

# This is our God

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[ 0 : 00 ] If you're welcome, it's a great joy to be here and to share this day with you, and especially to share this great chapter of Isaiah, which we're going to look at this morning, and also this evening, the second part of the chapter, so that it unites the two services today with God's Word from this mountain peak of the Old Testament.

So please turn with me back to our reading, it's page 599 in the Church Bibles. Now I wonder if you would describe yourself as an optimist, someone who sees the glass half full, as they say, or perhaps a bit more of a pessimist, someone who tends to see the glass half empty.

And whether you look at our world or our nation, maybe at the church in the nation or at your own life, your own family maybe, do you see yourself as an optimist or a pessimist?

It's been said that the optimist thinks that we are living in the best of all worlds, and the pessimist rather fears that that might be so. But as Christian people, we should surely be optimistic realists, and I want us to ask God to help us to see in Isaiah 40 how to do that.

Because we live at a challenging moment in our cultural history. It's a time of ambivalence about our past, with its Christian heritage of truth and moral values, and an uncertain future of relativism, fluidity of values, if indeed there can be any values at all.

[ 1 : 43 ] And the church, of course, is not immune to these pressures. Indeed, across the broad spectrum of Christianity in 21st century Britain, you can see the whole cultural confusion reflected.

It's not surprising then to find a general bewilderment in our culture about what, if anything, the Christian faith has to say to our world.

And in some ways, the royal wedding provided a microcosm of this. Here is Simon Carr's sketch in yesterday's independent newspaper. He says, Now isn't that an interesting comment?

It's tongue-in-cheek, of course. But did you catch that comment about God being brought into the wedding, when no one really expected that? About 20 years ago, an American thinker and theologian, David Wells, wrote a book called *God in the Wasteland*.

And in that book, he said these words, It is one of the defining marks of our time that God is now weightless. I don't mean by that that he is ethereal, but rather that he has become unimportant.

[ 3 : 42 ] He rests upon the world so inconsequentially as not to be noticeable. Those who assure the pollsters of their belief in God's existence may nonetheless consider him less interesting than television, his commands less authoritative than their appetites for affluence and influence, his judgments no more inspiring than the evening news, and his truth less compelling than the advertiser's sweet fog of flattery and lies.

That is weightlessness. And that, 20 years on, has only increased in our society. We are faced all around us with friends and neighbours and colleagues and contacts who regard God as weightless. How amazing that the clergy should speak about God as if he really existed. No one expected that. And all across the spectrum of the church, that weightlessness manifests itself.

So our doctrine of God may be impeccable in its expression. We believe in his transcendence, in his sovereignty. We ascribe all power and authority to God. We believe that he is the creator, the king and the judge.

We are orthodox believers. But in our personal lives, in our families, in our church, sometimes God is strangely weightless.

[ 5 : 11 ] He's all but excluded from our reality. And a great gulf opens up between our theology and our practice. And that, I think, is why so much of what passes for contemporary Christianity is so trivial.

Why it's little more than a spare time interest to lots of people why it's just an elaborate fiction.

We're happy to sing our songs about God or to him.

We pray when we can find time and when our needs are sufficiently pressing. We read the Bible or favourite bits of it to acquire inspiration. We go to church if there's nothing else more important. And we enjoy meeting with one another and being stirred. And those of us who are involved in church life sit on our church committees and work away at putting our plans into action. We're sincere.

We're committed. And yet, so often, our horizons belong to the spiritual nursery. We're content with so little. Because we know the real God so little.

[ 6 : 13 ] And as a result, we can be weightless too. Now, Isaiah chapter 40 is a great antidote and a great way forward from and through this problem.

And we're going to look at it today because, well, there is no more magnificent mountain range in the whole Old Testament on the glory and grandeur of God than the second part of Isaiah's great book which begins here at chapter 40.

It's full of teaching about who God really is. It's full of images and expressions that begin to shape our minds and challenge our small horizons and begin to restore the throne and dominion of God in our minds and hearts.

And that is the purpose of the Christian preacher. 300 years ago, the New England Puritan, Cotton Mather, preaching on Isaiah 52, said, the great design and intention of the office of a Christian preacher is to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men and women.

That's why we're here this morning. From all the voices that impact us day after day, hour after hour, from all the pressures around us, we come together this morning not to retreat, but to say we see our lives in the context of the throne and dominion of God.

[ 7 : 35 ] That this God who has revealed himself to us in Holy Scripture is our God. And that is life-changing in itself when we begin to take that perspective.

But the other ingredient that makes it so applicable is that these majestic chapters are directed to an uncomfortably parallel historical situation to our own.

