

Seeing the World As God Sees It

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[0 : 00] Now, coming to our Bible reading once again in the prophecy of Isaiah, and on page 589 you'll find chapter 29.

We're going to read this chapter, chapter 29 of Isaiah. A quick word about this odd name Ariel that appears in these verses.

It's a name for Jerusalem, nothing whatever to do with washing powder, and sadly nothing whatever to do with the sprite in Shakespeare's *Tempest* either.

Anyway, I'll talk a little bit more about it when we come to it. Isaiah 29, page 589. Ah, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David encamped.

And year to year, let the feast run their round. Yet I will distress Ariel, and there shall be moaning and lamentation, and she shall be to me like an Ariel.

[1 : 03] And I will encamp against you all around, and will besiege you with towers, and I will rage siege works against you. And you will be brought low. From the earth you shall speak, and from the dust your speech will be bowed down.

Your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost, and from the dust your speech shall whisper. But the multitude of your foreign foes shall be like small dust, and the multitude of the ruthless like passing chaff.

And in an instant, suddenly, you will be visited by the Lord of hosts with thunder, and with earthquake, and a great noise. With whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire. And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel. All that fight against her, and her stronghold, and distress her, shall be like a dream.

A vision of the night. As when a hungry man dreams he is eating, and awakes with his hunger not satisfied. Or as when a thirsty man dreams he is drinking, and wakes faint with his thirst not quenched.

[2 : 13] So shall the multitude of all the nations be that fight against Mount Zion. And the Lord has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep.

And has closed your eyes, the prophets, and has covered your heads, the seers. And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed.

When many give it to one who can read, saying, read this, he says, I cannot, for it is sealed. And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, read this, he says, I cannot read.

The Lord said, because these people draw near with their mouth, and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.

Therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder. And the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning men shall be hidden.

[3 : 24] You who hide deep from the Lord your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, who sees us, who knows us? You turn things upside down.

Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, and the thing made should say of its maker, he did not make me? Or the thing formed, say of him who formed it, he has no understanding.

It is not yet a very little while until Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest. In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.

The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel. For the ruthless shall come to nothing, and the scoffers cease.

And all who watch to do evil shall be cut off, who by a word make a man out to be an offender, and lay a snare for him who reproves in the gate.

[4 : 31] An empty plea, turn aside him who is in the right. Therefore, thus says the Lord, who redeemed Abraham concerning the house of Jacob, Jacob shall no more be ashamed, no more shall his face grow pale.

For when he sees his children, the work of my hands in his midst, they will sanctify my name. They will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.

And those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding, and those who murmur will accept instruction. Amen. This is the word of the Lord.

Now, Isaiah here uses his favorite term for the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and here also the Holy One of Jacob. Now, let's have a moment of prayer, and then we'll look together at that chapter we've just read.

Lord, we pray again the words that we sang some moments ago. So, voice of God, prophetic spirit, speak to every heart today to encourage or prohibit urging action or delay.

[5 : 47] Clear the vagueness which impedes us. Come, enlighten mind and soul. And through Jesus Christ who leads us, teach the truth that makes us whole.

And that, Father, is our prayer, and we pray you will grant it in Jesus' name. Amen. I don't very often quote Robert Burns.

Indeed, I don't think I've ever quoted him here. But one of the things he said, a phrase familiar to most of us, would some power the gift of Gaius, to see ourselves as others see us.

To see ourselves as others see us. Now, there is truth in that, of course, and it's valuable. But the trouble about that is that other people's views of us can be just as wrong as our own views of ourselves.

And the other way around. Aren't we very inclined to people we approve of, they can do no wrong. And if they do anything wrong, we always find excuses for them.

[6 : 55] People we don't like can never do anything right. If they do something right, we find reasons for explaining it away. Isn't that so characteristic of human nature? That our views of ourselves, our views of others, can be very jaded and very biased.

First, what we need to be interested in is not to see ourselves as others see us, but to see ourselves as the Lord sees us. And that's what this chapter ultimately is about, given the title, Seeing History as God Sees It.

It includes our history, it includes our lives, as well as that of others. And it's similar to the chapter we looked at last week.

Last week, we looked at chapter 28, Opening Eyes to Reality. And this chapter continues that theme, but with a different emphasis.

