

Dealing with Doubt

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Date: 01 May 2011

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[0 : 00] Well, with that great prayer in our minds and on our lips, let's turn back to Isaiah chapter 40, which you'll find on page 600, and it will be a real help to me if you have the Bible open, and I think to you too, as we look at these great words from the Lord tonight.

Thank you so much for your welcome. It's been such a joy to share today with you, and I look forward to meeting the Cornhillers during this coming week. And thank you for your support of the Cornhill course here as a congregation over these first five years that it's been active now in Glasgow.

It's been a great joy and privilege to share in that work too. In his book on interpreting the Bible, the theologian Louis Burkhoff compares understanding Old Testament prophecy, like this passage in front of us, to taking a walk in the hills.

And he says, imagine that you're going out for a day's hike, perhaps on a lovely day like today, out in the hill country. And as you look ahead of you at the start of the day, at the terrain that you're going to walk over, you make a sort of mental calculation as to how long it may take you to get to that first peak, and then perhaps the second beyond it, and if you're really ambitious, maybe a third hilltop beyond that.

But as you go on the hike, and as you actually enter into the experience, you find that the distance between those hilltops is considerably greater than you thought.

[1 : 29] There's a long way down and a long way up. And although they're foreshortened in terms of your vision, the trip, the hike, takes you a lot longer than you originally calculated.

And Birkhoff says Old Testament prophecy is like that. He says, you ought to think about any Old Testament prophet, any passage in the major or minor prophets of the Old Testament, as having three hilltop peaks, each of which is a focus of fulfilment.

But often the distance between them is a great deal greater than you would think. So he would say to us, when we're reading Isaiah, you need to think about the 8th century congregation in Jerusalem that Isaiah was addressing in his long ministry, probably of 40 or 50 years in that city. But that's only the first hilltop. Beyond that, centuries later, 700 years later, a greater degree of fulfilment of his prophecies occurred when Jesus Christ came into this world.

And so if we ask ourselves at the first hilltop, what did this mean to these people then in Isaiah's day? By the time we reach the second hilltop, we're saying, and what is the difference that it makes because Jesus has come to fulfil this prophetic word?

[2 : 54] And then says Burkhoff, we travel on, 2,000 years in history. And we've not yet reached the third peak because the third peak is the eternal kingdom, when Christ comes again, as we were reminded in our first hymn.

And so as we are progressing towards that great day, we have to ask the third question, which is, how should it stimulate us now? What will the eternal fulfilment be?

Now if you keep Burkhoff's three hilltops in mind, what did it mean to them then? What difference does it make that Jesus has come? And what is the yet future fulfilment that we shall enter into? Isaiah 40 comes alive in fresh ways. Because in this chapter, as we saw this morning, God's people are facing a time of spiritual discipline, reproof and correction.

Because as a nation, as a covenant community, they've failed to trust God and they've constantly disobeyed him. And God says to them there in Judah and in Jerusalem that the time is coming when they will be exiled to Babylon.

[4 : 04] It'll be a time of suffering and deprivation when they will begin to wonder whether perhaps the gods of Babylon, the great mighty power of their generation, have won the battle against the Lord, whether somehow perhaps Yahweh their God has been overcome by the forces of the pagan

gods.

And God is teaching them before it happens that he will use this to prune and to purify his people, to bring them back spiritually renewed and comforted.

And that he is going to bring through the suffering a result of such immense blessing and joy and fulfilment to his people that they will hardly be able to imagine that it's happened.

Now as we saw this morning, that happened to a small extent when King Cyrus the Mede conquered the Babylonian Empire and issued a decree that all the subject peoples that the Babylonians had taken into captivity could return to their lands, including the Jews, back to Jerusalem.

But that's only peak one. When we ask ourselves at peak two the question, what is the difference now that Jesus has come? We see that when the Lord Jesus came into the world, it was to deal finally with the problem of human sin and rebellion by taking our just punishment upon himself so that we do not have to be exiled from God.

