

Two Things That Make it Hard to Listen to God (And Why You Should Listen Anyway)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 October 2018

Preacher: Andy Gemmill

[0:00] Tonight's reading is from Isaiah chapter 46, and we're reading the whole chapter, and it can be found on page 734 of the Church Bibles.

Isaiah 46. Bell bows down, Nebo stoops low. Their idols are borne by beasts of burden. The images that are carried about are burdensome, a burden for the weary.

They stoop and bow down together, unable to rescue the burden. They themselves go off into captivity. Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob, all the remnant of the people of Israel, you whom I have upheld since your birth and have carried since you were born.

Even to your old age and grey hairs, I am he. I am he who will sustain you. I have made you, and I will carry you. I will sustain you, and I will rescue you.

With whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me, that we may be compared? Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales.

[1:09] They hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it. They lift it to their shoulders and carry it. They set it up in its place, and there it stands.

From that spot, it cannot move. Even though someone cries out to it, it cannot answer. It cannot save them from their troubles. Remember this. Keep it in mind. Take it to heart, you rebels.

Remember the former things, those of long ago. I am God, and there is no other. I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.

I say, my purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. From the east, I summon a bird of prey. From a far-off land, a man to fulfil my purpose.

What I have said, that I will bring about. What I have planned, that I will do. Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are now far from my righteousness.

[2:12] I am bringing my righteousness near. It is not far away, and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendor to Israel.

This is the word of God. Well, good evening, everyone.

My name is Andy. I am a member of the congregation here. We are looking at a very, very wonderful passage this evening. It contains a magnificent promise, a truly amazing promise.

But it is a promise that back then, God's people found it very hard to believe. And so we are going to pray that God would help us to believe it, and take it to heart ourselves. Let's pray together.

Gracious Father in heaven, we thank you that you are a God who always speaks the truth, and that you always do precisely what you say. We pray that through the work of your Spirit this evening, you would help us to hear your words, and to believe them wholeheartedly.

[3:19] We ask this for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. I wonder if any of you have ever been on Trivia Plaza. For those not yet familiar with Trivia Plaza, Trivia Plaza is a website, a big website, full of quizzes.

Annie, my wife, and I sometimes visit Trivia Plaza, usually when we can't get to sleep at night in order to help us. And because Annie's a bit of a geography nerd, we've done our fair share of geography quizzes on Trivia Plaza.

They have nerdy sorts of names, like Lakes and Seas No. 4. And if you click on Lakes and Seas No. 4, and you click on the first question, up comes a satellite photo with a bit of water and a bit of land.

Is this A, the Hudson Bay, B, the Yellow Sea, C, the Straits of Hormuz, D, Loch Lomond?

And you think, I've absolutely no idea. It's a bit of sea and a bit of land. How on earth do I work that out? I can't even see which way up on the map it's supposed to be.

[4 : 28] Well, let me say, folks, when you drop into the book of Isaiah, it feels a bit like dropping into Lakes and Seas No. 4 for many of us, except without the A, B, C, D to give us a clue where we might be.

There's a lot of words in this big book, and it's not always that easy to get your bearings. So I want to spend the first few minutes just getting the bearings. Where are we?

Where are we in history when we get to chapter 46? Well, this part of Isaiah is written to help the people of Israel, who, by the time they needed these words, were enduring a national catastrophe. We're talking the mid-500s BC. The catastrophe, well, the catastrophe was this. The God who, way back in their history, rescued them from slavery in Egypt and took them to the Promised Land, has thrown them out of the Promised Land.

They've been conquered by the great empire of Babylon. They are captives in Babylon. Why did God do that? Well, he did it because he rescued these people in order to be a showcase in the world for his amazingly generous character.

[5 : 47] Their national life was supposed to say to the world around them, look, look how brilliant it is to live under the rule of the loving God. But all the way through their history, they'd resolutely refused to do that.

They were like a signpost with a wonderful label on it, like Glasgow, but pointing to a really grim destination, like Middlesbrough or somewhere like that.

They'd become absolutely useless as a signpost to God's brilliant character. And so God threw them out. But because of his amazing kindness, he is not finished with them.

And this passage contains a great promise of another rescue from slavery for the people of Israel. Now, that's where we are in the history.

Let's just orientate ourselves in the chapter. I want to say three things just to get our bearings in this chapter. First, notice where it starts and where it ends. It starts with two names, Bel and Nebo, the greatest of the gods of Babylon.

[7 : 01] And verses 1 and 2 describes the downfall of the gods of Babylon. They're going to be conquered one day. The passage ends, verse 13, with a wonderful promise of rescue.