Last week, it was much more an emphasis of the kind of things we needed to do, needed to change in our thought life and so on. Here it's much more how God, in his wisdom, sees history.

[8 : 04] What does God see as history unfolds? And how can we learn from that? It's no accident that the words here in verse, if I can find them, help if I'm looking at the right chapter, of course.

The wisdom of the wise. I still haven't found the verse, but you can do a little work and find it for yourselves.

I've never been good at numbers. These are quoted by Jesus in Matthew chapter 15, and by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1 and into 2 Corinthians, where he contrasts the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God.

The wisdom of this world, he describes as devilish, coming from the author of lies himself. The wisdom of God, coming from above, is a wisdom that helps us to live the way we need to do.

So, worldly wisdom is fascinated by power, by personality, by success. That is how the world judges people, and that's how we tend to judge people as well.

[9 : 20] God's wisdom is revealed in the cross. The cross, the foolishness of God, says Paul, is wiser than worldly wisdom.

So, that's what this chapter is about, seeing history as God sees it. Now, a word on this strange name, Ariel, why is Jerusalem called this?

Now, the word can mean lion of God, and some people think that's what it does mean, because of the reference to David, Ariel, Ariel, the city, where David encamped.

But it has another possible meaning. It can mean something like altar hearth, where the flame is kept burning. Indeed, the prophet Ezekiel, speaking about the restored temple, uses this word, about the flame kept burning for the sacrifices.

Now, I want to suggest that makes more sense in the context. It reminds us of chapter 6, Isaiah's own call, where he confesses that he's a man of unclean lips, and one of the seraphim get a call from the altar hearth, bring it and touch his lips, and he is cleansed.

[10:33] And then again, in chapter 1, Isaiah had talked about the meaningless ritual of going through the rituals of religion without any change of heart.

And that fits in very well here with verse 1 again, let the feast run their rounds. The danger of pleasing ourselves rather than pleasing God.

Jerusalem here, in other words, is a center of religion, a place where sacrifices happened, and it was right that they should happen, but not a place of true change of heart.

Seeing history as God sees it. So let's see how this develops. First of all, in verses 1 to 8, God is teaching his people humility.

God is saying, one day you are going to be besieged. One day you are going to be in deadly danger. And almost certainly that refers to the Assyrian invasion, if you read about in chapters 36 to 37.

[11:35] And the great Assyrian power sweeps down, and the city is in deadly danger. But not everybody sees what's really happening. Notice verse 3, Assyria will encamp against you and besiege you with towers.

That's not what the verse says. The verse says, I will encamp against you. In other words, why are the Assyrians coming? They are coming because God has sent them to teach his people humility. Back in chapter 10, Isaiah said, Assyria, the rod of my anger. God used the Assyrians to bring his people to their senses. David took the city, the city where David encamped.

Read back in 2 Samuel 5, how he took the city from the Jebushite, its original inhabitants. But this time, God himself is bringing the Assyrians to humble them.

For they let the feasts run their round, endless round of activities. The problem is, there was no heart in them.

[12:41] They were legalistic, and they were formal. Now, why is legalism and formalism so attractive? Why is it always such a temptation to God's people?

Well, first of all, it's self-justifying. It depends on our good works, and it has no need for humility and repentance.

That is the point. That is why religion is always popular, and such a temptation. Endless ritual here. Let the feasts run their round.

The kind of thing Isaiah said already, and we'll see again. And the Lord says, you shall be brought low, verse 4. The Lord who alone has the power of life and death, will humble his people.

You know, that's not very attractive to hear, is it? It is, and in itself, that is why we are so attracted to religion. We can do our bit.

[13:45] We can contribute. We can make ourselves successful. Now, I'm not saying for a minute that the things that are done are wrong in themselves, but Isaiah is continually reminding us that even right things, if they're not done in a spirit of humility and repentance and dependence on the Lord, soon become idols.

So, God say, is humbling his people. And, but the second part of this section, verses 5 to 8, God rescues his people by his power.

Now, the following chapters, which we'll return to later in the year, talk about the dangers of alliances with Egypt. It's natural enough, when this great superpower comes down from the Tigris and Euphrates, who's going to help us?

