

Opening Eyes to Reality

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now, we've come to our reading this evening, which I think you heard that first bit very clearly, probably do clearly, which is once again in the book of Isaiah, and if you turn please to page 588, and we'll be looking at chapter 28.

Just a quick word about the place of this in the book. We've been doing an occasional series on Isaiah over the last few months, and I've tried to divide this gigantic book into sections, and we're coming to the third section this evening, which is really chapters 28 to 39.

One of the most striking things about Isaiah is how he, from his vantage point in Jerusalem, he looks out over the whole world, indeed the whole created order.

He's continually moving between these two points, if you like, from his own hometown, so to speak, then looking out widely. And in the previous chapters, chapters 13 to 27, the oracles against the nations, he's swept around the nations of the time, and indeed in chapters, the chapters we looked at the last two weeks, chapters 24 to 27, he's given us visions of the new creation, of the whole created order redeemed.

But now he's returning to his own hometown, if you like, and to the nations of Judah and Israel. Remember, Isaiah is a poet.

[1 : 37] The language is vivid, and therefore we must try and respond to it in that way. So Isaiah 28, and we'll read the chapter, page 588.

Ah, the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim, and the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of the rich valley of those overcome with wine.

Behold, the Lord has won who is mighty and strong, like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest, like a storm of mighty overflowing waters. He casts down to the earth with his hand.

The proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim will be trodden underfoot, and the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of the rich valley, will like a first ripe fig before the summer.

When someone sees it, he swallows it as soon as it is in his hand. In that day, the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty to the remnant of his people, and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.

[2 : 49] He's also real with wine and stagger with strong drink. The priest and the prophet reel with strong drink. They are swallowed by wine. They stagger with strong drink.

They reel in vision. They stumble in giving judgment. For all tables are full of filthy vomit, with no space left.

Who will he teach knowledge? And to whom will he explain the message? Those who are weaned from the milk, those taken upon breast, for it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little.

For by people of strange lips and with a foreign tongue, the Lord will speak to this people. To whom he has said, this is rest, give rest to the weary, and this is repose.

Yet they would not hear. And the word of the Lord will be to them, precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little, that they may go and fall backwards and be broken and snared and taken.

[4 : 04] Therefore hear the word of the Lord, you scoffers, who rule this people in Jerusalem. Because you have said, we have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement.

When the overwhelming whip passes through, it will not come to us. For we made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter. Therefore thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone of a sure foundation.

Whoever believes will not be in haste, and I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line, and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter.

Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand.

When the overwhelming scourge passes through, you will be beaten down by it.

As often as it passes through, it will take you. For morning by morning it will pass through, by day and by night. And it will be sheer terror to understand the message.

[5 : 12] For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on, and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in. For the Lord will rise up as on Mount Perizim, as in the valley of Gibeon he will be roused.

To do his deed, strange is his deed, and to work his work, alien is his work. Now therefore, do not scoff. Let your bonds be made strong.

For I heard a decree of destruction from the Lord God of hosts against the whole land. Give ear and hear my voice. Give attention and hear my speech.

Does he who plows for sowing plow continually, does he continually open and harrow his ground when he has leveled its surface? Does he not scatter dill, sow cumin, and put in wheat in rows, and barley in its proper place, and emmer as the border?

For he is rightly instructed, his God teaches him. Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge. Now is a cartwheel rolled over cumin, but dill is beaten out with a stick, and cumin with a rod.

[6 : 21] Does one crush grain for bread? No, he does not thresh it forever. When he drives his cartwheel over it with his horses, he does not crush it.

This also comes from the Lord of hosts. He is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom. Amen. This is the word of the Lord.

Now, could we have our Bibles open, please, at Isaiah 28, on page 588, and we'll have a moment of prayer. God, our Father, we believe you have things to say to us, things that we need to hear, things that will often challenge our preconceptions, light that will shine into our darkness.

And we pray, Lord, that your gracious Holy Spirit, who inspired these words long ago, may bring them to us, not as echoes of a distant and vanished era, as are the very living words that you are speaking to us now.

We ask this in the name of the living word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray. Amen. The poet T.S. Eliot once said, humankind cannot bear very much reality.