Zion, Jerusalem, which had been trashed by the Babylonians, is going to be splendidly restored one day. The gods of Babylon, they're going to fall.

Hooray! Jerusalem is going to be restored. Hooray! Fantastic news for the people of Israel. Notice, second, all the way through this chapter, there's a running contrast between, on one hand, the gods of Babylon, who are completely useless, and on the other hand, the true God, who can do absolutely anything he wants to do.

Verses 1 and 2. The gods of Babylon, they're really just burdensome images that have to be carried around. Verses 3 and 4.

The true God, he's the God who, verse 3, carried Israel in the past, and verse 4, he's going to keep carrying Israel. And then verse 5.

[8 : 17] The gods of Babylon, they are, well, they're man-made gods, verse 6, and therefore, verse 7, they can't speak, or move, or rescue, or in fact do anything.

Contrast that, verses 8, 9, 10, with the true God who has a massive history of rescuing people and says what he's going to do and just does it.

He's completely free to do that. So, there's a running contrast here. The lifeless gods of Babylon and the seriously alive God of Israel.

And then notice third, the commands in this chapter. Two commands come twice in chapter 46. Verse 3. Listen to me. Verse 12. Again. Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted. And then in the middle, verse 8 and 9.

[9 : 13] Remember. Remember. Remember. Evidently, the people of Israel are having trouble listening and remembering. What this passage does is explore why they're having trouble.

It's not because God isn't speaking to them. It's for another reason entirely. So, that's the shape of this passage. Fantastic news from the totally alive God, which for some reason, these people don't want to listen to.

The title of this sermon is Two Things That Make It Hard to Listen to God and Why You Should Listen Anyway. Let's find out why Israel found it hard to listen to God's promise of rescue.

Here's the first reason. Israel found it hard to listen to God's promise. because the things people build sometimes look invincible.

Verse 1. Bel and Nebo. What a splendid-looking pair of gods they must have been, don't you think? Bel, God of the great city of Babylon, chief God of the gods of Babylon.

[10:36] Nebo, the son of Bel, the God of wisdom and writing. And together, every year, at New Year, these images were carried around the city in a great procession.

Their joint task, to reveal to the people of Babylon the fortunes decreed by the gods of Babylon for the year ahead. they must have looked something special, don't you think?

They represented the might and wisdom of the mighty Babylonian empire. They couldn't possibly have been little puny rubbish-looking gods, could they?

I imagine there was a fair bit of money on display on a procession like that, don't you? Everyone wearing their smartest clothes, plenty of military power on show, marching soldiers, tanks, missiles, everybody all blinged up with medals and all that kind of thing.

Imagine the impact of something like that, of that grandeur on an exiled Israelite. these are the visible images of the greatest power in the world, the one that conquered us.

[11:47] Think Statue of Liberty, think Empire State Building, think Golden Gate Bridge, grand images representing a massive power. And the splendor of it is brought out in verses 6 and 7.

Look at verse 6. Gold, silver, great craftsmanship. And then verse 7, a procession, pomp and ceremony and splendor, awe-inspiring images of an awe-inspiring empire.

Don't you think that might have made it hard for the Israelite in exile to believe God's promises of rescue? Don't you think? The invisible God of Israel, whose nation was defeated by the mighty Babylonians and their gods?

Is he really going to rescue us? Really? But, says God, actually, verse 3, I'm the one you need to listen to.

I've carried you. The reason you still exist is because I'm still carrying you and I'm going to keep carrying you. are you really going to be in awe of them?

[13:07] Verse 5, are you really going to compare me with them? Is all that grandeur going to get in the way of you believing my promises? The one who's started you off and is still carrying you and is going to keep carrying you?

Look at them. Look at them carefully. They're just lumps of stuff. I know they look amazing, but look at them. They've got to be carried around everywhere.

Look at verse 7. Once you put them down, they can't move and they can't speak and they can't rescue. And there will come a day, verse 2, when they'll be completely conquered, completely unable to rescue mighty Babylon.

Her gods, completely unable to rescue her. Now folks, we live in a very different time from them, very different in many ways, but it is still the case that the symbols of human power are sometimes exceptionally awe-inspiring.

And they make it hard for people to listen to God. I wonder which of the many man-made symbols you see around you seem most awe-inspiring to you.

[14:24] Perhaps your awe is inspired by the amazing technological advances of the last couple of decades. The stuff we invent to do, the things that they can do, is just breathtakingly powerful looking.