Because when Isaiah wrote these words, the people of God were at the end of an era. They were facing, in fact, the loving discipline of God, which was moving inexorably towards the time when God would give Jerusalem and the whole kingdom of Judah into the hands of the Babylonians, and all the flower of the nation would be taken off into exile.

And it's at that point that Isaiah is inspired by God's Spirit to bring God's word. The first 39 chapters of his book lead through many prophecies of God's wrath and judgment, not just against the nations, but against his failing and faithless people.

And the big Isaiah agenda is, how is God going to make this faithless people of Israel into a faithful community? What is he going to do to change the hearts of people?

[ 8 : 49 ] So that the true and living God, the throne and dominion of that God, rules in the hearts of men and women, whether it's in 8th century Jerusalem or 21st century Glasgow.

Now that northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom where Isaiah was operating was still at this point a free society.

But during his ministry, they moved nearer and nearer to the time when they would follow the northern kingdom into exile, not at the hands of the Assyrians, but at the hands of the Babylonians. And that's why I read those last three verses of chapter 39, because you see, this is the context into which he speaks. Knowing that they are going to lose so much, knowing that their city is going to be overrun, knowing that God is going to, in his discipline, remove them from the land, but of course to bring them back purified and having experienced not only his discipline, but his grace in restoring them to the land.

Isaiah brings this message to a community which we know from earlier in the book is very religious. The sacrifices are still being offered in Jerusalem. Orthodoxy is alive and well, but God has become weightless.

[ 10 : 10 ] And the temple, though it's crowded with worshippers, is crowded with people who just want to celebrate the experience and don't want any real relationship with God.

So we're in a very similar context. In many ways, the church is on the back foot. People look around and they write the funeral notices of Christianity. So much in our culture today.

What is God saying to us, as his people, in a situation like this? Well, he is saying that there may well be a chastening, that there may well be a discipline, a sifting that will happen, because so much of church life has turned its back upon his word and is not governed by his scriptures.

But he is always saying also, and this is confirmed to us, in a way that Isaiah's readers could never have understood, confirmed to us in the Lord Jesus, that he is a God who comes to rescue and to save and to renew and to transform.

So let's turn to this splendid 40th chapter and this morning we'll look at the first 11 verses. This evening we'll move on to verses 12 to 31 where questions are asked about what we look at this morning.

[ 11 : 26 ] I think it's better to do this in two sermons than to try to do it in one. This morning we have before us the teaching God wants us to grasp about who he is when his people are up against it.

And this evening we have those people asking all sorts of penetrating questions, which God then begins to answer. So if you can join us for that tonight, that would be great as well. The prophet now looks beyond his own day to the exile that he's just prophesied, the Babylonian exile, which is going to take place considerably later than when these words were spoken.

And he begins to show the people of God how they should react to that event. Now this has one central theological purpose.

He wants to assure them of God's unchanging commitment to the covenant promises he has made. So that whether they're in Jerusalem or later in Babylon, they will learn to trust him and to obey him. They will learn to know that this God will fulfill all the promises that he made to Abraham, their forefather, and that through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

[ 12 : 43 ] He wants them to know that he will preserve the line of King David and from the stump of Jesse there will come an eternal king on whose shoulders the government will be forever.

And so this prophecy is designed to encourage the reader whether it was originally the generation that Isaiah spoke to or ourselves so many centuries later and all down through the history of the church.

It has encouraged the reader in every generation to put obedience to God at the heart of our lives because of the future certainties which are eternal.

Babylon will not be the last word. God is not weightless. He has eternal purposes of grace to fulfill and nothing, not even his people's unfaithfulness will stop him.

And that is the optimistic realism of these first 11 verses to which I turn you now. Here is God's message of comfort.

[ 13 : 54 ] It begins with those familiar words verse 1 comfort, comfort my people says your God. Now I don't know about you but for many of us today the word comfort belongs to a world of fabric softeners or it belongs to the world of nice cups of cocoa by a warm fire in the winter.

It's a little self-indulgent the word comfort isn't it? Well no because if you look at the way it's made up comfort even in English it means with strength.

And the double exhortation in verse 1 comfort, comfort my people really means literally strengthen my people or breathe life into my people.

Help them to know what it is that they should trust in. There's an interesting use of this word comfort in the Bayer Tapestry which you remember is the sort of early cartoon that was embroidered to celebrate the Norman invasion of Britain.

And in one of the pictures in the Bayer Tapestry you see the soldiers the British soldiers running out of the battle all at sixes and sevens but the next picture shows those same soldiers lined up now in order just about to re-enter the battle.

