

Big God, Big Covenant

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- [0 : 00] This evening's reading is from the book of Isaiah, chapter 42, starting at verse 18. And we're reading through to chapter 43, verse 21.
- It can be found on page 729 of the Church Bibles. Isaiah 42, verse 18. Hear you deaf, look you blind and see.
- Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one in covenant with me, blind like the servant of the Lord? You have seen many things, but you pay no attention.
- Your ears are open, but you do not listen. It pleased the Lord for the sake of his righteousness, to make his law great and glorious. But this is a people plundered and looted, all of them trapped in pits or hidden away in prisons.
- They have become plunder, with no one to rescue them. They have been made loot, with no one to say, send them back. Which of you will listen to this, or pay close attention in time to come?
- [1 : 08] Who handed Jacob over to become loot, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the Lord against whom we have sinned? For they would not follow his ways, they did not obey his law.
- So he poured out on them his burning anger, the violence of war. It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand. It consumed them, but they did not take it to heart.
- But now, this is what the Lord says, He who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name.
- You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. And when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned. The flames will not set you ablaze.
- For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. Since you are precious and honoured in my sight, and because I love you, I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life.
- [2 : 14] Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, give them up. And to the south, do not hold them back.
- Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth. Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made. Lead out those who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf.
- All the nations gather together and the peoples assemble. Which of their gods foretold this and proclaimed to us the former things? Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right, so that others may hear and say, it is true.
- You are my witnesses, declared the Lord. And my servant, whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.

I, even I, am the Lord. And apart from me there is no saviour. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed. I am not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, that I am God.

[3 : 26] Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it? This is what the Lord says, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

For your sake I will send to Babylon and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians in the ships in which they took pride. I am the Lord, your Holy One, Israel's Creator, your King.

This is what the Lord says, he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the armies and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick.

Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs up, do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

The wild animals honour me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself, that they may proclaim my praise.

[4 : 38] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Well, let me pray before I start.

Father, we thank you that you have brought us here this evening. I pray that as we listen to your word, that you would speak to us, Lord, that you would change us, that what we take in by your spirit would be applied to every part of our life, and that we'd have new and fresh reasons to praise you this evening.

Amen. Amen. Well, good evening. For those of you I haven't met, my name is Simon, and I'm a member here at St. Silas. I want to start by asking us all a big question.

Who is actually in control in human history? Now, the obvious answer one would assume here in a church is God, surely. Of course he's in control of human history.

But do you ever find that we run to that answer a little too quickly? How honest a reaction does it feel when we look at our world and back to history? When we think of all of those things that Lydia brought up in her prayer, the tsunami in Indonesia, the death toll is already over 800.

[5 : 56] Or we see division and disarray in world politics. Or when we look back at history, we find whole empires that have been specifically atheist, but incredibly powerful, often abusing God's people and causing great destruction.

And what about the persecution of the modern church in the Middle East and Asia? What is God doing for his people? Or here in the UK, how is the church seemingly so weak when it was once so strong?

How does it have so little place in public life? What is God being doing to let this happen? Is God actually in control of this world?

And if he is, how do I relate to him? Well, I think this question is one that we would likely find on the lips of Israel at the time of Isaiah that we are looking at in this series.

Israel are about to go into exile in a foreign land, conquered by a foreign nation. It's a time of deep distress for the people of Israel. Israel. So has their God forgotten them?

[7 : 08] Has he stopped caring or just given up on his promises? Maybe he's been overpowered by one of the gods of Babylon and he actually can't save them. They keep asking, is he blind to our suffering and deaf to our cries?

And it's into that suffering and pain and confusion that the prophet Isaiah comes. With a very strong message of God's total sovereignty and control.

He will purify a people for his name. But God isn't the blind party in that relationship. Israel is. And this disaster that has befallen them in the exile, well, that's his own doing.

It's hardly the answer that Israel would have expected. And the one that comes with some very deep questions for us. What is God doing? If this is how God works in history, can we actually trust him?

