

I'd Like to Believe in God, But...

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[0 : 00] Queen City of the Babylonians. No more will you be called tender or delicate. Take millstones and grind flour. Take off your veil. Lift up your skirts, bare your legs and wade through the streams.

Your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered. I will take vengeance. I will spare no one. Our Redeemer, the Lord Almighty is his name, is the Holy One of Israel. Sit in silence, go into darkness, Queen City of the Babylonians. No more will you be called Queen of Kingdoms. I was angry with my people and desecrated my inheritance. I gave them into your hand and you showed them no mercy. Even on the aged you laid a very heavy yoke. You said, I am forever the eternal Queen, but you did not consider these things or reflect on what might happen. Now then, listen, you lover of pleasure, lounging in your security and saying to yourself, I am and there is none besides me.

I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children. Both of these will overtake you in a moment on a single day. Loss of children and widowhood. They will come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and all your potent spells. You have trusted in your wickedness and have said, no one sees me. Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you when you say to yourself, I am and there is none besides me. Disaster will come upon you and you will not know how to conjure it away.

A calamity will fall upon you that you cannot ward off with a ransom. A catastrophe you cannot foresee will suddenly come upon you. Keep on then with your magic spells and with your many sorceries, which you have laboured at since childhood. Perhaps you will succeed. Perhaps you will cause terror.

All the counsel you have received has only worn you out. Let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month. Let them save you from what is coming upon you.

[2 : 10] Surely they are like stubble. The fire will burn them up. They cannot even save themselves from the power of the flame. They are not coals for warmth. This is not a fire to sit by. This is all they are to you. These you have dealt with and laboured with since childhood. All of them go in their error.

There is none. There is not one that can save you. Listen to this, you descendants of Jacob, you who are called by the name of Israel and come from the line of Judah. You who take oaths in the name of the Lord and invoke the God of Israel, but not in truth or righteousness. You who call yourself citizens of the holy city and claim to rely on the God of Israel. The Lord Almighty is his name.

I foretold the former things long ago. By mouth announced them and I made them known. Then suddenly I acted and they came to pass. For I knew how stubborn you were. Your neck muscles were iron.

Your forehead was bronze. Therefore, I told you these things long ago. Before they happened, I announced them to you so that you could not say, my images brought them about. My wooden image and metal, God ordained them. You have heard these things. Look at them all. Will you not admit them?

From now on, I will tell you of new things, of hidden things unknown to you. They are created now and not long ago. You have not heard of them before today. So you cannot say, yes, I knew of them.

[3 : 44] You have neither heard nor understood. From old, your ears have not been open. Well, do I now know how treacherous you are. You were called a rebel from birth. For my own name's sake, I delay my wrath. For the sake of my praise, I hold it back from you so as not to destroy you

completely. See, I have refined you. Though not as silver, I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another. Listen to me, Jacob, Israel, whom I have called. I am he. I am the first and the last. My own hand laid the foundations of the earth and my right hand spread out the heavens.

When I summon them, they all stand up together. Come together, all of you, and listen. Which of the idols has foretold these things? The Lord's chosen ally will carry out his purpose against Babylon.

His arm will be against the Babylonians. I, even I, have spoken. Yes, I have called him. I will bring him, and he will succeed in his mission. Come near me and listen to this.

From the first announcement, I have not spoken in secret. At the time it happens, I am there. And now the sovereign Lord has sent me and downed me with his spirit. This is what the Lord says. You're Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. If only you had paid attention to my commands.

[5 : 23] Your peace would have been like a river. Your well-being like the waves of the sea. Your descendants would have been like the sand. Your children like its numberless grains. Their name would never be blotted out nor destroyed from before me.

Leave Babylon. Flee from the Babylonians. Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it. Send it to the ends of the earth. Say, the Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob.

They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts. He made water flow for them from the rock. He split the rock and water gushed out. There is no peace, says the Lord, for the wicked.

Amen.

Salon, and thanks Ann for reading. Let me pray. Father, we thank you for your word. Please speak to us this evening.

May what is helpful be remembered and what is unhelpful be forgotten. In the Lord's name. Amen.

Well, it was the best of times and it was the worst of times.