[ 15 : 10 ] And as you know the Bayer Tapestry has captions all along the pictures and the little army of soldiers now the line of soldiers is marching into the battle. Why? Well because behind the last one in the line there stands the bishop wearing his mitre and carrying a spear in his hand which he is prodding into the rear of the soldier and the caption reads the bishop comforts his soldiers.

Now that is biblical comfort. It's not cups of cocoa it may be very nice to have those but that's not biblical comfort. Comfort is the strength of God through the word of God to the people of God breathing new life into them.

And the double verb comfort, comfort indicates the intensity and the urgency as the prophet is called to be the agent of strengthening through the word that he is speaking which is God's present tense word.

It is by believing God's word that God's people are strong. As soon as you reject the Bible you commit yourself to disintegration as the church of God.

It is founded on the word of God and as soon as we begin to compromise that word and to say well I like most of it but I don't like this little bit and I'm not going to go that way. As soon as we begin to do that the church begins to weaken and ultimately to disintegrate.

[16:32] And the next 27 chapters of Isaiah which fear not we are not going to look at this morning are the comforting content of God's self-revelation to his people. Now it's a word that has to be spoken tenderly verse 2 that is to say to the heart for this is not just an announcement this is a word of mercy and love and compassion spoken into the ear of his people to reach the heart of his people.

And God says yes sadly my discipline has to be exercised because of your faithlessness but listen I have something beyond that. The city of Jerusalem will lie in ruins and you will be away in exile but here is the good news a day is coming when verse 2 the warfare will be ended the sin will be pardoned because the punishment has been sufficient.

Now that of course is Old Testament language for saying God in his infinite compassion and mercy is putting these people through an experience of his refining judgment in order that he may bring them out of it stronger and more focused and more committed to him.

He's going to make that faithless city into a faithful city. You may wonder why it says at the end of verse 2 that the Lord that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

Does that sound as though he's a vindictive God who likes to over punish? No, it doesn't mean that at all. It's not an unfair double amount. It's the idea of an exact match.

[18:12] It's the idea you see that if you take a piece of paper like this and fold it in two like that you have a doublet a double one side matches the other they are an exact match and when it speaks about this doublet of God's judgment upon their sins what it is saying is the exact match has been made and so in this historical situation there is no more sin to be atoned for because God in his mercy at the end of the exile has forgiven his people's sins.

Now we read the Old Testament through our New Testament spectacles. We put them on and we read it as New Testament believers and we know that this refers to a great work that God did on that cross of Calvary outside Jerusalem when the warfare was ended when peace was made between man and God when iniquity was pardoned when the exact punishment the exact match of human sin was born by the Lord Jesus as he died on that cross.

So verse 2 is pointing forward ultimately to Jesus but through the historical context of the restoration of Israel to the land following the Babylonian exile.

So we want to keep those two perspectives in view. We want to see that it's got a historical meaning because unless we understand what it meant to them then we have no chance of understanding what it means to us now.

But we look beyond the them then into what is now the present to them the distant future and we see that the Messiah whom Isaiah was prophesying has come.

[19:47] He has taken our judgment. He has made peace between man and God. Our iniquity is pardoned. We have received forgiveness because of his atoning grace.

And therefore the three things that follow are true for us in an even deeper and richer and more wonderful way than these Old Testament antecedents would encourage us to think.

So let me just as we look at these verses take you to three things that they needed to know about the comforting renewing grace of God and that we can know as we go out to the big challenges that face us as the church in our generation.

There are three voices that follow. You see in verse three a voice cries in verse six a voice says and in verse nine there's a herald with a message. Let's just look at the three voices and try to bring the message together.

The first voice declares to us in verses three to five that God is going to come to rescue his people and by doing that God will reveal his glory.

[20:57] God will reveal his glory. When we are tempted to be pessimists when we think that things are so hard that there can never be any change in the spiritual life of our nation let us remember that God is the God who comes and he comes to rescue and in his rescue he reveals his glory.

Now the picture is of massive roadworks in the desert. Have a look at verse three b. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Here are the roadworks.

Every valley lifted up. Every mountain and hill made low. An even ground level, rough places, plain. In other words there's a flattening out of all the physical features.

Of course it's a poetic picture about there being no barrier now to stop God coming across the desert to his city to Jerusalem.

He is coming across it's his highway you see making the desert a highway for our God. He's bringing his people back from Babylon that's the good news. He's going to reveal his glory as he comes to rescue his people.