How do we respond to a God like this? And I think that challenge is just as clear today as it was for them. So where are we going this evening?

[8 : 19] Well, we're going to look at the passage this evening in four parts. So chapter 42, verses 18 to 25. The Lord is in control, even in his people's sufferings.

And then chapter 43, 1 to 7. The Lord is present with his people in every trial. 8 to 13. The Lord is totally unique. His people are his witnesses.

And 14 to 21. The Lord has acted and will still act to reveal himself. Now, don't worry if you didn't get all of that. I'll make sure those are clear as we get to them.

So first then, chapter 42, verses 18 to 25. The Lord is in control, even in his people's sufferings. Throughout the whole of the Old Testament, we see God making promises to his people.

Covenants of relationship with them. And each time covenant is made or brought up, it is to remind his people that there is a responsibility on God's side and their side.

[9 : 23] If they're going to enjoy their relationship with God and flourish as a people, they must follow him and live by his commands. Now, if you were to go to the end of the book of Deuteronomy, you would find Israel, after receiving the revelation of God's law, being told that they had a choice to make.

Option one, obedience and blessing. Option two, disobedience and curse. And ultimately, some form of exile.

They wouldn't be allowed to keep the land that God had given to them. So let's look at what God actually specifically says there. If you turn to chapter 29 of Deuteronomy, if you want to follow along, starting at verse 24.

All the nations will ask, why has the Lord done this to this land? Why this fierce, burning anger? And the answer will be, it is because this people abandoned the covenant of the Lord, their God.

The covenant of their ancestors. The covenant he made with them when he brought them out of Egypt. They went off and worshipped over gods and bowed down to them. Gods they did not know.

[10 : 31] Gods he had not given them. Therefore, the Lord's anger burned against this land, so that he brought on it all the curses written in this book. In his furious anger and great wrath, the Lord rooted them from their land and thrust them into another land.

Heavy words to hear, aren't they? God in Israel's history, however, has never been unclear about the consequences of rejecting him and following other gods.

One day, his people, if they decide to continually follow another god, would be taken out of their land. Now, if Israel had remembered this, they wouldn't have ended up in exile.

And this is the argument we see in this passage. It's not that God is blind to their pain and suffering. It's that Israel have been blind to the commands and covenant love of their God.

Verse 21 of Isaiah 42 says that God made his law great and glorious. As people were meant to listen to it and live by it, to display the glory of God to the other nations.

[11 : 41] But instead, we see Israel here called deaf messengers, blind servants. Verse 20, God says, You have seen many things, but you pay no attention. Your ears are open, but you do not listen.

It's this rejection of God. Ignorance of Yahweh, the covenant lover of Israel, that has brought upon them the terrors of this exile. Look at what God has done.

He sent war upon his people. Sent Babylon to loot these people and destroy their land. But he's done this not in spite of his covenant relationship with them, but because of his covenant relationship with them.

Israel were meant to be God's people, his messengers, but they've become faithless. And the message that we see played out then is that they've been torn apart by war.

Not by the power of their enemies, but by the choice of their God. Now we might ask, with a God like this, who needs enemies? A God who brought his people into such devastation and suffering because of their relationship with him.

[12 : 54] How do you relate to that God? Well, thankfully, this passage goes on to tell us how these people will have a restored relationship with this God.

But we need to stop here for a moment. If the God of the exile is the God that we believe in, if this is our God, then how do we respond?

The first thing is that we must fear him enough to listen to him and obey him. To disobey the Lord is never, ever safe.

And God has made that very clear. Part of that fear is understanding how God is at work in history. We may not think that God is in control when we look at the state of the church and the state of the world.

Because things don't always seem to go well for his people. But Isaiah shows us how to relate to God. We relate to him by his promises, not by our perception.