We'll get Egypt to help us, this other big superpower. Natural enough, I suppose, if you're attacked by China, get the United States to help you, and so on. It's kind of very, the way people naturally think.

But don't you see the point here? This, the great Assyrian juggernaut is not destroyed by the Egyptian army, much less by the army of God's people.

[15:06] It's destroyed by the Lord himself. Byron says in his poem, the destruction of Sennacherib, the might of the Gentile, unsmoked by the sword, has melted like snow in the glance of the Lord.

Read chapters 37 and 38, and that tremendously exciting story. A couple of summers ago, I visited the Assyrian rooms in the British Museum.

Absolutely fascinating. And remember the thing that fascinated me most was there was a relief from one of the walls of Sennacherib's palace, which showed the Assyrian army on the night before they were going to take Jerusalem.

And the inscription read, the Assyrian commanders seek the help of their gods. And their gods proved totally, totally futile.

Their gods simply could not protect them. Hezekiah's god protected him. You see, that is the point. Worldly power simply melts away. Just as he rescued them from Egypt, he is going to rescue them from Assyria.

[16:19] And verse 7, Shall we like a dream, a vision of the night? So Psalm 126 said, When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed.

See, it's pointed beyond that invasion and beyond the exile to the end of the age itself. Not saved by achievements, not saved by military strength, but saved by God's grace.

The multitude, verse 7, of all the nations that fight against Ariel, all that fight against her and her stronghold and the stressor. It's like a dream, a vision of the night.

Which is what will happen, is it not, at the end of the age when all God's enemies are destroyed. The last enemy, death. And everything that happened before will simply seem like a bad dream because the Lord has rescued and visited his people.

So God is humbling his people. You see how both parts of the section do that. First of all, he's humbling them by saying, I'm tired of your meaningless rituals.

[17:25] I'm tired of the way you behave yourselves without real change of heart. Now he's also saying, he's also humbling by saying, you are not going to save yourselves. You aren't going to be saved by me.

Isn't that the big difference between views of salvation? Do we believe that we contribute to our salvation? Or do we believe that only the Lord can save us?

Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. So that's the first thing then. Seeing history as God sees it, seeing the power of God rescuing his people, pointing forward to the time when all his enemies will be vanquished.

And then the second part, verses 9 to 16, God's showing his people what they are really like. God's people are blind. God has revealed himself, but they do not see.

Astonish yourself, blind yourselves and be blind. They have the revelation. God has shown himself to them, but they don't see.

[18:33] First of all, there is unwillingness to listen. Verses 11 to 13. The vision of all this has become to you like words of a book that is sealed.

Now, the book here is God's book, and people can't be bothered to open it and read it. When you think of it, we've found more responsibility than they did. They had far less of the word of God than we do.

We have the word of God in its completeness. And yet, so many people can't be bothered to read it. There never has been a time when there have been more attractively produced translations of the Bible, more aids to understand it.

And that's even before you get to all the electronic means of help as well. But, so often, our hearts are not in it. Look, it says, when men give it to one who can read, saying, read this, I cannot, for it's sealed.

Too difficult. We're not going to read this, because it's too difficult. Now, admittedly, some chapters are more difficult than others. This chapter we've read tonight is not an especially easy chapter, is it?

[19:50] But, the answer to that is not to say, oh, it's a sealed book, and I can't understand it. The answer to that, surely, is to pray that the Lord will give guidance and help.

So easy to pay lip service. The Lord says, because these people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me. How easy it is to pay lip service.

It's awful easy to talk the talk, isn't it? To talk the evangelical jargon, and so on, and make people think that we are, that we are in tune with God, and driven by evangelical practices, rather than by the Bible.

Now, I know very well, it's easy to have the Bible in our heads, without Christ in our heart. That's very true. But on the other hand, if we neglect the Bible, we are not really going to have Christ in our hearts, because the Christ in our hearts will become increasingly a Christ of our own imagination.

We need to read the Bible, need to ask the Spirit's help. If we are going to know Christ, if we are going to love him and understand him, we need to love the word that he has given us.

[21 : 12] This is not what's sometimes called bibliolatry, the worship of a book. It's because this book leads us to the living word himself.