[8 : 00] And that's absolutely true. And that's just as true of Christian humankind as it is of other humankind. We do love so often to live in a fantasy land.

We do often love to live in a land which is what we would like it to be, rather than what it is. And the prophet here is determined that the people he is speaking to, and that's us as well, of course, not just the people of the time, that our eyes will be opened to reality.

That's our title for tonight, opening eyes to reality, living in the real world, and not least the reality about ourselves. As you know, we have very, we tend to swing between thinking we're really all that, we're really rather good people, then going to the opposite extreme and thinking there's absolutely nothing commendable about us at all.

Well, the prophet is saying, open your eyes, or as the apostle John says, walk in the light, as he is in the light. Now, just two things I want to say by way of introduction.

These passages, this chapter and 29, and the following chapters are rather bleak. Now, if you were here the last few weeks, or perhaps earlier on in the series, when we looked at some of these glowing pictures of the new creation, those pictures of the wolf lying down with the lamb, little child playing at the serpent's den, and these wonderful visions of the nations crowding to Mount Zion to be blessed by the Lord.

[9 : 41] And you might well feel, well, he's getting back to the real world. Now, that's simply not true. Both these worlds are real. But it's quite a contrast, though, isn't it?

It's such a contrast it is that many commentators can't handle it and say it must have been written by different people. Isaiah, who wrote about the desert blossoming as the rose, and so on, couldn't have written this.

You know, some commentators of such Philistines have absolutely no literary sensitivity at all. They don't see that the prophet is actually living in the real world, and he is anticipating an even more real world that already exists and is to come.

You see, the only way we can effectively live in this world is by being transformed by the renewing of our minds as we wait for the coming of the kingdom.

There is contrast, but there is no contradiction. Both things are true. We live in this world which is perplexed, confusing, often vicious, often nasty, and we are preparing for that world to come.

[10:54] And we, and that was the prayer, the end of our last, saying, Lord, may we day by day prepare to see your face and serve you there. Now, what about the time of the prophecies?

Back in chapter 1, verse 1, Isaiah tells us he prophesied during the reigns of four kings, probably for a period of 40 and more years, perhaps as much as 50 years.

Jotham, one of the yes-but kings who was quite good, but ultimately made little impact. Then, of course, King Uzziah, in whose, year of whose death, he had the great vision of Yahweh of hosts, holy, holy, holy, as Yahweh of hosts, a man who began well, but ended tragically.

But much of his prophecy centers around the reign of the two next kings, King Ahaz, a godless king who took the nation back to idolatry and whom Isaiah said to in chapter 7, if you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand firm at all.

Ahaz, live in the real world. You're not going to save the nation by cozying up to the Assyrians. If you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand firm at all. Now, these prophecies, 28 to 39, probably come from the reign of Ahaz's son, an utterly different kind of man, Hezekiah.

[12:26] We read in two kings that Hezekiah was a man of faith. There was no one like him before and no one like him after. Oh, he wobbled a bit.

He flirted with Egypt and with Babylon, but ultimately, the assessment of the biblical prophetess, he was a man of faith. And it's very likely that these prophecies come from the very early years of his reign before his great reforms had begun to make an impact.

After all, you don't turn aside 20-odd years of godlessness in a day or two. So, that's the kind of situation. Hezekiah has come to the throne, but there are still many, many people, particularly in the leadership, who prefer the old ways of Ahaz, the ways of diplomacy and politicking rather than trusting in the Lord.

So, that's the background. And just one other point, Ephraim mentioned here in the first verses is the name given to the northern kingdom which is about to fall.

So, that's the situation. And let's look at the chapter now as it develops in three major sections. First of all, verses 1-13, pride and a fall.

[13:45] This is pride which is coming before a fall. Pride and a fall. Ephraim is, as I say, the name of the northern kingdom.

Just quickly to remind you, after the reign of Solomon, the kingdom was torn apart and part of the ten of the tribes follow, ten of the tribes in the north and two of the tribes Judah Benjamin in the south.

And sometimes the northern tribes are called Ephraim because Ephraim and Nasser were the sons of Joseph. And you get this in some of the Psalms that talk about Joseph as the representative of the north.

Now, Ephraim was about to fall to Assyria. But in spite of lurching from one crisis to another, in spite of being totally ineffective, it is still absolutely filled with pride.

