

1. The Danger of Ignoring God

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[0 : 00] Well, it is very, very good to be back, and I thank Willie for his welcome back here. He's had the greatest difficulty in keeping me on the leash. I've been wanting to get back to this.

But as always, of course, as a book in my study says, we are trembling on the threshold of the Word of God. That's what we are here for. And we're starting a little series called the Seeing the World as God Sees It.

That's what we're going to be looking at over the next weeks. And we're going to be looking at Isaiah 41, which is on page 601. And today we're going to be looking at verses 1 to 7 of that chapter.

This is a chapter, as I say, about seeing the world as God sees it. So let's read the chapter. And God himself is speaking. And the Lord says, Listen to me in silence, O coastlands.

Let the peoples renew their strength. Let them approach, then let them speak. Let us together draw near for judgment. Who stirred up one from the east, whom victory meets at every step?

[1 : 16] He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot. He makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow.

He pursues them and passes on safely. By paths his feet have not trod. Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning?

I, the Lord, the first. And with the last, I am he. The coastlands have seen and are afraid. The ends of the earth tremble.

They have drawn near and come. Everyone helps his neighbor. Even says to his brother, Be strong. The craftsman strengthens the goldsmith.

And he who smooths with the hammer, him who strikes the anvil, saying of the soldering, It is good. And they strengthen it with nails, so that it cannot be moved.

[2 : 14] And that is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us. I imagine many people here will have heard a version of the story of the blind man, the blind men, and the elephant.

A number of blind people were confronted with an elephant. And they were asked to describe what the elephant looked like. One blind man, feeling the massive body, said, Clearly, an elephant looks like a wall.

Another one, who held the trunk, said, Obviously, an elephant looks like a snake. Another one hugged one of the huge legs of the elephant, and said, Obviously, the elephant is like a tree.

Partial understanding. Imperfect understanding of what an elephant was. I want to suggest that is a picture of humanity in their understanding of the world we live in, and particularly in their understanding of God.

Some people, if you ask them to explain the world, will explain it by their experience. Their own experience, the experience of friends, perhaps experience of people they've seen on television, or on films.

[3 : 30] And that will obviously give us some kind of insight into the world, but it will be limited. The people we meet will be only a limited number of people. The books we read, the films we see, will be ones we've chosen to read and see, and therefore probably simply reinforcing our own prejudices.

Other people will look at politics and history, and will obviously learn a great deal about the world, but they'll be perplexed to understand why it is that sometimes, and in some parts of the world, there is good, honest, fair, just government, and other times, in other parts of the world, there is tyranny, there is evil, there is bloodshed, there is famine and plague, and so on.

Others, again, will look at nature, look at the beauties of nature, look at the sunset, look at the moonlight, look at the wonders of the night sky, but then there's also tsunamis, earthquakes, and so

on.

Others will retreat into fantasy, they'll consult horoscopes, tarot cards, Ouija boards, and things like that. And the end is simply muddle and confusion.

Now, the prophet Isaiah is determined we are not going to live in a world of muddle and confusion. Just a quick word about the place of this chapter. Prophet Isaiah prophesied some in the 8th century BC.

[4 : 59] He prophesied at a time of great danger. The Assyrians were threatening to overthrow the kingdom, take them into exile. Indeed, the northern part of the kingdom were taken to Assyria in Isaiah's lifetime.

But Isaiah looks beyond that. He looks beyond that to a God who is in control of history. And he says, you're going to be rescued from the Assyrians, but the Babylonians are going to come and take you away.

And they're going to rule for a time. Then after that, they're going to be replaced by another empire, and so it goes on. And that's why he points them to God, the Lord of history.

Look at the world as God sees it. And in this first section, we're looking at the danger of ignoring him. God here is Lord of history.

Next week, we'll see him as Lord of creation. And in the final week, we'll look at the delusion of those who trust in other gods, in idols. Listen to me in silence.

[6 : 02] Notice this chapter isn't saying, I'm one of the voices whom you might like to listen to. I've got some insight. This isn't giving us any choice. This chapter is not saying, put God first and things will go well.

This chapter is saying, we won't have any choice. Listen to me. If you were here the last few weeks, Willie was preaching about prayer, and one of the points he made many times was that we can only pray because God is a speaking God.

We can only speak to God because he speaks to us. Indeed, if God didn't speak to us first, we'd have nothing at all to say to him. That's what Isaiah is.

So who is to listen then? First of all, the coastlands, or the islands in some versions. The prophet is looking westward, and even in the 8th century, he's beginning to see how power is going to shift away from the old empires in the east to the new empires.