[5 : 34] And as he demonstrated and revealed to us the glory and the grace of God in his own person, as he fulfilled all the promises that the Old Testament prophets pointed to, he brought redemption to men and women like us who come under his care as the rescuer and the ruler, here and now through the gospel.

And if he has done that at the second peak through his death and resurrection, then at the third peak we know that the eternal kingdom, when he comes in power and glory as King of Kings and Lord of Lords to wind up human history and to bring in his everlasting kingdom, when he will demonstrate himself to be the sovereign and the shepherd of his people, that will be the moment at which we know what a great salvation we really have.

Now I said this morning that in those first eleven verses, those are the themes that are explored. We have actually three of them there. One is that God is coming to reveal his glory in the great work of rescue.

The second is that God will fulfill and keep all his promises. And the third was that God will shepherd his flock to bring them home to his eternal kingdom of love and joy and peace.

And you might think that ought to be enough for us. But the Bible is so realistic and so down to earth that it knows that we will find that hard to believe when the Babylonians seem to be winning on every side.

[7 : 08] And when we face pressures and difficulties and suffering and traumas. And when it seems as though God's power has nothing to say in a world that has gone against him and seems to be running amok.

And so the second part of the chapter that we read this evening is a dialogue with the doubters. And it helps us to apply these truths to our lives because it takes up the sorts of questions that we all ask.

Two of them in particular. The first is, well that's all very well what you've said about God but does he really have the power to rule eternally?

It looks as though the world is out of control. It looks as though he has very little power in the world today as we saw this morning. He seems to be weightless. Does he really have the power to do these things?

Or is it just Christians who have wishful thinking about pie in the sky by and by? And the second question is this. If he has the power, does he really have the will to do it?

[8 : 14] Can you depend upon him? Now the reaction of God's people to this declaration of his comfort is really summed up in verse 27. Look at it with me if you will.

Verse 27 towards the end of the chapter. Where God turns to the covenant community, the faithful people of God, though many of them had forgotten what that meant in practice.

And he says to Jacob and Israel, why do you say, my way is hidden from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God?

See that's the reaction that Isaiah's preaching produced. People went home from the sermon in the temple complaining that yes, it's all very well in theory, but in practice God doesn't know about our situation.

And in any case, he ceased to care for us. They began to question his power and his will. We saw this morning in verse 10 that that's already answered because in verse 10, the Lord God comes with might as the ruler whose arm is in control of history, who's working out his purposes.

[9 : 21] And he comes in verse 11 as the shepherd who cares for his sheep. So he has the power of the sovereign and the will of the shepherd to meet his people at the point of their need.

But they went away from these sermons, many of them saying, I can't really believe that. And so by way of response, Isaiah provides a series of wonderful pictures that should stretch and expand our concept of God beyond the weightless, pocket-sized God, the user-friendly deity of contemporary thinking, to the real God, the true God, the God of might and power, the creator and judge of all. And as he says in the start of the chapter, verse 9, Behold your God. So now he draws back the curtain and he reveals the character of God in answer to these two questions.

God has made all these promises, but does he have the power to keep them? And does he have the will to perform them? Well, of course, you'll know that his answer is yes, yes, yes.

But how does he get that answer and how does it impact us? Notice with me three things that he makes in answer, three points that he makes in answer to the first question.

[10 : 39] Does God really have the power to bring in his eternal kingdom, to fulfill all his promises? And Isaiah answers in verses 12 to 17, yes, power beyond all measure.

Power beyond all measure. I think it's true to say that we all need help in understanding the godness of God. Now, of course, there's a sense in which we'll never fully understand that.

You see, if you could fully comprehend God with your mind, then whatever you had at the end of the process would not be God by definition, because whatever you had would be smaller than the compass of your mind.

And so it couldn't be God. We can never encompass God by our human intellect. But, in verse 12, the prophet takes some very ordinary human measures and he blows our minds by relating them to God.

Have a look at verse 12 with me. He says, if you want to understand the nature of God, ask yourself these questions. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?

[12 : 01] Now, let's think about that for a moment. Here is the hollow of your hand. Have a look at it. It's very small. Or here is the span of your hand from your small finger to your thumb.