[6 : 32] My drama degree at university was going well. I was in the second year. I had long blonde hair. I'd started a Christian surfers club with some mates.

We'd go down to the beach most weekends, catching some tubes, surfing, having barbecues. It was brilliant. I'd just started reading 1 John with my student pastor at the local church.

I'd been learning about the glories of Christ. I'd been going to Roots Midweek Social or Midweek Bible Study, going through Mark's Gospel, going through Romans.

I was keen and eager to serve the Lord and serve Him better. And I'd moved in with my best mate, David. What a legend. And we were both trying to outdo each other in being Christian.

Well, I remember the day that David invited a friend over. A chap called Flippy. Flippy was from the wrong side of the tracks. He was from one of the local townships.

[7 : 36] Kayamundi in Cape Town. He came over. But from the first time we met him, we knew that here was someone who loved the Lord. He knew all the songs. He had brought out his guitar.

He'd play the songs. We'd sing together. We'd worship together. We didn't have much. But whatever we had, we'd share it with Flippy. We'd crack open the spam, the cooked beef.

Mix it with some tomatoes, beans on toast. Share it. A feast if you're a student. Well, I remember opening up the paper one day.

A local gang had been arrested in Kayamundi. They'd done all sorts of unspeakable atrocities. Things that I wouldn't want to mention in church.

Flippy came around and he said, well, my friends have been arrested. Something's gone wrong.

Well, David and I were a little bit taken aback. What's going on here, Flippy?

[8 : 33] Who are your friends? Oh, no, they've been beaten by the police. It's bad. Well, I remember the last time I saw Flippy. I'd gone to my uncle's house to house it for the weekend.

David and I had already begun to have our suspicions. And Flippy said, well, can you help me out or something? And, well, we said, I'm sorry, Flippy. I can't at this time. And so Flippy left.

And David and I went to go and watch a movie. And when we came back, the house had been ransacked. And Flippy's fingerprints were everywhere. So what are we to make of when Christians do bad things?

And if you're an investigator to the Christian faith tonight, this is a common objection that you might make. You might say, well, I'd like to believe in God, but I don't and I can't because I see what Christians do.

And it's not a new problem. We remember the context of Isaiah. God's people had been called to serve and love the Lord, but they'd rejected God and had followed the idols.

[9 : 43] And because of that, God had judged them by sending them into exile in Babylon. And Isaiah prophesied that this was going to happen. But he also prophesied that they would come back from Babylon and that he would bring back a remnant into the people, into the land.

Well, if you've closed your Bibles, it would be a great encouragement to me if you could open them up again and just look down at the first couple of verses of chapter 48.

So 48, verse 1 and 2. Listen to this, you descendants of Jacob, you who are called by the name of Israel and come from the line of Judah, you who take oaths in the name of the Lord and invoke the God of Israel, but not in truth or righteousness.

You who call yourselves citizens of the holy city and claim to rely on the God of Israel, the Lord Almighty is his name. So here is the criticism that Isaiah and God are bringing against the people of God in Isaiah's day.

See, the people in Isaiah's day were claiming a great heritage. They were claiming to call upon the name of the Lord. They said, we are descendants of Jacob. We are called by the name of Israel.

[11 : 03] We take oaths on the name of the Lord. We call ourselves citizens of the holy city. And we claim to rely on the God of Israel, but not in truth or righteousness.

And so we see God's verdict on his people if we look ahead to chapter 48, verse 8. That he judges them for their religiousness and for their self-righteous confidence, but deny the Lord in their actions.

You have neither heard nor understood. From old your ears have not opened. Well do I know how treacherous you are. You are called a rebel from birth.

And it's not a very optimistic picture for the people of God. And God's verdict on them and on us is that we are deaf to God's word and voice, we're treacherous at the best of times, and we're rebellious from birth.

And you wonder then if there's any hope for any of God's people, or for Christians, or for anyone. And it is great relief then that we go on to read chapter 48, verse 9 to 11, that despite the hardships of exile, of God's discipline, that they and us, that God is not going to treat us as our sins deserve and utterly destroy us.

[12 : 31] So I'll just read there for us. For my own namesake, I delay my wrath. For the sake of my praise, I hold it back from you. So as not to destroy you completely.