And we will never, as individuals, or as fellowships, make any progress, whatever, if we neglect, or even begin to regard the Bible as simply one of the things that are helpful.

I'm always worried when people talk about the Bible as a useful resource, which means, of course, that we've made a decision it's a useful resource, but there are other resources.

We might well decide someday these other resources are more useful. See what I'm getting at. We need to love the word, but otherwise, we'll draw near with our mouth and honor with our lips.

And then there is hidden rebellion in the hearts there. Verse 15, All you who hide deep from the Lord your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, Who sees us?

[22 : 13] Who knows us? Trying to limit God and forgetting he is the creator. The doctrine of creation is not an abstract idea about how the world began.

The doctrine of creation means that God is the creator and we are his creatures. It's a very, very practical doctrine. Because if he created everything, then that means there is nothing outside his power.

There is nothing he cannot do. As we read from Daniel earlier, he does as he wills in the hosts of heaven and in the inhabitants of the earth.

And no one can say to him, What are you doing? He is the creator. You see, other gods, pagan gods, were simply aspects of nature. The wind, the rain, the sea, or else dramatizations of good qualities such as love and health and so on, and evil things such as death and suffering.

And Isaiah is saying the master knows best. And the image of the potter here, which both Jeremiah and Paul use. Now, that could be regarded as basically saying we are just lumps of clay and God can do anything about us that he wants.

[23 : 38] The trouble is, that is not what the biblical image of the potter is about. The word potter here, the word translated form, which you get in Genesis 2, suggests loving, tender care, determined that this clay pot is going to be the most beautiful and most useful it can be.

That's the whole point about the creation story. Everything is good when God makes it. Good means fulfilling the purpose for which God made us.

This is the one who works with loving care. This is the one who will not allow us to become a useless and debased pot. This is the one who is going to make us fulfill what he created us to be.

So you see, it's not the case of, it's not a case of never raising questions. After all, read the book of Job. Job is continually raising questions about creation and so on.

But it is an assertion that ultimately, the Creator, we are in the Creator's hands and because we're in the Creator's hands and not in somebody else's hands, then we are safe.

[24 : 51] That's why David, at the end of 2 Samuel, says, let me fall into the hands of the Lord and not into the hands of men, for with the Lord is great mercy.

God is showing his people what they're really like. They're rebellious, they don't listen to the word he's given them and because of that, they are blind. Because of that, they are literally useless.

They're not the useful pots that the great potter is making. They're lying uselessly on the shelf. So you see, God is showing his people what they're really like.

God is teaching his people humility and in the third section, verses 17 to 24, for God is preparing for a new world.

God is preparing for a world that will fulfill everything we could ever have dreamed of and far more. You see, the problem is that relying on our own wisdom, we become blind and unimaginative.

[25 : 57] We worship the wrong things. We worship power and status and success. Gnosis, verse 17, is it not yet a very little while?

Little while, of course, in the language of prophecy doesn't mean it's going to happen tomorrow. Little while means that it's certain to happen. And from God's perspective, Psalm 90, a thousand years are as a day.

In the life of God, a thousand years are as a day. And that's wonderfully illustrated in Genesis 5 where Methuselah, the longest-lived man, doesn't even make a day in the life of God.

You see, if we don't have God's perspective on history, we'll come narrow in our vision. We'll become confined to what we know and we'll trust in our own wisdom.

And if we trust in our own wisdom, the danger is we're going to say nothing can change. And that's a very common temptation, is it? Nothing can change. Things go on and they'll continue to go on. [27 : 07] Now notice, first of all, verses 17 to 21, God says there will be transformation. Lebanon, symbol of the uplands and the fruitful field of the lowlands.

In chapter 40, the prophet is going to say, every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain brought low. This is another version of that. And in the Song of Mary, the Magnificat in Luke 1, she says exactly the same thing.

He's brought down the mighty from their seats and exalted the humble. And because of that, ears will be opened. The deaf will hear the words of a book.

Those who have been deaf will actually look at scriptures like this and say, yes, that is what's happening. This is our God. We trusted in him and he has rescued us.

Out of their gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind shall see. Now that, these kind of things happened in a measure when Jesus was here on earth.