It's a few inches. Or think about what you could put in your shopping bag tomorrow when you go to the grocery store. Or what you might weigh on your kitchen scales as you cook something this week.

And we know that those are comparatively small quantities over which we have total control. Maybe a few drops of water. Maybe a few inches we can measure.

A few things we buy at the stores. A few grams we measure on our scales. Now think about God. What does God have in the hollow of his hand?

Verse 12. The oceans of the world. What does God mark out with the span of his hand? The heavens.

[13 : 02] The immeasurable extent of space. What does he put in his shopping bag? The dust of the earth. What does he weigh on his kitchen scales?

The mountains and the hills. You say that's mind-blowing. Yeah, of course it is. That's what it is intended to do. Try to get your mind around it and you won't be able to.

That is the immensity of God's power. If we can control a few little grams of this and a few drops of that, then the whole world and creation is like that to God.

His power in creation, his preservation of the world, means that he has total authority over everything that he has made. No wonder in verse 13, he says, the mind that lies behind this amazing planet and all the universes that we dimly know about and cannot understand.

Who do you think had the wisdom to do all that? Who measured the spirit of the Lord? What man shows him counsel? It's as though Isaiah is saying, tell me the man whom God appointed to the creation of the world committee.

[14 : 13] Did he have a mentor? Did he have a consultant? Of course not. Verse 14, who made him understand? Who taught him the path of righteousness and justice or knowledge?

Of course God didn't need a human being to help him. He is entirely self-sufficient. And there is nothing outside the realm of his power.

So work out what that means in this huge and amazing world, which often seems so complex and threatening to us. He's got the whole world in his hand.

Sometimes little children understand this better than we adults. I remember years ago now when I used to do the school run, having a few little children in the back of the car when we were in Southampton, going to Winchester on the bypass to take them to school.

And a little voice on Monday morning of a four-year-old in the back saying to me, Mr. Jackman, how big are God's hands? And I said, why are you asking me that, Mark?

[15:16] And he said, well, we sang in Sunday school yesterday. He's got the whole world in his hands. He must have very big hands. Yes, he does. That is God.

Little children often see it more carefully and clearly than we do. But look at what he wants to write onto our hearts. Verse 15. What do you think about the nations of the world?

We've been praying for them in all their turmoil. Are they a problem to God? No, the nations are like, look at verse 15, a drop from a bucket.

Not even two drops or three drops, just one from a bucket. Oh, you say it's poetic hyperbole. Of course it is. But it's meant to drive home the point that the nations are totally under God's authority. And so we must never reckon on any human factors as conditioning God's plans or purposes. In God's equations, even the most powerful human agencies are a minus quantity.

[16:20] Did you see verse 17? All the nations are as nothing before him. They are accounted by him as a minus quantity and emptiness.

It doesn't mean he doesn't care for the nations. He made them all. But alongside God, they are creatures and he's the creator. And that's why verse 16 reminds us that nothing that God has made could ever be sufficient for him.

Given the whole of the forests of Lebanon and all their animals as one huge sacrifice, that couldn't make atonement for the sins of man because the creator is never dependent on his creation or on what his people can provide from it.

We are dependent on him totally and utterly. He takes our breath away and we're finished. Now do you see what that perspective does to any fears that the Babylonian gods may have triumphed over the Lord?

Or to any view that somehow God is not in control of the world of which we're a part? Now human pride and arrogance will be blown away by God.

[17:29] And so what Isaiah is saying is look around at the world in which you live. Look at the wonder of the miraculous creation, the tiny detail of a flower, the massive power of the oceans.

Well we've seen this year the massive power of the forces of nature as they're called, the world as God created it. Do you see that that perspective dwarfs us and makes us realise that this God who has revealed himself to us in the Lord Jesus Christ is supreme.

He is beyond all power. Supreme and sovereign. Now of course the problem is that we forget that and so we start to be fearful about people and fearful about our own lives and we start to try and put confidence in ourselves and we say well if the Christian church had a bit more money and a bit more media exposure and better training courses and know-how and better techniques and methods and the technology that we need to get the job done then we'll impact our culture.