[13 : 58] Israel haven't been abandoned in this, they just think they have. But actually, if they lived by his promises, they would know that God was still with them. That he wasn't willing to give them up. So ask yourself the question, who was in control when Jesus suffered on the cross?

And if we judge that event purely by sight and not by God's promises, what would we have concluded? The thing is, God was in control. And that suffering was specifically because of God's relationship to his people, not outside of it.

Now, we can't apply that logic to any and every situation in human history or any and every suffering that we go through. The exile and the cross are both unique events in history.

But in the end, we have to admit that our own perception is not a good measure of God's control. The only option we can take when things look that bad is trust.

And in our own lives, when we found that we have sinned, that we've rejected God ourselves, where do we turn? Well, the only place we can turn is back to him.

[15 : 11] Isaiah is showing us, Israel, and Israel, that the Lord is actually in control, even in his people's sufferings. So I imagine that first section feels quite heavy, and I believe that it should.

The Lord is glorious, and we can't relate to him without reverent fear. But we also can't relate to him exclusively by fear. We'd be unable to really know the Lord if we only feared him.

So the second part of our passage then, chapter 43, verses 1 to 7, the Lord is present with his people in every trial. If God is in control, and this is how he acts, is he actually good?

Who have I put my trust in? Well, God's covenant of promise to his people wasn't just a functional relationship. It was one of jealous and devoted love for his people.

Even amidst the curses of Deuteronomy, there was a clear hope. Now, sorry to make you jump back and forwards, but if you go back to Deuteronomy chapter 30, just after the passage we looked at, there is hope for a future exiled Israel.

[16 : 29] So from the start of chapter 30 of Deuteronomy, when all these blessings and curses I have set before you come on you, and you take them to heart wherever the Lord God has dispersed you among the nations, and when your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from the nations where he scattered you, even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, for there your Lord will be able to gather you and bring you back.

He will bring you back to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and he will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. The Lord God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants so that you may love him with all your heart and all your soul and live.

The Lord is absolutely determined to love and restore these people who have wandered away. The start of Isaiah 43 shows this covenant love of God again.

They may have been exiled, yes, but God is with them and will act to restore them. Just look how closely Yahweh relates to his people in those first seven verses.

I created you who formed you. I have redeemed you, summoned you by my name. You are mine. I will be with you. I am your savior.

[17 : 59] You are precious and honored in my sight. I love you and I am with you. This is all the language of deep and intimate relationship. God really loves these people.

Even in the suffering that he has brought to them, he is closely present with them, not far away. And this would be seen in the exile. Really, it's quite hard to read the words, I will be with you when you walk through the fire.

You will not be burned and the flames will not set you ablaze. Without immediately thinking of the story of Daniel, God's faithful people thrown into a furnace by a foreign king and yet walking out completely unsinged.

Is God with these people? Absolutely, he is. Closer than they remotely believe. What we have seen is the loving discipline of God for an entire nation.

So, of course, it's a huge event. But it's also discipline that seeks a loving restoration. God has demonstrated this many times in Israel's history and is calling them to remember that.

[19 : 07] What wouldn't he give for these people? In this passage, the Lord says that he would give whole nations for them in order to redeem them, according to verse 7. This is overwhelming love and a magnificent display of his glory.

And 70 years after the exile starts, by the clear action of God, Israel did come back from that exile. And there was a restoration to their land. But it wasn't very glorious when they returned.

Something greater was still yet to come. If this was a restoration, well, it just doesn't seem good enough. And the good news is that it wasn't quite. There was something greater coming.

God did eventually completely save and restore his people at great cost. In fact, at the cost of his own son. God didn't withhold Jesus and Jesus' life to redeem these people.

Instead, Jesus would give himself up as a ransom for many. And no greater love would ever be shown than that. So, picking back up from our first point then, if this is our God, how do we relate to him?

[20 : 21] Well, our first response was that of reverent fear, but that is now coupled with joyful faith. If you are one of God's own people, he loves you passionately.