Back in 1 King 16, Omri, father of the better-known king Ahab, built the strong city of Samaria on a beautiful hill. That's what's referred to here, the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of the rich valley, in verse 1, in verse 4.

[15:00] Beautiful, strong city, so strong indeed that the Assyrian war machine took three years to overthrow it. This strong city on its beautiful hill, and earlier on, the prophet Amos had attacked the indulgence and arrogance of its citizens, a place of great luxury, a place of great oppression, and a place where the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer.

The rich in their ivory houses, Amos talks about, and the poor are trodden underfoot. Now, this has got to do with us.

You might think, oh well, fair enough, that's then, what about now? Now, this can all seem remote, or it can be turned into a rant on an indulgent lifestyle.

One way of preaching this was simply to give a rant about drink and about self-indulgence and so on. But, that's not really what the passage is about.

The self-indulgence, the drunkenness, is the symptom of something else, far deeper. It is the symptom of pride, the proud crown. Repeated, verse 1, verse 3, the proud crown.

[16:19] And pride, remember, is the natural human condition without the grace of God. Pride is a daily temptation that we all struggle with.

And there are two aspects of pride which are just as relevant to us as they were to the inhabitants of Samaria, which are clearly shown here.

First of all, pride means boundless confidence in ourselves. Strong, beautiful, the glorious beauty, the head of the rich valley, and so on.

that is the first element of pride. And verse 7, the real envision. In other words, they're not seeing reality.

Cocooned by their luxury, cocooned by their apparent power, they're not seeing clearly. Does that only happen in the world?

[17:15] Of course not. Remember Revelation 3, the church in Laodicea, I am rich. I have prospered. I need nothing.

Undoubtedly that's what Laodicea's website would say. Laodicea's website would not say we are poor, miserable, and naked, and blind, as the Lord said about them. It's so easy, isn't it, to be proud. Proud of our gifts, proud of our churches. I will not boast in anything. No gifts, no power, no wisdom. How easy it is to sing these words, isn't it?

How hard to carry them out. It's always tempting to trust in our gifts rather than in the Lord himself. I'm sure you notice verse 8, this disgusting verse.

All tables are full of filthy vomit, with no space left. If you told somebody that's in the Bible, they might not well believe you.

[18:21] Why is that there? What is the point? The point surely is ultimately pride is ugly and ridiculous. Human beings strutting and fretting their hour upon the stage, dressed in a little brief authority.

There is something ridiculous, something ugly about human pride, something that is a total denial of the gospel. Ephraim, only a few years before it was to be trodden into the dust.

Verse 2, Behold, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong, like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest. Notice, it doesn't say here, Assyria is going to come and conquer you, rather, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong.

Isaiah said this already back in chapter 10, that the Assyrian is the rod of his anger. He'll use Assyria to punish his own people, and then he'll punish Assyria.

That's the point. Strutting and fretting, drawing attention to ourselves. That's the first aspect of pride. But the second aspect that comes out very clearly in this section is boundless contempt for those thought to be inferior.

[19:37] And that's probably the point of verses 9 and 10. To whom will he teach? knowledge. I think that's probably a dig at the prophet himself. Ephraim's, Ephraim, Ephraim and its drunken pride, does not want to hear the message of the prophet.

A simple and naive preacher who comes telling them that they need to repent, comes telling them they need to change. As Isaiah say, well, if you won't listen to this teaching, you're going to have to listen to it, verse 11, by people of strange lips and with a foreign tongue.

The Lord will speak to this people. If you won't listen to it from me, you'll hear it from the Assyrians. And you'll have to listen then. People of strange lips with a foreign tongue, the Assyrian language fairly like Hebrew, but not enough alike for people to understand it.

You see, this message is, look at verse 12, this is rest, give rest to the weary and this is repose, yet they would not hear. If they had listened to the voice of the prophet, they would have been saved. If they had listened to the voice of the prophet, this disaster would not have happened. If you can't learn this way, you're going to learn the hard way.

[21:00] Now, once again, what's this got to do with us? You know, the devil is a very, very subtle enemy.

If he can't stop us reading our Bibles, if he can't stop us listening to preaching, he's going to try and do his best to pervert that, isn't he?