And God leaves us to ourselves because our machinery has steamrolled at him out of sight. Now this is not a God that you can domesticate.

This is not a God that you can control. This is the almighty creator who is powerful beyond all measure. And then secondly in 18 to 24 powerful beyond all comparison because just as nature abhors a vacuum so if we do not have the weight of the living God at the centre of our lives we'll have something else and I can tell you what it'll be some form of idol will take his place.

[19:18] The contrast with the preceding section is as plain as is the folly of idolatry. God has made everything including human beings but then humankind starts to make its own idols in order to exile the living God.

As one dramatist said God made man in his own image and man has returned the compliment. For Isaiah the worship of foreign gods is one of the clearest marks of Israel's sin and I guess that's true in the New Testament as well when the church is told little children keep yourself from idols.

But God who knows that when the blow of the exile falls it will be fatally easy for his people to glide into the syncretistic religion of Babylon with its huge temples and its impressive ceremonies devoted to its brilliantly crafted idols.

God prepares his people and so he sets out to capture their minds with this awareness of the greatness of God in comparison to the greatest idol.

And these verses are written verses 18 to 24 to prepare the way for when Israel goes into captivity. So they're important verses for us if we're going to face times of challenge and hostility as we may well do in the coming years within our own culture.

[20 : 41] Let me try and put it into contemporary terms. Look at verse 19 where he talks about the futility of idolatry. A craftsman making it a goldsmith overlaying it and if you're not wealthy enough for that well choose some non-rot wood.

It's as though he knows that when they get to Babylon there will be letters dropping through their Babylonian letter boxes and they'll open them and it'll say Dear Mr. Kosherberger of all the families in Marduk Avenue, Babylon you have been chosen to receive this very special offer.

Be the envy of your neighbours and friends because we can offer you the latest craftsman cast idol overlaid with gold to the very latest design equipped with silver chains so that it won't get stolen or to stop accidental slippage should you establish it in your garden shrine.

Or maybe you are a practical family man and you're looking for an economy model with your growing family to consider in which case we can guarantee to you a non-rot wooden design with its unique non-topple fixture which is specially designed to avoid the embarrassment of finding your guard flat on his face in the morning.

That's what he's saying and you put that in the place of God well you get what you pay for don't you? the value of the God depends entirely on what the devotee can afford because there's nothing there except wood and metal and human artifice.

[22 : 19] Well you say I don't buy idols like that no but you have idols in your life and so do I. It can be your bank balance it can be your career it's prospects your status it can be our image our popularity our success our children our grandchildren and those things are as neutral in themselves as wood and metal but fashioned into something that squeezes God into the margin of our lives and we're no different from the pagan Babylonians.

Those idols take us over can even be our church can be our Christian service it can be our ministry our gifts our experience anything that you cannot imagine living without is the idol that controls your heart.

Brothers and sisters we need to take in verse 21 don't you know? haven't you heard? What? 22 it's he who sits above the circle of the earth and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.

See how great God is beyond all comparison what sort of idol do you have that can possibly compare with the true and living God because even the inhabitants of the world that he said are like a drop from a bucket now he says in another image are like grasshoppers.

The commentators have had great fun with this one of them says grasshoppers are little squeaky creatures jumping up and down but we do need to shape our thinking in the perspective of verse 22 because that's what it means to live by faith in God the God whose tent is in the heavens and who has no problem in exercising his sovereignty over the whole of human history.

[24 : 07] I like Alec Mateer's literal translation of verse 23 who brings princes to nothing and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness he says princes he appoints to non-existence and judges he has made of no further significance.

That is God. they will all die all flesh as grass for as the next verse shows the breath of God on the most apparently secure of rulers means their instant removal.

He blows on them they wither and the tempest carries them off. You look down through the history of the Christian church you think of all the tyrants and dictators who have been going to destroy the Christian faith and burn the Bible and eradicate the knowledge of Christ from the world.