See, I have refined you, though not as silver. I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed?

I will not yield my glory to another. So God says, rather, for his own namesake, for the sake of his praise, for his glory, he will not treat his people as their sins and crimes deserve.

He will not wipe them out completely, lest it is said that God does not keep his promises, or that he cannot save his people.

How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another. So if we're sitting here tonight and we look down on Christians for their behavior, for when they deny God for how they behave, God does too.

[13 : 40] But if judgment begins with those who trust in the Lord, what will happen of those who do not trust in the Lord and still do bad things?

And this is perhaps the second objection that many non-Christians bring against why they might not become a Christian. So they'd say, folk might say, this might be you tonight.

I'd like to believe in God, but I find it difficult to believe in a good God when I see so much unrighteousness and suffering in the world.

And if this is you, then that is a good objection. God agrees with you. God passionately hates all injustice and suffering and unrighteousness.

So I wonder if you'll join me and just look down at verse 3 of chapter 47 and see what God says about those who treat others unjustly. And remember, this is the context, the Babylonians.

[14 : 43] He's speaking about how the Babylonians have treated God's people in exile. So 47 verse 3, your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered.

I will take vengeance. I will spare no one. Why will God do this? Why will he spare no one? Because they have loved pleasure over worship.

Verse 8, they presume to sit in God's place. Verse 8, to be like God. They consider themselves immune from justice, above the laws.

Verse 10, and they have not learned the lesson from history that God judges all unjust people.

Verse 7, even those who he calls his own.

And so what is God's judgment on those who do unrighteousness and cause others to suffer? Well, God says he will utterly destroy them.

[15:42] Verse 11, let me just read that for us. Disaster will come upon you and you will not know how to conjure it away.

A calamity will fall upon you that you cannot ward off with a ransom. A catastrophe you cannot foresee will suddenly come upon you. Nothing and no one will be able to save them.

So verse 15 continues, that is all they are to you, those who have dealt with and labored with since childhood. All of them go in error and there is no one that can save you.

You see, we are right to question things when we see the wicked prosper. When we see injustice going unpunished.

When we see people causing others to suffer and then nothing to be done in return. But the issue is, our sense of justice and our picture of God is too small.

[16:45] You see, God says that he will judge and will punish all wickedness, all unrighteousness, even that done by his own people. No favoritism will be shown.

God will judge all injustice. It doesn't matter if you're a king or a street sweeper, all will face judgment for the injustice they have done.

No matter how great or how small you are. And so we get to this point in Isaiah and we think, well, it seems as though God's made these great promises but it seems as though he's been defeated.

God's people have renegaded. They've followed idols. They've utterly abandoned God. And those outside of God's people are unjust and assumed to be God in the place of God.

So what hope is there? Well, God has promised to save his people, those who trust in him.

[17:48] So see how God refers to himself in this passage. 47. We read at verse 4 of chapter 47. Our Redeemer, the Lord Almighty, is his name, is the Holy One of Israel.

Israel. And to redeem, well, that's the Bible's favorite word of God's saving action in the world. It means, literally, to buy something back at a price.

And so we remember how God's people were stuck in Egypt and how God bought them back out of slavery at the cost of the firstborn. and we see here how God promises to redeem his people out of exile in Babylon despite all their wickedness.

And the manner of this redemption is that God is going to do something new. So I wonder if you'll just turn to chapter 48 in the second half of verse 16.

And now the sovereign Lord has sent me, endowed me with his spirit. This is what the Lord says, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

[19:04] You see, God's response to the stubbornness of his people's idolatry and his response to the rampant injustice in the world and the suffering that we see is to send a Redeemer, is to send a person, a servant who will redeem God's people and all who trust in him.

So chapters 47 and 48, they don't speak much about how this Redeemer will do this. But in the very next chapter, 49, it speaks about and it describes the servant Redeemer.

Particularly in verses 6 and 7. I'll read a couple of them, but you guys don't have to. If you just want to scan ahead, I'll just look at them for us. So 49, verse 6. He says, it is too small a thing for you to be my servant, that is, the Redeemer, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring them back, those of Israel I have kept.