[28 : 12] Remember John the Baptist in prison sends his disciples to Jesus and says, are you the one we expected or should we be looking for someone else? And Jesus says, go back and tell John the deaf hear, the blind see, the lame walk.

You see, he's saying, these things are already happening. And because of that, John can have confidence that I am the one who was sent.

Now, that, that was only a partial revelation of the kingdom. three people were raised from the dead but the cemeteries didn't empty.

People were healed but not everybody was healed. And those people Jesus raised from the dead will all die again. The point is, they are showing that he is the, he is the one from God who is going to do all these things.

Verse 19, the meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord. Surely that's echoed in the Sermon on the Mount, blessed are the meek. And so on. And the poor among mankind shall exalt in the Holy One of Israel.

[29 : 22] You know, it's not narrowly nationalistic. He's not saying only the Jewish people, it's saying human beings will exalt. And there's a dark side of course to this.

Obviously the ruthless, the scoffer, the liar, they will be judged. Because obviously spiritual transformation can only happen when evil is judged.

There will be a new hunger to learn. A sealed book will be opened, read, obeyed, and loved. Now these kind of things happen partially in this world.

When someone comes to the Lord and their eyes are opened, they begin for the first time to read and love the Bible. Sometimes it happens on a larger scale, times we call revival, when whole communities come alive as the word is opened and as the word is believed.

When that happens, society is transformed. Not totally, but it does happen. There is a story told about an 18th century merchant who visited a place in Cornwall notorious for its drunkenness, for its debauchery, for everything that was debasing.

[30 : 40] He returned again 20 years later with rather fearing, thinking, I wish I didn't have to go to this place again. And he found the place totally different.

Oh, of course, there was still sinfulness, there was still drunkenness, there was still debauchery, and so on. But the whole community had been transformed. He asked an old man, what's happened in the 20 years?

The old man says, there came a man among us, he was called John Wesley, and he taught us the gospel. He opened our eyes and showed us a different way to live.

Now, that didn't mean the kingdom had come. But that is what happens when the gospel is proclaimed and the gospel is believed. Eyes are opened, ears hear, and the blind leap.

And then the promises of God are fulfilled. Verse 22, Therefore thus says the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, right at the beginning of the story. Now, Abraham's eyes were opened.

[31 : 44] And surely that's the point here. Abraham lived in the city of Ar, magnificent, splendid city. Once again, if you go to the British Museum, you can see many of the remains of that powerful and glorious city.

But his eyes were opened. He left that city to travel to another city whose architect and builder is God. The city, Abraham's eyes opened to the city to come, the city of the Holy One of Jacob.

Now, I think the Holy One of Jacob is used deliberately here. Isaiah, like all the Old Testament writers, but particularly Isaiah, is fond of playing this Israel-Jacob parallel.

Jacob is the liar, the cheat, and Israel is what God made him by grace. I read the story of Jacob. You know very well that all through his life, he still retained an awful lot of Jacob in him just as we do throughout our lives.

Nevertheless, God working in him changed him. The Holy One of Jacob will stand in awe for God of Israel. They will sanctify.

[32 : 56] Now, sanctify, of course, does not mean we make him holy. We can't possibly do that. He is holy. What it does mean, we realize that he is holy and declare that to the world so that others might come to know him.

And those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding. And those who murmur will accept instruction. You see, throughout the Old Testament run two great affirmations.

The first is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one. And we'll be coming to that shortly in the studies in Deuteronomy. In other words, there are no other gods.

He is the one who must be worshipped and obeyed, and his word honoured. And the other great affirmation of faith is, The Lord reigns. The Lord is king.

Isaiah is saying, One day the world will know that the Lord is king. One day the world will know that the Lord is one. And he's saying to his people, he's saying to his people then in 8th century Jerusalem, these people now in the 21st century, because that is the way God sees history, because that's the way history will work out.

[34 : 12] Then let's live our lives believing and proclaiming that there is one Lord, one Jesus Christ, one way of salvation, and one king whom one day all the world will honour and obey.

Amen. let's pray. Father, as we look around us, we look into our own hearts, we see so many evidences of our lack of humility, so many evidences of our rebellion, so many times when we do not love your word and do not obey you.

we pray, Lord, you will open our eyes, you will unstop our ears, and you will indeed help us to proclaim the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Amen.