

God's people will gather

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now, we're starting a new series in some extracts from the book of Isaiah. The shops begin to prepare for Christmas about October, so it's quite right to begin to prepare for Christmas by looking at a series of passages on the coming kingdom in Isaiah.

We've looked at Isaiah in lunchtimes before, mainly the latter part of the book, over the next few weeks, although not next week. I'll remind you again at the end.

We'll be looking at a number of passages in Isaiah about God's kingdom coming. And we're going to begin today by reading our passage, which is on page 567 in the Bibles, Isaiah's vision, or the first of his visions of the coming kingdom.

Isaiah 2, reading verses 1 to 5. The words that Isaiah, the son of Amos, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem, it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it.

And many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, that we may walk in his paths.

[1 : 26] For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples.

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. So let's pray together. Lord God, in the midst of our busy days, in the midst of our world, with all its fret and turmoil, in the midst of so many things that we have to do, we thank you for these moments, and we can turn aside to look into your word, to hear what you have to say to us, in particular to focus on the coming of your kingdom.

We pray often, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. We thank you that one day that prayer will be fulfilled, and indeed we pray increasingly in our lives, that that kingdom may come, and anticipate that day when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

So help us, Lord, as we listen to Your word, and bless us, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, the book of Isaiah has sometimes been called the fifth gospel.

[3 : 04] Every part of the Old Testament points to Jesus Christ, to His coming, to His death, to His resurrection, and to His coming again. But in Isaiah, we have many passages which are particularly clear, particularly lucid, as they point to the coming of the King, and the coming of His kingdom.

And this is the first of them, this passage about the mountain of the Lord, and the people going to it. The general title of this is, God's kingdom will come, and the title for today is, God's people will gather.

Isaiah, living eight centuries or so before Christ in the city of Jerusalem, has already told us in chapter one what the actual conditions are like in that city.

There's social turmoil, there's idolatry, there's all kinds of oppression, people are, they're going to church, if you like, but they're not taking their faith seriously, they're simply going through the motions.

And from that, Isaiah looks forward to the Jerusalem, to the Zion of the future. Zion, the city of David. The oldest part of Jerusalem, we read in 2 Samuel 5, that David captured that citadel and set up his kingdom there.

[4 : 22] Now, Zion actually was not a very high hill. There's no Ben Nevis, no Mount Everest, no Mont Blanc, it's actually a very small hill. And yet, it's transformed because God has chosen to live there, just as God was to bypass Rome and Alexandria and Athens and come to Bethlehem to be born.

So here, he chooses this and the psalmist talks about the mountain of God exalted above all the mountains. But it's not just the literal city.

Zion becomes a picture in Scripture of all the people of God. Hebrews tells us, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to the spirits of the just made perfect, to a multitude of angels, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

So, so here, God's people will gather in Zion. Now, like so much in prophecy, this is fulfilled throughout time as well as at the end of time.

Isaiah is living in 8th century Jerusalem. He's looking forward, first of all, to the time when the city would be destroyed and the people taken off to Babylon.

[5 : 34] Then he's looking beyond that to return from Babylon. And he's talking about that here in one sense. After the exile, people came back led by, led by, first of all, Ezra, then Nehemiah, rebuilt the temple, rebuilt the city.

But then he looks forward further still to the day of Pentecost when the Spirit came and when people gathered from all over the world coming to Jerusalem to hear about the wonderful works of God.

But it's still in the future. Revelation talks about a great multitude around the throne of God and the Lamb from every kingdom, language, tribe, and nation.

Now, you see, that's very practical. Isaiah isn't saying, oh, shut our eyes to all the mess that's in present-day Jerusalem. He's not saying to us, oh, forget about the world, forget about its trials and troubles, forget about your own situation.

No, what he's saying is, because there is a glorious future, because this is certainly going to happen, you can cope with the present troubles, with the weariness, with the divisions, with the apathy, because the end of the story is certain.

[6 : 43] You have come to Mount Zion. There's two things I want to say. First of all, this is a universal gospel. Isaiah is not just talking to the people of 8th century Jerusalem.

Verse 2, all the nations shall flow to it. Verse 3, many people shall come and say, come, let us go to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob.

And this echoes a much earlier part in the story. Abraham was called, but not called for his own sake, called so that all the families, all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

It's a universal gospel. But we're not left to muddle our way, as it were, to Zion. Try and, we're not left without a compass, without a chart, because verse 3 says, he may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths.

God has given us the map to make sure we get there, if you like. Knowledge isn't just knowing a lot of information, it's about a changed and transforming lifestyle.

[7 : 52] He talks about in verse 5, let us walk in the light of the Lord. And the apostle John is to use this as a picture of the Christian life, if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with him.

The universal gospel. There are some implications of this. First of all, Zion is a reality now, as well as in the future. See, it's not looking forward with some kind of cloud cuckoo then, there's no relationship whatever, to our present world.

As God's people gather into his kingdom, as people come under the sound of the gospel, as they hear the word of God, become part of that kingdom, become part of Zion, then that gives us a glimpse of what it's going to be like.

Maybe a rather imperfect glimpse, but nonetheless, a real glimpse. And as Isaiah says, out of Zion, verse 3, shall go the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

That's what literally happened, of course, at the beginning of the story of the spread of the church. The risen Lord said to the disciples, begin in Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, and then the ends of the earth.

[9 : 07] So it's happening there. And what draws people into the kingdom? The same as Isaiah knew then, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

As the word spreads, as the church grows, people gather into his kingdom. So Zion is a reality now. It's a coming into being. It's more like a building site than a show house.

A show house is great to visit. All that gleaming, all that gleaming wood and polish and so on. Nothing out of place. A building site is dirty and messy.