I also will make a light for the Gentiles that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth. So what is the role of the servant of this Redeemer? Well, it's to restore and rescue God's people despite all opposition.

It's to be a light for the Gentiles. That's for people outside of God's people of the Old Testament. That's you and me. And it's to proclaim God's salvation and glory to the ends of the earth.

[20:39] That is, the Redeemer is going to rescue God's people even though they do bad things.

And he is going to rescue those who are outside of God's people who have been unjust and wicked.

That all honor and glory and praise might go to the Lord because of his mercy. But see what Isaiah says about the manner of this redemption and the cost.

So 49 verse 7, I'll just read it for us. This is what the Lord says, the Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation.

See, Isaiah here, he describes this Redeemer, this rescuer, as one who is despised and abhorred by his nation. That is, the Redeemer redeems his people, redeems all people at the cost of his own life.

Well, in Luke's Gospel we read how Jesus Christ was betrayed by one of his closest friends. And we read how when he was taken before the governor, Pontius Pilate at this time, Pontius Pilate pleads with all the Israelites at that time, not to crucify Jesus.

[22 : 00] So I'll just read a bit for us from Luke's Gospel. So 23 verse 22, For the third time he spoke to them, that's Pilate, Why? What crime has this man committed?

I have found in him no crowns for the death penalty. Therefore, I will have him punished and released. But with loud shouts, they, that's all the Israelites, all Jesus' people, insistently demanded that he be crucified and their shouts prevailed.

So Pilate decided to grant them their demand. He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus unto their will. You see, the Jews of Jesus' day, that is, Jesus' people, they rejected Jesus, even though he was one of them.

They rather wanted a known insurrectionist and murder released to them than Jesus. They despised and abhorred Jesus, even though Jesus was sent by God as a servant to redeem them and serve them and save them.

[23 : 18] And when Jesus died on the cross, he was one person who was truly innocent and just. He did no injustice. He caused no one to suffer.

But when Jesus died on the cross, he took on himself God's wrath for all the injustice in the world. When Jesus died on the cross, he redeemed God's people from their self-righteous denial of God and the idolatrous hypocrisy.

He gave his life that we might live. So what about you? Well, it might be that you're sitting here today and that you are trusting in Jesus.

And it might be that there are things and idols in your life that you might need to repent of. or it might be that you're sitting here today and that you are not trusting in Jesus.

You still have questions. You still have queries. That's okay. But it might be that tonight is the time for you to turn and repent to God and say sorry for the things you have done and sorry for rejecting him.

[24 : 36] Well, what might it look like to turn and trust Jesus with your life? Well, one of the reasons that I came up to Glasgow was this friend of mine called Tony Lowe.

So Tony and I grew up. We were beach mums on the beach in Durban, basically. We were a couple of kids who grew up surfing on the beach. And the one day we went down to the beach in Durban and we met this guy called Hopi.

This is 94, 95 in South Africa. Apartheid's just ended. Hopi was an Indian chap. He was born with one leg shorter than the other.

He didn't have a hope in the world. The whole system was against him. He was an invalid. He had become a Christian. His Hindu parents had abandoned him.

He made his living by fishing for sea lice on the seashore, picking up little bugs and selling them to the fishermen. So we chatted to Hopi.

[25 : 37] We took out our lunch packets. We shared our sandwiches with Hopi. And we asked him, Hopi, you're a good guy. You love the Lord. Let's pray together. And so we prayed together.

And we asked Hopi, well, Hopi, how can we serve you? How can we help you? And he said, brothers, it would be a great encouragement to me if you could bring me a bar of soap and a Bible. See, Hopi wanted to have a wash on his outside and clean himself so that he could be more respectable.

and he wanted a Bible so that he could learn about God more, love him better, and seek to be cleaned from the inside better by trusting Jesus more.

Let me pray for us. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for these tough words that speak of a glorious redemption, Father.

we are sorry for the times when we have gone astray from you, when we have neglected you, when we have been self-righteous, Father, when we have been unjust to others, Father.

[26 : 45] We are truly sorry, Father. Thank you for sending a Redeemer. Thank you for sending your Son. In Jesus' name, Amen.