Where are they today? Stubble. Blown away. Facing the judgment of God beyond this world but as far as their life in this world is concerned of less than nothing importance.

All power in heaven and on earth is in God's hands. He is powerful beyond all comparison. And therefore verses 25 and 26 he is powerful beyond all rivals.

[25 : 26] You see such a God can have no equal to whom then will you compare me that I should be like him says the Lord. And then he takes them out outside the house and he says look up into the heavens and see the stars.

Why does he say that? Well because the Babylonians worshipped the stars. The astral gods of Babylon were the representation of the powers of pagan religion that they worshipped. And he says okay look up into the heavens and look at those powerful gods of Babylon.

Who's in charge of them? Who created them? Who brings out their hosts by number? Who knows them all by name? Whose power is it that determines that not one of those stars is missing? Well the answer is the creator. And the gods of Babylon are only creations. They're either images that are creations of men or they're the stars that are creations of the living God but they're only sustained by his power not by their own power and though they are innumerable to us he has a personal knowledge of each of them and if that's true of the stars then don't you think that he knows you whom he made in his image?

And don't you think that he cares for you who are the sheep of his pasture and the members of his covenant community? No he says Isaiah stop this nonsense about God doesn't have the power to do his will.

[26 : 44] He's powerful beyond all rivals. But lastly does he really have the will to do it? I mean we could believe that he's powerful but isn't he remote and distant shut away from us not really concerned?

That's the logic behind those very direct questions in verse 27 my way is hidden from the Lord my right is disregarded by my God. If the Lord knows every item in his creation then how can he forget his people but often his people feel that perhaps he has because it's not working out the way they wanted he doesn't seem to be answering the prayers that I'm asking him.

Look at verse 28 haven't you known haven't you heard the Lord is the everlasting God the creator of the ends of the earth he doesn't grow faint or weary his understanding is unsearchable.

See what that's saying God is so great and so committed to his people he's not a God who sometimes feels I don't have the energy to do that or I don't have the resources to meet that need far from that he doesn't faint or grow weary and his wisdom is so deep that we can't begin to plummet he's the everlasting God he made the ends of the earth but look at his will in action in verse 29 he gives power to the faint and to him who has no might he increases strength so when you think does God really care you go back to the creation and you see his power and you see that that is the power of God because there was a man who came to reveal God to us the God-man who demonstrated his authority over creation as he stilled the storm as he healed the sick as he raised the dead to life

Jesus is the historical proof of the power of God in creation the unseen God coming into his own world to execute his purposes and work out his sovereign will and if that was true of Jesus in terms of his power what was true of Jesus in terms of his compassion and his will to strengthen his people come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest take my yoke upon me learn of me I am meek and lowly of heart and you'll find rest for your souls you see it is in the position of weakness that we come to God and recognize that apart from God we have nothing and here is the spiritual paradox which is so enormously important that it isn't human strength that prevails verse 30 youths shall faint and be weary young men shall fall exhausted the idea is of the young men in peak condition these are the elite marine corps these are the Olympic prospects but says Isaiah even people with that a degree of fitness and strength it's all finite only God has limitless strength and he shares it with those who wait for him the last verse says that is those who put their faith in him those whose hope is focused in him those who say to the Lord Jesus thank you that you came into this world to be my rescuer to change my life and so it is the weary and the weak who prevail and the reason says Isaiah is because well they exchange their strength that verb renew means to put on a new set of clothes it's talking about changing your clothes for a different situation and if you wait for the Lord if your hope and faith are in him then you will find in every situation of need a suit of clothes that matches it you will find yourself exchanging your weakness for his strength exchanging your failing humanity for his divine enabling because it's when we're weak spiritually speaking that we're driven to Christ who is the only source of strength and look how the chapter ends you know that amazing last verse the effects are wonderful when you come to Jesus and when you recognize his power and his will active in your salvation then you find in Christ strength to soar and stamina to run and perseverance to walk all supernaturally given that covers both the crisis and the humdrum every day that provides confidence both that he will bring his people the long journey back from exile and also that he will bring us his New Testament people to that third peak of fulfillment in the everlasting kingdom now this is no easy triumphalism this is not saying oh we can float effortlessly through life without any problems or difficulties you try telling that to the Babylonian exiles no no this is the healthy biblical optimism that I talked about this morning that knows that we need never be knocked out of the battle and we need never give up the fight that