And that's very often what the church on earth is like. We're not the finished article. We're a genuine anticipation. The other implication, this is God's work. It is the spirit who takes and applies the word.

But it also needs a response. Come, let us go up. Come, let us walk. I think we need to see that as we are spreading the gospel, if you like, as we are calling people to come to Zion.

[10 : 12] This will encourage us when our efforts seem to be failing and nothing seems to be happening. It will also keep us humble when they do appear to be succeeding.

It's not our work. It's the Lord's work. Late William still said, God has only one worker, the Holy Spirit. We need to remember that all the time.

We are privileged to join in that work, to be part of that work. But we are not the ones who finally build the kingdom and call souls into that kingdom.

So it's a universal gospel. And the second point, the result of that, it is a universal kingdom. Since the gospel is presented to everyone without restriction, without national boundaries, without any kind of boundaries, anyone can come, anyone who believes and responds and repents can come.

So the final result of that is the universal kingdom. Now that universal kingdom is a real and transformed creation. We see more of that in our final study in chapters 11 and 12 for C.S. Lewis quote coming up.

[11 : 23] This is the deeper country of Narnia, of the land which is more real, more vivid, more colorful than the present land.

It's a physical landscape. It's not a shadow land. At the moment, we are in the shadow lands. The shadow lands are less real, less vital, less impressive.

Although even in this creation, there are beautiful glimpses. I walked to the train this morning, beautiful seeing the autumn leaves and as they crackle under our feet.

Just make, just take advantage of it today. Apparently the rain is returning tomorrow. Because even rain is beautiful. If you lived in a desert, you'd be delighted to see rain, no doubt.

Think of autumn leaves, think of moonlight nights, think of waves crashing on a rocky shore, the beauty of mountain, forest, and meadow. These are all anticipations of the world to come.

- [12 : 24] And they're real anticipations. Reading the Psalms, how though this creation has fallen, it's still good. And indeed, the Psalm has called on trees, hills, mountains, winds, snow, even rain, to praise him.

Not quite sure how rain praises him, but nevertheless, the Psalm has called on that. So there's a real and transformed creation. Then, especially in verse 4, there will be true justice.

He shall judge between the nations and shall decide disputes for many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. Renewal of Eden, but more than the renewal of Eden, it will be a totally new creation.

There will be no narrow nationalism here. The kind of thing that causes nations to go to war against nation will no longer exist. I believe in the new creation there will probably still be nations, but it will be nations without racism, without prejudice, without snobbery, without unreasoning dislikes, and so on.

- [13 : 35] And weapons of war in that situation become irrelevant. Obviously, Isaiah is talking about the weapons of his time, swords, spears, and so on, but it does refer, essentially, to military hardware.

Now, in this world, of course, there are people who strive very hard to bring peace among warring nations, increasing a very, very difficult task. Particularly if you're dealing with the Islamic State, for example, we'll not sit around a table with you and discuss.

You see, these horrors will be banished. There will be no hostages taken and decapitated and so on. These belong to the fallen creation. And under the reign of the Prince of Peace, there will be true peace.

First of all, peace in the human heart. Remember, that is the first basic peace. We justify by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. But there will be genuine peace among the nations of the world.

And more than that, neither shall they learn war anymore. Now, this is not about pacifism. Some Christians are pacifists, some aren't.

- [14 : 46] And many believe that it's necessary sometimes to go to war to prevent a worse evil, to go to war with dictators who love and glorify war.

Neither shall they learn any more. Most wars, after all, are caused by militarism. Most wars are caused by people who want to grab up land or oppress other nations.

That's what will not happen in the new creation. There will be, neither shall they learn war any more. And notice how this is all couched as an invitation in verse 5.

O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord. Very important text there because that's essentially the call that came to Abraham.

Abraham was called to leave the city of the world, leave a place which actually was devoted to militarism and to empire building and so on, and journey to the city whose architect and builder is God.

- [15 : 50] It's not all of the pictures. When we're talking about the new creation, there was a whole cluster of pictures that we need to use. If we have only one picture, then we'll get the idea that heaven's going to be an endless concert hall singing choruses to all eternity, strumming harps on clouds as you're dressed in ethereal negliges.

That sounds awful. If that's what it's about, count me out. But that's not what it's about. There will, of course, be praise in heaven, greater praise than we ever have on earth.

But there'll also be all what the prayer book calls lawful and worthy activities where the peace of God, which is not just the absence of hostility, the peace of God, is about a whole changed lifestyle, an attitude of mind, which will mean that people, instead of learning war, people will learn peace.

If you see what I mean, studying the arts of peace, growing together, loving one another in a way which is so difficult on earth. So you see, our first picture then, our first glimpse of the new creation is God's people gathering.

God's people gather from all over the world, from earth's wide bound, from nations farthest coast. Nowhere is this gospel inappropriate.

[17 : 10] Nowhere can this gospel not be preached. But they're coming together to the city of God, which is also, of course, the new creation itself, of the house of the God of Jacob.

My final comment is this, the God of Jacob. Who was Jacob? The twister, the cheat, the sharp guy. This is the one who is transformed into Israel.

That's what the gospel is about, taking raw, unsatisfactory material and molding it into children of God. And that is a great prospect. That is a gospel worth believing.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, as we look into the future, we are encouraged to keep growing in the present. As we think of the kingdom that is to come, we are strengthened in our desire to see others come into that kingdom.

As we think of the wonderful things that God has prepared, we are blessed and richly blessed. And thank you for the anticipations even in this life.

[18 : 17] And so as we leave here now and go back to our normal business, we may realize that not just here but outside of here we are indeed on the journey to Zion, to the city of the living God.

And we give you our praise and thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.