The Greek city-states are already flexing their muscles. In Isaiah's lifetime, a small village was founded in Italy on the river Tiber, a tiny settlement called Rome, which was to become the world leader.

[7 : 15] So you see he's looking at the great powers, but he's also looking, let the peoples, that is the whole of humanity, everybody has to listen, not just the rulers of the world, but everybody.

This is public truth, truth for the rulers, truth for the nations. It's also individual truth. Each one of us here has to listen. Never listen to people who say the Old Testament is narrow and inward-looking. Right from the very, very beginning, the Old Testament, I mean, after all, how does the Old Testament begin? God created the heavens and the earth. His purpose is universal, not just the earth, but what we call the universe.

And then when he calls Abraham, one man, why does he call him? Because all the nations will be blessed. And notice, I want you to notice something else here. You'll notice it is a summons.

We have to listen. But it's also a gracious invitation. Let them approach. Let them speak. And that's so true of God. God, if he wished, could simply force himself upon us, force us to listen, and sometimes, of course, God does that to people.

[8 : 24] He forces them to listen against their will. But it also counts as a gracious invitation. Renew their strength. This is picked up from the previous chapter, verse 31 of chapter 40.

Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. Let them draw near for judgment. Judgment means that history is going somewhere.

There is going to be a final verdict. As Acts 17 says, God will judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. And he's proved that by raising him from the dead.

So, listening to the world, sorry, listening to the word that God speaks and seeing the world as God sees it. I want to ask two questions of these verses.

First of all, how do we know that the Lord is God? That's verses two to four. And the key seems to me to be the double question. Who stirred up one from the east, verse two, and who has performed and done this, verse four.

[9 : 27] Isaiah says, this God I'm speaking about is not a myth. He's not a fantasy. He's not someone that people have dreamed up whose exploits are told in legends and in myths.

This is a God who works in history. And he does two particular things in history. First of all, he calls specific individuals to carry out his purpose.

Who stirred up one from the east? Now some of the older commentators say this actually refers to Abraham himself. And there's some truth in that because you read back in Genesis 14, Abraham won a victory over the kings and the Lord gave up nations before him.

But it's much more probable that he's referring to the Persian king Cyrus who is going to overthrow the Babylonian empire and allow God's people to return to their homeland.

And indeed Cyrus is to be named later on in chapters 44 and 45. See what Isaiah is saying. In this moment of crisis we are looking beyond it.

[10 : 35] God is going to raise up someone called Cyrus and he's going to allow God's people to return home. so that God is in charge of the great moments of history.

Who stirred up one from the east? Stirred up a very vivid word meaning a kind of alarm clock word. This word is illustrated by what happens in the morning when you are sinking into a deep and wonderful sleep and then you hear a bell which you think is part of your dream but it keeps on going and going and going.

That's what stirred up means. In other words it wasn't Cyrus who was to overthrow the Babylonian empire. It was God who stirred him up. So God is in charge of the great moments and the great figures of history.

That's the first thing. If we are going to look at the history of the world as God sees it we need to realize that. That doesn't take away our responsibility. God knows although the commentators don't know and are becoming increasingly uncertain who is going to win the forthcoming general election. That doesn't mean we don't have to vote because God works through means. But God raises up kings, he raises up nations, raises up empires, states and individuals.

[11 : 54] But the second thing is this. This isn't just history. Look at verse four. Who has performed and done this calling the generations from the beginning. In other words what is true of Cyrus and other conquerors, other leaders, other nations, other states, is actually true of all humanity.

And it's part of a plan right from the beginning. Calling the generations from the beginning. In generations as wide a word as possible, every single human being on this earth is there because God has placed them there.

That is why this message is for everyone. For the thousands of people who pass up and down Buchanan Street every day, for the people we hear about in the use for ourselves, for our neighbours, for our families and friends.

It's as old as history itself. And the Lord is the first and the last. New Testament says Alpha and Omega. And we would say the A to Z.

That means he's in charge of everything in between. It's not just the beginning and the ending. If he's going to be in charge of the end, then clearly he has got to be in charge of everything that leads to the end.

[13 : 07] And that's what I mean by seeing the world as God sees it. I am. Probably it'd be better to miss out the he, because that's the name revealed to Moses, the God of the past, the present and the future.

So the wise thing is to accept that invitation and enjoy the blessings, is it not? And if we haven't yet listened to the voice of the Lord, it's a good day to start listening, because God is calling us, God is inviting us, God is summoning us.