Or perhaps your awe is inspired by money and commerce and the massive power that those things seem to wield. Or perhaps you're inspired by the things that people build.

think for a moment of architecture. There's something about a big city and its big buildings that makes us think this is just amazingly solid.

I mean, human beings are very short-lived, but we build things that make our power look big and prominent and permanent. Next time you walk through central Glasgow, if you can get your eyes past the rain and through the storm and all that kind of stuff, just look up at the old buildings in central Glasgow and feel their substance and the power they represent and the history they represent and the wealth that they represent, all the money that was behind them and poured into them.

And it's the same in London or in any of the great cities of the world. There's a tremendous feel of permanence and security about the buildings. Of course, the people who built and paid for those buildings, they're all dead now and forgotten.

[16:00] But isn't it hard looking at what they built to believe God's promise that Jesus, presently, completely invisible, will one day rule supreme and every great power in every great city everywhere will recognize him as Lord without fail.

I remember visiting Rome when I was a student and being totally overwhelmed because every way you look if you visit Rome, you see the ruins of this once massive empire which stretched as far as here.

Do you think anyone alive back then at the peak of imperial Rome's grandeur could possibly have said to themselves, well, this obviously isn't going to last for long, we'll be conquered in the end and one day the people living here won't even be able to speak our language?

Do you think anybody back then thought that? Has that ever crossed your mind walking through Glasgow one day this will all be obliterated and everybody living here won't even be able to understand Scottish people anymore?

Of course they didn't think that back then, did they? Because they built something that looked incredibly powerful. Transient human beings build things that have a feel of permanence about them.

[17:38] Do you think that Christians living in Rome in the first century being persecuted for being Christian found it easy to believe that one day Rome would disappear while the empire of the Lord Jesus just grew and grew and grew everywhere?

Do you think they found it easy to believe that? Do you think God's people back in Babylon found it easy to believe God's promise that one day the gods of Babylon would look like nothings and Jerusalem would be restored?

You ever heard the words bell and Nebo before this evening? Totally forgotten. And so says God, verse 3, listen to me.

They've got to be carried around by animals and people. This is only human power on display here. But I've carried you. Are you really going to look at them and think, oh no, God's never going to be able to do what he said he'd do?

Never. The truth is that human power, despite its great buildings, is very frail indeed. The things we make last longer than we do.

[18:51] But when something comes along that's bigger than human power, the things we make are absolutely useless. I, on the one hand, says God, I am very much alive.

Listen to me. Well, that's the first thing that makes it hard here for the people of Israel to listen to God. The things people build look invincible.

Now, here's the second thing. Look at verse 8. And here, things begin to hot up in this chapter. Second reason people find God's promises difficult to listen to, because God's promise involves real disappointment for these people.

Let me read verse 8. Remember this. Keep it in mind. Take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago. I am God, and there's no other.

I am God, and there's none like me. Remember. Remember the past, says God. What's he want them to remember? Well, he wants them to remember the previous occasion, when God showed himself to be supremely powerful over the great powers of the day.

[20:09] Namely, when they were slaves in Egypt. And back then, God defeated the great gods of Egypt, and the great human powers of Egypt.

And God says, remember that, you know I'm capable of rescuing you. I've done it before, remember. And unlike the gods of Egypt, and the gods of Babylon, who can't speak, you know that it was me who did it back then, because I told you in advance that I was going to do it, and then I did it.

That's what makes me different from them. I can speak, and then I do what I say I'm going to do. I never lie. I'm supremely powerful. I'm promising what's good for you.

I've done it before. You can trust me. You can take it to heart. Why didn't they trust him then? It's a brilliant promise, isn't it?

I'm going to rescue you, just like I did back then. I'm powerful enough to do it. I'll make Jerusalem built again. I can do it. Why didn't they trust that? Well, the answer is because of verse 11.

[21:25] From the east I summon a bird of prey. there's a rescuer coming, and he's not a cuddly one.

He's not like Superman, polite, well-mannered, kind to women and children and pets. No, he's an empire builder. The bird of prey in view here is Cyrus, emperor of Persia, another huge, brutal, greedy conqueror, much like the Babylonians who enslaved them at the moment. And yes, he will rescue Israel, and yes, he will let Israel go home to Jerusalem, and yes, he will let them rebuild the city, but the one thing you can be absolutely sure Cyrus is never going to do is allow Israel to become the great world power that she always dreamed she would be again. You see, this rescue is not going to be an Israeli nationalist stream. Cyrus is not going to allow the calling of an independence referendum. He is absolutely not interested in Israelite autonomy. No, he's after control. He's a bird of prey, a capturer. This great promise of rescue, despite being a great promise, and a genuine rescue from slavery in Babylon, was completely unpalatable to Israel. [22 : 51] evil. Because it signaled the end of what she deeply, deep down, most longed for. Namely, to be a strong, proud nation on the world stage.