His love is relentless and overwhelming. Fear and faith just have to go hand in hand with a God like this. They can't be separated. I cannot feel safe to disobey God, but neither can I doubt his love for me.

The Apostle Paul, I think, sums this up well in Romans chapter 8. If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all.

How not also along with him will he graciously give us all things? So, what is God like? Well, we couldn't have made him up, could he?

We would not have written this story had we written it ourselves. In fact, none of the mythologies of the world have a God like this. He doesn't suit us. His presence isn't comfortable.

[21 : 22] But Isaiah goes on to show us that Yahweh is totally and magnificently unique in our universe. That as the title of the sermon series says, there is none like him.

So, our third point then. Our passage changes in verse 8 into a vast courtroom of heaven. And this is where we will find that the Lord is totally unique and his people are to be his witness.

All the nations on earth are assembled to the heavenly courtroom to bear witness to their gods. And here Yahweh takes down the idolatry of the nations, showing that there is no witness to the other gods, only to him.

And then, to our utter astonishment, Yahweh calls a defendant to the stand. And somehow, Israel, this Israel from this passage, are chosen to stand as witnesses for him.

Not only has God not forgotten them, and not forgotten his love for them, he has not forgotten the job that he gave them to declare his glories to the world. And he expects them to keep that job.

[22 : 32] The Lord's people will remain his watching witnesses. They are always meant to display his glory to the world. And so shall they stay in that position. They are called partially so that they themselves can know that Yahweh is their only God, and give up on their idols.

So who does Yahweh declare himself to be? Well, even in the word Yahweh, I'm harking back to the Exodus, and to God's old covenant name, the one that he gave to his people.

But what we see in this passage is that he is genuinely awesome in the real meaning of that sense, of that word. First, Yahweh is self-existent.

See the end of verse 10. There is nobody before him. There will be none after. God is not dependent on anyone, nor is he in any way created. And that sets him apart from everyone and everything else in the universe, all of which is dependent on him for its life and being.

He is totally independent and totally unique. He doesn't need anything from these people, but he wants them. Second, in verses 11 and 12, he is the only Savior.

[23 : 52] Only he has revealed himself. Only he has saved his people. Only his victory can be proclaimed. Yahweh alone is at work in Israel's history and in human history.

To use a slightly trite but entirely correct Christian phrase, history is his story. He is the only one in control and the only one capable of salvation.

And finally, in verse 13, his works are unchallengeable. When he steps into the ring, there are no competitors. Yahweh is God alone and nobody can change what he enacts or deliver out of his hand.

There is no competition. There is no challenge. Yahweh alone is king. The Lord is awesome, overwhelmingly sovereign and entirely unique.

And as he is unchanging, we can declare that all the truths in this passage in Isaiah we can still see in Jesus. There aren't two different gods. Jesus is Yahweh.

[25 : 00] Jesus is unique. He is eternal. He has only ever been Trinity. And the incarnation when Jesus came in the flesh wasn't God reinventing himself to make him slightly less terrifying.

Here is the eternal son, the unique God. He was there before creation and he will be there after and there is no other. He is the only savior. We know well that none of us could take away the sin that we have in our lives and the wrath of God against that except God himself.

And finally, he is the victor. On the final day, there will be no challenger, no other champion. He has already won and we await his return to usher in that final victory.

So our right response to this then has to be, as Israel's was meant to be, to be worshipping witnesses of our creator king. If Jesus is the magnificent savior, then we must live our lives worshipping him, giving him thanks and telling others about our glorious king who loves us, who one day will come again to judge.

So you wonder, after all of that in this Isaiah passage, what is there left to say? If God is this big, then what could I possibly say about him that would add anything to this? Well, after God has marked off the entirety of time and space as his territory, Isaiah moves into a much smaller frame.

[26 : 33] After reorientating our minds to the vastness of Yahweh, we focus in on little Israel in their present, their past, and their future. So our fourth and final point is chapter 43, verses 14 to 21.