So that's the first question then, how do we know he is Lord? He is Lord because he's in control of the great figures, the great moments of history, but he's also in charge of every single individual. Second question really in verses 5 to 7 is how stupid can we be? It begins apparently positively, verse 5 looks promising, the coastlands have seen and are afraid, the ends of the earth tremble. It seems at first sight as if this message is going to be heeded, and the nations from all over the world are coming to listen. But the trouble is, they are afraid, but it's not the fear of God, and they are turning not to God, but to the gods, to idols.

[14 : 29] We're going to see this particularly in the third section, if you glance ahead at the very last verse of the chapter for a moment, behold, they are all a delusion.

All means the idols that many people have made, their works are nothing, their metal images are empty wind. People are trusting in wind rather than in the solidity of God. So how stupid can we be? How stupid are the nations, the ends of the earth? They combine against God. Everyone helps his neighbour and says to his brother, be strong. In many ways that sounds very positive, but the trouble is, like in Psalm 2, the nations and the kings are combining themselves against the Lord and against his anointed. Back in chapter 40, what had the Lord said about the nations? Chapter 40, verse 15, Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket and are accounted as dust on the scales. [15:28] Behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust. They're hopelessly outclassed. They don't have what it takes, even when they combine together.

Mere numbers count for nothing against God. You see, we're not here, this is not a healthy, helpful and positive combining together.

This is a futile and arrogant attempt to dethrone God. And we must remember the earlier story, the Tower of Babel. Come, let us build a tower whose top will reach to heaven.

And let's join together in case we're scattered. That runs through the whole Bible. When people, it's a good thing when people combine for good purposes. But as we know, so much of human history is people combining and conspiring for evil purposes.

So they trust in their own power. They combine against God, strength in numbers. But they also trust in their own skill. The craftsman strengthens the goldsmith. He who smooths with the hammer, him who strikes the anvil, saying of the soldierings is good.

[16:35] And they strengthen it with nails so that it cannot be moved. And if we glance back again just across the page, look at chapter 40 verse 19, it's obviously referring to this, an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts it for silver chains.

He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot. He sets out a skillful craftsman, a set of an idol that will not move. No one is so contemptuous of idols as Isaiah.

Indeed, when you read Isaiah, when he talks about idols, it's not so much the wickedness of idols, it's the silliness of idols. Basically, he's saying, look, you're getting together, you're getting all your craftsmanship, and then you're bowing down and worshipping it, and that is foolish.

How foolish is it to do that? You get something that's less than you, and you've prostrate yourself before it. Now, of course, that's a very convenient God, isn't it?

A God who cannot see, isn't going to see when I'm up to no good. A God that can't hear, isn't going to hear when I'm telling lies, or saying things I shouldn't be saying.

[17:47] A God that can't move, isn't going to be able like the God of Psalm 139 to pursue me to the furthest ends of the universe. What good is a God like that?

If he can't see, then that means he won't know when I'm in danger and there will be no help. If he can't hear, that means there's no point in praying. If he can't move, that means I can get away from his sphere of influence, and take my own way.

So Isaiah is mocking trust in technology, in human enterprise. Now the Bible never mocks human endeavour as such.

The Bible continually says that human beings are skilful and that is a gift of God. What the Bible continually attacks, and what the scriptures continually warn us against, is trusting in that.

Trusting in the works of our hands, trusting in our technological know-how. After being through the kind of winter we've been through, we just see just how helpless our technological know-how is against snow.

[18:52] And there's so many ways in which our technological know-how will let us down. If we see it as a gift from God, and thank him for it, then it is a good and wonderful thing to help us in our earthly lives.

So, we come back to the question at the beginning. Whose eyes are we looking at the world with? Is it our experience, simply? Our experience is going to be terribly limited, and we're going to find there are many questions it leaves unanswered.

Is it the experience of human beings throughout history, politics, and so on? All of these are valuable, because after all, this is about God in history. Is it creation itself?

Once again, wonderful and great things there. are we lapsing into idolatry? You go up to Waterstones, I didn't say go down to Borders, unfortunately you can't, but if you go up to Waterstones and look at the mind, body, and spirit section, you'll find there abundant evidence of

21st century idolatry, how to read your tarot cards, interpreting your dreams, and all this kind of fantasy world to which people want to escape.

Instead of this, Isaiah speaks with the voice of God, a vigorous, uncompromising summons, and yet a gracious invitation.

[20 : 23] Listen to me in silence. Let them approach, let them speak, let us draw near together for judgment. Let us look at the world through God's eyes.

Let us listen and live according to God's voice. Amen. Let's pray. Father, we know you have told us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

So often we pursue wisdom in other things, some of them valuable, some of them ridiculous, some of them complete delusion. So help us from today onwards to fear you, to live wisely, and to walk humbly before our God.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.