And what's going to happen is we're going to start admiring gurus and not listening to what they say. We're going to start admiring, we're going to start admiring the preacher rather than the preaching.

We're going to, what Paul says, we're going I of Paul, I of Apollos, I of Cephas, and the super spiritual I of Christ. Now, the point is, it's not wrong to admire preachers.

There's certain preachers I admire greatly and will learn no doubt a great deal from. But that's not the point. The point is, the Bible is not a prophet, it's the prophesying, it's not the preacher, it's the

preaching.

[22 : 07] That is the point. And of course, it's terribly easy to think, oh, we're so clever, we need really deep teaching. You kind of think, oh, isn't that such a clever guy, I can't understand a word he says.

Well, if that's the case, that is a condemnation. If you can't understand a word he says, then he hasn't bothered to make himself clear. See, as Lewis once said, if we cannot express our faith clearly, we either don't understand it or we don't believe it.

And that's quite thought provoking. So, we can be muddled, or on the other hand, I don't know what the muddle comes because people don't really believe what they're saying. And therefore, it comes across as confused.

And that is the, you see, the gospel, of course, is profound. The Bible will never be exhausted. But, the task of the prophet, the task of the preacher, is indeed precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little.

A theologian of an earlier date, James Denny, who was once principal of Glasgow University, said, no preacher can prove himself to be clever, and prove that Jesus Christ is a great saviour.

[23 : 31] And of course, for Isaiah, it must be a great, I mean, after all, Isaiah is an artist in words, he's a poet, his language is tremendous. So, you see the point here.

Pride, boundless confidence in ourselves, and boundless contempt for those considered inferior. Not that the gospel is naive, not that the gospel is simplistic, but there's a basic simplicity.

Verse 12 again, this is rest, give rest to the weary, that they would not hear. And because they wouldn't hear, they were going to have to hear.

Now, that's Ephraim, the northern kingdom, and now he turns, of course, to his own kingdom of Judah. Therefore, hear the word of the Lord, you scoffers, who rule this people in Jerusalem.

Israel, Ephraim is doomed, can Judah be saved? Now, notice the false, we have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement.

[24 : 36] Undoubtedly, these were not the words that they actually used in public. They weren't going around saying, oh, we've made a covenant with death, and with the grave. what they were actually saying is that we are safe ourselves.

We didn't ignore the covenant. This morning, Willie was speaking about the covenant that the Lord made with Moses, which remains the standard for all future generations.

Now, they say, we don't need that covenant. We've made a covenant with death and hell. These are probably the early days of Ahaz. Ahaz had made a treaty with the king of Assyria.

We're not going to be in any problem with Assyria. Our king actually made sure that we wouldn't be.

One of the things that the king's historian praises Hezekiah for is he rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him.

So, you see, there's a fatal choice here, choosing death rather than life. Scoffers, these are probably, you see, the vestiges of Ahaz's old guards who were still preaching politics, still saying, we're in no danger, they won't come here.

[26 : 03] Verse 18, then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand. When the overwhelming scourge passes through, you'll be beaten down by it.

And it will come and come and keep on coming. It passes through, verse 19, morning by morning, by day and by night. Actually, there's the point of this curious, this rather odd-sounding verse, verse 20, the bed is too short to stretch oneself on, the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in.

That is the equivalent of our phrase, you've made your bed, so you've got to lie in it. They are making their bed, and the tragedy is their bed is the grave, their bed is death and the end.

So, living in the real world. But, even here, there is a note of hope. I want to mention verses 5 and 6, which you thought I'd forgotten about, and then, of course, verses 16 and 17.

The Lord's purpose will stand. However much his people fail, however blind his people are, will stand. In that day, the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory, a diadem of beauty.

[27 : 28] You don't need to pretend that you are so special. The point is, the Lord himself, he makes you special. Clothed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before his throne.

Don't go parading before the throne of God and posturing with your own clothes on, because they are, as I, Jeremiah used to say, they are filthy rags. The point is, God has provided garments of salvation.

And then again, in verse 16, behold, I am the one who was laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone.

Peter quotes these words in his first letter and applies them to Christ, of course. But you see, taking the big picture, after many, many years of unsatisfactory and downright bad rule, David had come to the throne again.