The Lord has acted and will still act to reveal himself. First, Israel's present circumstances. In verse 14 and 15, when Israel hear this prophecy in the painful time of the exile, they need to remember that God is totally in control over their captors.

It won't feel that way when they're under the might of Babylon, but they're being called to live by faith and not by sight in their captivity. Yahweh alone is Lord, is Holy One, is Creator and King, and none of the Babylonian kings will ever be him.

He is above them. Secondly, verses 16 and 17, they're called to look at their past, specifically to the Exodus, to the time of Yahweh's great demonstration of his power and his character.

And Isaiah reminds them of when God led his people through the Red Sea and then closed the Red Sea behind them, completely wiping out the Egyptian army. That slightly terrifying little phrase, snuffed out like a wick, says verse 17, a reminder that their God is a God of extraordinary power.

[28 : 02] But finally, verses 18 to 21, they're called to look to the future, to something new, and in doing so, Isaiah tells them, forget the former things, do not dwell on the past.

And after all this passage has said, doesn't that sound inconceivable? Forget the works the Lord has done. I mean, it hardly seems sensible. The thing is that now God is going to do a new thing, something so powerful that the Exodus will pale in comparison, something so revealing of his character, it will like the eyes have finally been opened of his people, something so magnificent that even the wild animals in the wilderness would honor him for it.

it's going to lead to exultant praise and worship, something new. And this statement is very rare in Bible history, only really appearing in Isaiah and Jeremiah.

So what's he talking about? Well, I'm sure you can guess, after so much covenant language, he's actually talking about the new covenant, the coming of Jesus in all his glory.

That is what God is going to do. Here is the something new that could make the Exodus pale in comparison. But how Isaiah talks about that, well, unfortunately, we haven't gotten that far.

[29 : 21] You'll just have to come back to the next sermon in the series to find out what God is going to do and how he's going to do it. But whatever it is, it's going to be the most magnificent action in the whole of history, something new, bigger than the Exodus.

So finally, let's take our eyes to the Lord and to our world. He has demonstrated that even in a world that doesn't seem like it is going his way, he is always in control.

There is no one like our God. So how do we respond to a God who is so overwhelmingly sovereign and of such magnificent power and love? Well, it's just as I said before, we have fear and we have faith.

First, fear. How could we not fear this God? But that fear should lead us to two things. First is humility. God can see the end from the beginning and I cannot.

We only see humanity and history from a tiny window, a limited perspective. And so I can't turn around to God and say that I know the world better than he does and demand that he explain himself.

[30 : 32] If God is in control like this, I must fear him in humility. Secondly, though, this fear has a natural output in listening and obedience.

God is not capricious but clear. There is blessing in obedience and faithfulness. So reverent fear is the right response to our creator king. When we've responded in fear, we also respond in faith.

They have to come together. If I can't see the end from the beginning, then I can put my faith in one who can. A God who does see the start of creation to the very end when he wraps it up.

And a God who will never abandon or stop loving his people. That faith must express itself in being a witness for him in the courtroom of the world.

If we are in a relationship with him, we must speak about him. In Jesus, we see that God's commitment to saving people goes way beyond their disobedience. He doesn't save them because they change.

[31 : 37] He saves them because he loves them and they are his people. For all of those whom Jesus has saved, they respond in faith to the incredible love that they have been shown.

If that is true, how could we not tell people about a gospel that is this fantastically good and an incredible God who must be shared? Here is a God who really is in control and really is good.

Who else is there like him? And who else is worth worshipping? Well, let me close with this. I wonder if the New Testament writer Jude had something maybe of this passage or something like it in his mind when he wrote the last two verses of his letter.

So I'm going to use them as a prayer to close this. To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence, without fault and with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, be glory, majesty, power, and authority through Jesus Christ, our Lord, before all ages, now, and forevermore.

Amen.