honoured.

[25 : 51] So the writer Don Carson going through Isaiah chapter 2 he says this how much more do large swathes of the confessing church in the west stand under similar judgment.

Their land is full of silver and gold. There is no end to their treasures but we are not a people characterized by great humility and passion for the Lord's glory. And the solution for them is the same as for us today. It comes in verse 22 at the very end of the chapter. Stop trusting in mere humans who have but a breath in their nostrils. Why hold them in esteem? It's God who one day we're all going to stand before. Only he can be trusted to get us through that day. So trust him and walk in the light of his ways. So that's our second reason to be children of light. The mountain of the Lord will be unbeatable.

[26 : 50] The day of the Lord is unavoidable. But it leaves us with a big question by the end of chapter 3 of Isaiah as he's gone through this. You're thinking how on earth is God going to do this? How can he bring about this incredible promise for the future if the raw material of his people is so disappointing? If his people are this underwhelming, if they've let him down, how can God create something glorious on the last day?

And then in chapter 4, Isaiah promises something completely unexpected. It's our third point. The branch of the Lord is incredible. Let's just look from verse 2 of chapter 4. Isaiah introduces here a new character in verse 2. In that day, the branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious. Now the branch is the language of the family tree. We talk, don't we, about our family connections as a tree today. And it's the same kind of idea that the branch is of the continuation of God's kingly line, David's royal line.

[28 : 02] And so there's a king coming, but he's not just a man. You see that? Verse 2, he's the branch of the Lord. He's in the Lord's family. So this one who's coming in David's line will be divine. And in the second half of the verse, he's the fruit of the land. That's another way of saying he's born in the land. He's Jewish. He's fully man. He's fully God. A divine king. And it says that his people will glory in him. They'll find him beautiful. So what happens as a result of this God-man coming into the world? Well, in verse 3, complete transformation for the people. Verse 3, those who are left in Zion, who remain in Jerusalem, will be called holy.

All who are recorded among the living in Jerusalem. And then in verse 4, the people are cleansed, purged, and restored. Verse 4, the Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion.

[29 : 03] He will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire. And the result comes in verses 5 and 6. Now, when God rescued his people in the Exodus, he showed that he was present with them, leading them, by a pillar of cloud in the day and a pillar of fire at night.

And let me just read verse 5. Have a look at that. Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there. A cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night. Over everything, the glory will be a canopy. So there's the presence of God among his people, brought about by the coming of this branch. And then in verse 5, this picture of a canopy over everything, that's the glory of God. The canopy was like a shelter or a shade in the beating sunlight. and a refuge from storm and rain. So do you see the contrast? In chapter 2, we've got people hiding in rocks. Why are they hiding among the rocks?

[30 : 08] From the presence of God. Because their hearts have turned from him and so they can't stand in his presence. They've rejected him. In chapter 4, we're invited instead to take refuge in God himself.

And as we come to Jesus as the rock that we take refuge in, we hide ourselves in him and then we can enjoy the presence of God because we get cleansed and transformed and we can be under the canopy of his shelter so that we don't have to fear anything.

And the offer is open to any of us. Simply put your trust in Jesus, the beautiful, glorious branch of the Lord. So here God unveils in chapter 4 his rescue plan.

This is how he's going to bring about the future he's promised. And the promise is there of the branch to move his people to trust him and because they trust him to walk in his light.

Folks, how much more for us who live after God has already sent the branch, the Lord Jesus who said of himself, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.

[31 : 23] And his call to us as his people this week is to be that light in our generation by walking in his ways. Not to retreat into a Christian ghetto that no one notices while we're waiting for him to come, you know, batten down the hatches, but rather to be agents of transformation in his world because we're distinctive in the way we go about life.

Whether it's in our school classroom or the school playground or it's in our workplaces or it's on campus, on our street with our neighbours, in our sports teams, the biggest contribution each of us can make to reaching Scotland for Jesus in our generation is that we walk in the light of his ways. We live distinctive lives among the people around us. Now it's hard to do because people around us are living for such different things, aren't they? They don't believe these promises, but let's encourage each other to live in light of them.

That picture of the glorious mountain, his glorious mountain, it's going to be unbeatable. His dreadful day that's coming, that's unavoidable, and his promised branch who we've seen now is incredible.

Let's pray together. Let's have a moment of quiet just to reflect on God's word to us.

[32 : 46] Come, descendants of Jacob, Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your breathtaking future promises. We praise you for what these promises speak to us, of your character and your power, your wisdom, your love.

Help us to fix our eyes on the future you've promised, even when so many around us live for the present. Free us, we pray, from the trappings of decadence and arrogance and idolatry, so that we enjoy the freedom of walking in the way of your commands.

And with our confidence firmly in your rescuing King, the branch of the Lord, help us, we pray, to let our light shine in the power of your Spirit, that men and women around us might see our good deeds and glorify you.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.