That's what the king says. Hezekiah walks in all the ways of David, his father. And there was no one like him before or after. So you see, even at that time, the fact that the good king Hezekiah has come to the throne is security.

[28 : 48] And the reason for that is, not because Hezekiah is the Messiah, although perhaps some people, although the assessment is so positive, perhaps some people even fleetingly hoped that might be.

He was a failure, of course. But in his failure, in his flaws, he was still faithful. And he pointed to Christ himself, the son of David, who would one day establish Zion, who would one day be a spirit of justice, and who sits in judgment and strength of those who turn back the battle at the gate. So you see, we've got the pride before a fall. We've got the danger of the fatal choice, the wrong covenant. And finally, in verses 23 to 29, we have the way of true wisdom.

Isaiah never leaves people simply saying, well, what do we do about it? Isaiah says, look, it's still not too late to follow the way of true wisdom.

The style here is very different. This could fit comfortably into the book of Proverbs. Remember, Isaiah is a wisdom teacher as well as a prophet. He adopts the style of wisdom.

[30 : 07] And basically, Isaiah is saying, the way of wisdom is to follow the way the creator governs his universe. What's the only else about farmers and sowing seed and so on, and dill and cumin and all the rest of it.

The point is, Isaiah is saying, God has built certain principles into the universe and it's the way of wisdom to follow them. And that's the very heart of the book of Proverbs, the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom.

There are two things here. The Lord reveals himself in the created order. That's the point of these verses. The rhythms of sowing, plowing, and reaping.

Remember, Israel is essentially an agricultural nation whose life and whose yearly routines depended on these. And, you see, you can imagine the scoffers saying, oh, this simplistic stuff again.

Why would we hear about farmers and ploughmen and so on? The point is, Isaiah is saying, these people you despise are actually following the wisdom of the Creator.

[31 : 17] Because, verse 26, he is rightly instructed because God teaches him, sow at the right time so that you can reap at the right time. Don't spend all the time sowing.

Don't spend all the time reaping. Don't use the wrong kind of tools. Don't use the wrong sort of methods. You see, this makes sense.

It may be simple, but it makes sense. But behind this, there is something else. because we've read about the covenant with death and hell, which, of course, sets aside and rejects the covenant with Moses.

But we're going back to a yet earlier covenant, God's covenant with creation after the flood. The covenant that God made with Noah, as long as the earth remains, summer and winter, sowing and reaping, day and night, will never cease.

God is faithful. God is committed to his creation because one day he's going to make it new. God hasn't written off his creation. God will judge and God will save.

[32 : 27] So that's the first thing. The Lord reveals himself in the created order. What if Isaiah say, don't listen to my words, go out into the fields and look. Ask yourself sensible questions.

And the final point, which seems to me to be the ultimate point, Isaiah is making, verse 29, the Lord is wiser than us.

Now that may seem an obvious thing to say, but I'm not sure we actually live our lives that way. We do so often tend to think that we know better than the Lord.

This is harking back to the wonderful counselor of chapter 9. Remember the great verse about the one who is to come, one of whose titles is wonderful counselor, and faith in him is true wisdom.

The New Testament, Paul and James speak about devilish wisdom, wisdom which is from beneath, wisdom which belongs to the earth, and wisdom which looks all right, but eventually leads to

disaster.

[33 : 32] But this wisdom, from the Lord who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom, this is the way to live our lives.

As I read the chapter this week, as I prepared for this evening, I realized just how powerful it was speaking into our situation.

The words of the hymn that we're going to sing in a moment kept on echoing my ears. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave, the God I love.

That is so much my experience. day after day, and I would be very surprised it wasn't your experience as well. When we do that, we need to remember that the Lord of hosts is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.

James says, whoever lacks wisdom, let them ask of the Lord who gives generously and does not hold back. Let's be people who ask of the Lord for wisdom and so experience his generous giving.

[34 : 39] Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, those words shine so powerfully into the dark places of our hearts.

We realize how we try so hard to work out things by our own wisdom and do not rely on you and do not seek your help.

and so give to us the grace, give to us the grace and the humility that will come to you in believing faith so that we may indeed show the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Amen. Amen. Amen.