Her hopes, really, you see, were all about herself, and what God could do for her, not what she could do for God. And they weren't really hopes that she'd honor God at all. Two things in this passage, then, that make it really hard to listen to God. Because the things people build look invincible. Can God really rescue? But perhaps more importantly, because God's promise includes real disappointment for God's people at this time. Now, folks, our situation is not the same as theirs. Really not, in lots of ways. But God is the same God, and human nature remains just the same. And God still makes promises. Look at the promise in verse 12. Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are now far from my righteousness. Israel were very far away from God's righteousness at this point.

[24 : 10] They were not living rightly in relation to the God who'd made them. God was promising, verse 13, to bring his righteousness near, not to delay his salvation.

God was promising to change things, to change them, to rescue them, to restore things to the way he intended them to be for his people. people. Now, folks, we are a lot further on than they were in the unfolding story of God's plans. And we know a lot more about what the promise of verse 13 entails now. We know, for example, that that promise, God establishing things rightly the way he designed, that promise has involved Jesus coming into the world, bringing forgiveness of sins through his death. That promise involves not merely the restoration of a city of Jerusalem, but the recreation of the world in order to make it right, just the way God planned it.

[25 : 23] That rescue, that promise involves the perfection of those who trust God's promises, their recreation as human beings, their resurrection in the end to a whole new order of existence.

And we have even more evidence than they had of the way that God speaks and then does things, and speaks and then does things.

Jesus said, I have the authority to lay my life down, and the authority to take it up again. And he spoke, and he did it. But, just as they did back then, we still find it hard sometimes to listen to and take to heart God's promises.

The things people build still look invincible. And there are things about God's promises that disappoint our human dreams. things. I'd like you to turn over to Mark chapter 8. Just one example from the words of Jesus of things that might disappoint our human dreams. Mark chapter 8, page 1012.

[26 : 43] There are so many places one could go, but we'll go here. It's a familiar passage. Peter recognizes who Jesus is.

You are the Messiah, verse 29. And instantly, Peter has all kinds of dreams of what that might look like. And Jesus' words about his coming death are totally unpalatable. And look what Jesus says, verse 34. Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his father's glory with the holy angels.

[27 : 52] What do you dream of in life for yourself? If you're old enough, what do you dream for your children in life? Do you dream of a fulfilling life?

Well, Jesus promises ultimate fulfillment here. But notice, there's going to be self-denial along the way. Do you dream of a safe life for yourself or your children?

Jesus promises ultimate safety here. Safety beyond your wildest dreams. But there will be danger on the way. Cross-carrying was never safe.

Success, maybe you dream of a successful life. Well, what greater success than to have your own place in a holy, renewed world when Jesus produces that, when he comes in glory.

But there's going to be loss on the way. Acceptance. You're the kind of person who dreams of being in, an accepted person in the world.

[29 : 00] Well, Jesus promises the ultimate acceptance, a welcome when he comes in his glory.

But there's going to be hostility on the way.

Many people won't embrace God's spectacular promises because they entail, in the present world, the death of something they just long to have.

Not realizing that ultimately God's promises offer more than we could possibly imagine. God's love for God's life.

What life do you long for? Well, what better life to have than life as a totally renewed human being, remade by your maker into the person you were always designed to be?

Jesus promises that, but there's death on the way. Two things that made it hard back then for them to listen to God and still do.

[30 : 10] Because the things that people build look invincible. Can God really do it? And because God's promise often involves real disappointment for our dreams.

Two things that make it hard to listen to God. But he is going to do what he says he'll do. And that's why we should listen anyway. Let's pray together.

Just a moment to respond in quiet to what God has said to us. And then I'll lead us in prayer. With whom will you compare me or count me equal?

To whom will you liken me says God that we may be compared? I make known the end from the beginning. From ancient times what is still to come.

I say my purpose will stand and I will do all that I please. Listen to me.

[31 : 48] Amen. We thank you gracious God for your amazing patience and kindness that you have carried your world and carried your people and continue to speak wonderful words of promise about all that can be had through the great work of your son.

We pray that even though the things people make look invincible, you'd help us to trust your promises. And we pray that even though your promises entail sometimes the loss of things that are still precious to us, you'd help us to believe them and to live in line with them because you always do what you say.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.