[ 22 : 06 ] So verse five the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh will see it together. If you think back to those films of the first Gulf War and the rough terrain and no major roads and the troops trying to make their way through this trackless desert rapid movement was impossible.

Well of course it always has been but you see this is saying it's not a problem to the sovereign Lord and in the poetic imagery of this little paragraph he can construct a motorway whatever earth works are required he can construct a way by which he will bring about his purposes for the God who comforts his people does so not at a distance but by coming to us.

He may send his messenger ahead to reveal his plans to announce that he's coming but in scripture God never sends his blessings he brings them he comes himself to the people and he's coming here and nothing will stand in his way when he determines to bring his people back from Babylon to the land that he's given them and as he comes in rescue and restoration what does he do verse 5 he reveals his glory now the Old Testament word for glory means the heaviness or the weightiness of God think about a very heavy weight it's talking about his essential being and character we might call it the Godness of God and this coming to rescue his people will be such a demonstration of his character that all the world will witness it so the paragraph that begins with a human voice ends with the mouth of the Lord the language is very reminiscent of the Exodus God coming down to deliver his people clearly the end of the exile then is going to herald a second Exodus a new work of God on an even greater scale God will come to rescue he will reveal his glory so when did the exile end we know that when Cyrus the Mede conquered the Babylonian Empire in 536 BC he issued an edict that permitted the Jews to return to their land but that was only a very partial physical fulfillment of this prophecy now the exile really ended spiritually and the new revelation of glory appeared when the voice of John the Baptist was heard in the Judean wilderness crying prepare the way of the Lord as he preached the gospel of repentance and it was when Jesus was baptized in Jordan that the voice from heaven affirmed this is my son whom I love with him I am well pleased that John the apostle could say we have seen his glory glory of the one and only who came from the father full of grace and truth so you see with our New Testament spectacles on we know that Christ is the key to all the scriptures and we are the recipients of Isaiah's comfort through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and we see the grace and glory of God revealed in the restoration after the exile yes but in a much deeper and more wonderful and eternal way revealed in Jesus who comes to be the revelation of the glory of God and God couldn't speak to us more completely and satisfyingly than he has done in the word who was made flesh well that's the first thing we need to hold on to then God comes to rescue and that means for us that if he came once to fulfill his promise in the incarnation he will come again to fulfill his promise in his return he is the coming Christ we are not looking to some sort of disintegration of the world under human failure and mistakes we are looking for the Lord Jesus to come in power and glory to establish his everlasting kingdom and the New

[ 26 : 21 ] Testament's uniform testimony is that God is going to bring about his eternal kingdom of truth and righteousness and justice and peace for the word who has been made flesh will return in power and glory to bring about his everlasting rule so look up be an optimistic realist doesn't lie in the hands of the politicians the future doesn't belong to the media the future belongs to Jesus Christ and we need to know that the throne and dominion of God is being restored in our lives because if the future belongs to Jesus and if he is the sovereign Lord now as of all history then oughtn't I to be living my life in obedience to him oughtn't I to be living now trusting him believing his word putting it into practice not having those no-go areas in my life where I won't let Jesus in not digging in and saying well I'll accept this much but not that you see that is what happened to

Israel that's why they had to go into exile and of course when the church does that or when I do that as an individual Christian that's what happens there's a disruption between me and God but the God who has revealed his glory in Jesus says to us through Jesus if you love me keep my commandments that's the first thing second thing in verses six to eight the second voice cries that

God will keep his word he will come to deliver he will manifest his glory he will keep his word and there's a link between the two sections in that little phrase all flesh you see it in verse five all flesh you'll see it together and again in verse six all flesh is grass now our world needs to hear that message that all flesh is grass and that we need to see that God alone is eternal look at the end of verse eight the word of our God will stand forever the grass withers the flower fades but there is something that lasts forever

God will keep his word wasn't it George Bernard Shaw who said that death is the ultimate statistic one in one dies and human glory you see is as nothing beside the glory of God the armies of Sennacherib the Assyrian have besieged Jerusalem but when God breathed on them in chapter 37 185,000 of them were removed now we need that message the word of our God will stand forever and that is why we need to give time to scripture it is the now word the forever word the fixed point of unchanging certainty in our uncertain transitory lives and you see the weightlessness of God in our Christian culture is directly related to the famine of the word of God in our pulpits for faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God and nothing else can take its place though many things will try to if Bible reading habits are dying out and Sunday teaching is reduced to ten minutes and that's all our input how wonder we're so ignorant of