is faith and perseverance and it's available to everyone you included me included everyone who waits on the Lord now that verb contains these two ideas of patiently letting God be God and restfully trusting in his wisdom his love and his power and in this way we're able to keep putting on fresh strength as we draw on the limitless divine resources and find the power

[32 : 46] of God within us to live for his praise and glory so as we finish tonight where does that leave us in our individual lives or as a congregation or as the church of Jesus Christ in our increasingly pagan sometimes hostile culture well where it leaves us is totally dependent on God alone that doesn't mean that we're inactive doesn't mean we're impassive doesn't mean that we let go and let God this is not jacuzzi Christianity where you just lean back into the bubbles and enjoy it all this isn't don't wrestle just nestle what it does is to challenge us about where our confidence lies Isaiah says in chapter 7 of his prophecy if you don't stand firm in faith you will not stand at all and faith comes by hearing the word of God so the pillars may be shaken the fixed points may be removed denominations rise and fall ministries come and go all flesh is grass they have their hour and cease to be but the word of our God stands forever and none of this takes him by surprise because he's working out his sovereign will through all the swirling tides of human ignorance and arrogance and so we need to take our stand upon the word of God at the cross of Christ in humble repentance and sincere faith asking that the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit will enable us to believe God's word to obey God's word and to refuse to compromise it and then to live our lives in that faith prepared to leave the outcome in God's hands

I think William Cooper the hymn writer had made Isaiah's message his own when he wrote God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform he plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm deep in unfathomable minds of never failing skill he treasures up his bright designs and works his sovereign will you fearful saints fresh courage take the clouds use so much dread are big with mercy and will break in blessings on your head judge not the Lord by feeble sense but trust him for his grace behind the frowning providence he hides a smiling face he is God he could not love you more than he does and he'll never love you less he is God he will not let you down and he will not let you go he is God he has shown it in coming himself in the person of his son and bearing our sins in his body on that cross so that we might be forgiven and so that our lives might be transformed and so that we might be brought into a living relationship with this creator who is our redeemer and so that we might count for God and his purposes in our generation and go forward strong in his strength safe in his keeping to be his ambassadors in the world and to bring the glorious good news of the reality of God the one who sits above the circle of the earth but who reaches down and rescues sinners like us bring that good news to our generation and our culture and yes it is a massive task and yes we will feel faint and weary and there will be times when we're exhausted but those who wait on the Lord will change their strength they'll find new set of clothes new power new ability to mount up with wings like eagles to keep on running to keep on walking if you don't stand firm in faith you will not stand at all but if you do

God is faithful and he the faithful God will keep us in that faith until we reach the third peak of fulfillment and we enter into the blessings of the eternal kingdom where there is no sorrow or sadness where the lamb is on the throne and where the glory of God is the obsession of his people let's pray together just a moment or two of quietness as we reflect on God's word we look at the areas of challenge in our lives which may seem insurmountable difficulties maybe in our own personal lives or amongst our family or friends or for the cause of the gospel in our land does God have the power does he have the will does he know does he care he is the sovereign and he is the shepherd so heavenly father we ask that you will reaffirm that trust in us or where it has never been that you will grant to us the gift of faith we ask you for your forgiveness that we so often domesticate you and try to bring you down to our level and we know how foolish that is because you are the sovereign Lord renew our humble repentance we pray increase our strength focus our hope grow our faith and send us out to live in the light of eternity knowing that you are God that you will never let us down and never let us go and may our lives count for your glory in this world because the throne and dominion of God is restored in our own hearts and lives thank you for the Lord Jesus help us to trust him and help us to live for your glory this week for your name's sake amen amen and mis purity to and