God and church life is often so anemic but what security and comfort it is to know that God through his word and by his promises will work out his purpose that every promise of the Lord stands sure none of them has ever been proved to be false so what shall I cry don't put your trust in flesh which is grass put your trust in the word of God which will stand forever these are the assurances with which we face the challenges of our generation God will come to establish his kingdom to manifest his glory he's done it once in Christ he's coming again to bring in that eternal kingdom so the word of our God will stand forever build on it and know lastly that God will shepherd his flock see verses 9 to 11 are abuzz with excitement get up onto a high mountain

O Zion herald of good news lift up your voice with strength O Jerusalem what's happening well they're looking out from the high places of Jerusalem across the trackless waste and they see God from verse 3 coming from Babylon bringing his people back to the land that he's given them that's what they see and as they see him coming with his people Isaiah's message is lift up your voice don't be afraid say to the cities of Judah behold your God he's coming back into the land he's bringing you back to the capital city he is going to shepherd his flock the Lord is coming home to Jerusalem bringing his people with him but the content of the message is not about the people it's about God behold your God this is your God and what are we to behold in our last two verses we're to behold him as the sovereign in verse 10 and we're to see him as the shepherd in verse 11 and isn't that an amazing and wonderful blend see verse 10 speaks about God as sovereign as king behold the

[ 31 : 44 ] Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for him behold his reward is with him his recompense before him he's in charge it's all about ultimate power he comes with his sleeves rolled up he means business he comes to rule to exercise his sovereign will through his mighty arm to complete his purposes in his world and he brings his liberated people as the fruit of his victory so it is the power of God that remakes the people of God but at the same time look at verse 11 that shepherd note he will tend his flock like a shepherd and then this beautiful tender compassionate picture he will gather the lambs in his arms he'll carry them in his bosom he'll gently lead the pregnant ewes those that are with young here's the picture of a shepherd who cares for the individual members of the flocks he knows when the lambs can't walk any longer he doesn't force the pregnant ewes into a root march he gently leads them as Psalm 23 says he leads them beside the still waters he provides the rich pastures and so you get this wonderful blend of the

God who has all sovereign power and authority and who uses it in his love and mercy to tend his flock with individual shepherd care see it's not that he is so great that he isn't bothered about the details of our lives it is that he is so great that he can be bothered about the details of our lives and he does care and he does know and he knows when we need to be carried and he knows when we need to be gently led it's a picture of detailed care exactly tuned to individual needs but carried out with limitless power God will shepherd his flock he is not going to allow his church to sink the one who powers his way through the trackless desert gently leads the pregnant ewes and in the new testament of course that image is extended even more as we see that the

God who comes to rescue is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep you matter that much to him he's that concerned about us and this is our comfort this is our new life this is our

strength and in a way that should be sufficient for us but we find it very hard to accept don't we especially when we're in difficulties especially when we're under pressure and what I love about the Bible is that it's so realistic and so down to earth because at verse 12 which we'll look at this evening it starts to dialogue with the doubters and it helps us to apply these truths even more deeply to our lives but that's for this evening for this morning let's just remind ourselves of what we've seen of this great and glorious God this is what the voices are telling us this is what the cry is as God moves beyond the exile in redemption in renewal in restoration that's what he's done in Jesus the exile ended by

Jesus coming and bringing us most of us here are Gentile people this morning I guess bringing us who are on the outside into his eternal kingdom because he is the living God because his glory has been manifested in Jesus Christ our Lord because he will keep his word and all his promises are sure so take your stand upon them and because we know more and more in our lives as we go on with him that he cares for the flock that he knows your need that he lifts you up and carries you when you need it and that he guides and provides and directs in every part of our lives comfort my people but you see the mark of the comfort is that we trust him and obey him because if he really is this God then he's in control and I'm not if he really is this God then his word governs not my ideas if he really is this

God then I want to submit to him as the king and authority not whatever the multimedia may tell us or whatever the largest majority of people in our culture think now there is a huge mountain to climb but we will never climb it unless we have this really clear in our hearts and minds that this God is our God that he is unchanging and that he who reveals his glory and keeps his promises will shepherd his flock all the way through this life into that eternal kingdom which is the ultimate reality for which we're looking so let's be optimistic realists it's not easy there's going to be lots of pressures lots of challenges but this is our God let's pray together help us heavenly father we pray so to receive your word in the strength and grace of your spirit that we may live in the good of it that we may honor you by seeking to trust and obey you in every part of our lives and that as your church here in this city you may use and bless and strengthen us and all our fellow believers so that we may show forth the glory of the one who is full of grace and truth believe the promises of the word and demonstrate to all those around us the joy and reality of living under your shepherd care we ask it for your greater glory and for their blessing in Jesus name amen