

1. Is Our God Big Enough?: Big enough to control history

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[0 : 00] Now, if you have the Bibles there, if you turn please to page 599 and to this great chapter in Isaiah. Just a quick word before we read it, and we're going to read the first 11 verses today.

Isaiah the prophet is speaking some 800 years before Christ. He's speaking to people living in a fragile world. They are threatened by Assyria, the new superpower.

And indeed in Isaiah's life and ministry, Assyria had come and tried to and failed to capture Jerusalem. But he's looking beyond that here in this chapter.

He knows although the people were freed from one disaster from Assyria, that they're going to be taken to Babylon. They're going to be there in exile. And he's looking beyond the exile, asking the question, is this God big enough?

Is he able to handle these great historical crises that arise? And is he able to handle the personal crises that arise as well? So let's read verses 1 to 11.

[1 : 09] Comfort, comfort, comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low.

The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. A voice says, cry. And I said, what shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and its beauty is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flowers fade, but when the breath of the Lord blows on it, surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

[2 : 24] Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength. O Jerusalem, herald of good news. Lift it up.

Fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, behold your God. Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him.

Behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms.

He will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. And that is the word of the Lord, and splendid and glorious words they are.

About the middle of last century, the Bible translator J.B. Phillips wrote a book. Some of you may have read it. It's still in print. And the book was called, Your God is Too Small.

[3 : 27] And that's the question I want us to ask over these next weeks. Is our God big enough? Or is our God too small? And what Phillips was saying was, For many people, God is rather like an aspirin, Or rather like a hot drink, Or rather like a shower bath.

Something that's useful, Something that's convenient, Something that's comfortable, But not someone who is actually big enough. Big enough to deal with Burma, Big enough to deal with China, Big enough to deal with the events of history, Big enough to be more powerful than the giant multinational corporations, Than the drug trade, Than the violence, Than all these huge issues, That beset our world.

Is our God big enough? And that's what Isaiah is saying to the people. One day, You are going to be taken to Babylon. Your world is going to crash about your ears.

Everything you've ever believed in, Is going to dissolve and disappear. Where's God going to be then? Is he big enough? And that's what he's saying in this chapter.

Of course he's big enough, Because he's going to bring you back. He is going to overthrow the Babylonian empire, And you're going to come back to your own land. God is in control.

[4 : 47] God is on the move. And that's why it begins with comfort. Comfort my people. Notice he still calls them my people, Although they've wandered from him.

Now, comfort is an interesting word. It's used here, In the rather older sense of the word, Comfort. To strengthen. To breathe back life into.

Some of you have seen the Bayeux Tapestry, Or if not, You'll have seen pictures of it. And there's a picture there, Of a group of soldiers running away, Looking dispirited. And there's a figure there, With robes and a funny hat, Or a mitre I suppose we should call it.

And he's prodding them with his spear, Back into the battle. And the caption is, The bishop comforteth his soldiers. Now he's not saying to them, Oh guys, it's been a rough time, Come on away and have a hot drink.

He's saying, Get back into the battle. That's how he's encouraging them. That's what this chapter is meant to do. It's a robust chapter, About a robust God. And we're told that her warfare is ended, Her iniquity is pardoned, She's received double.

[5 : 56] Now that doesn't mean God has punished them, Twice, Over for their sins. Doubled here means rather like this. When I double this sheet, The two halves correspond exactly to each other.

And that's what the prophet is saying. God has punished you, He's punished you the way you deserve, But he's going to forgive you the way you don't deserve. And here, The issue in these verses is, Verses 1 to 11, Is he big enough to control history?

Does history take him by surprise? And he has to react rather shrewdly to it? Or is he actually in charge? And three voices call out. And the first voice, In verses 3 to 5, Is telling us, If you look at history, Through the proper eyes, You will see that history reveals God's glory.

Verse 5, The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together. Now what is God's glory? What does it mean we say, We look at history and see God's glory?

We look at history and we see violence, We see bloodshed, We see devastation, We see death, As well as seeing good things as well. Now, When the Bible talks about God's glory, First of all, It means God's reality.

[7 : 20] The word used for glory means, God is totally real. God is solid. God's not weightless. God is not a puff of air, Like the gods of other nations. That's the first thing it means.

But the other thing it means, Is the light that shines from God, By which we can truly see, His glory. In other words, God is saying, Isaiah is saying, Sorry, If you look at history, You will see that God is at work.

But only if you look at it, Through the eyes of faith. Through the eyes of His word. And behind this, Is the great story, At the beginning of the Bible.

The story of the Exodus, When God brought His people out of slavery. Now He's bringing them back from slavery. In the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord.

Make straight in the desert, A highway for our God. God cannot be stopped. God will be God, And the world will know it. That's what Isaiah is saying.

[8 : 23] These words are not just about the Exodus. They're not even just about the future, That Isaiah is promising to his people, When they come back. These words are taken up by Mary, In the Song of Mary, In Magnificat, When she's told that the baby she will bear, Is the Son of God, The Saviour.

She takes up these words, About the mountain and the hills being made low. And they're also taken up by John the Baptist. Prepare in the desert, A highway for our God.

In other words, You see what Isaiah is saying. Isaiah is pointing to a time, When someone is going to come, Who is going to do all those things, That will be foreshadowed. Someone who will remove the obstacles, Someone who will lower the mountains, And so on.

Someone whom no obstacle can prevent. No obstacle, No physical obstacle can stand against him. No institutional obstacle can stand against him.

And it is going to be seen by everyone. The book of Revelation says, They see he is coming with clouds, And every eye shall see him. So is our God big enough?

[9 : 39] And Isaiah says, Our God is big enough, Because history is going to show his glory. If you go and stand at some great natural event, A great natural phenomenon, Such as the Grand Canyon, Or if you think of some great historical event, Or series of events, We feel small, don't we?

We feel insignificant. That's what Isaiah is saying. This God, No one, Nothing, Can stand against him. Nothing in this world, Nothing that has been created, Can stand against him.

That's what the first voice says. History shows his glory. The second voice, In verses 6 to 8, Says, This God will keep his word. The grass withers, The flowers fade, But the word of our God, Will stand forever.

And notice the picture he uses. All flesh is grass, And its beauty like the flower of the field. Someone said human history, To be summed up in these words, Like the history of grass, Mown, Sorry, Sown, Mown, Blown, And gone.

Sown, Mown, Blown, And gone. That's the history of grass, And the history of human beings, Is not much more. When you walk through a graveyard, Or when we are faced with death, We realize that.

[11 : 18] But what we've also got to realize, Is what Isaiah is talking about, When he says, The grass withers, And the flowers fade. He's talking about, The great empires of the world, The great nations, Like Assyria, And Babylon, And Persia, And Greece, And Rome, Nations like America, Nations like Russia, Nations like China, Nations like Britain, And its prime, All these nations, Are like grass, All their beauty, Like the flower of the field, They come, And they go, But what remains, What lasts, It is the word of God, The word of God, Which at the beginning, Spoke creation into being, And next week, And next week, We'll look at how, God is greater, Than the creation, He's made, And throughout history, Systems come and go, Institutions come and go, That's why we can't rely, On anything else, But God, Do you rely, On your insurance policies, Of course, It's sensible, To have insurance, Do you rely,

On your house, Or on your car, Or on your job, All these, Are fragile, The grass withers, The flowers fade, But the word of our God, Stands forever, Now you see, What Isaiah is doing, He's saying, We're insignificant, He's saying, We're fragile, He's saying, We're vulnerable, But he is also saying, That that God, Who is so great, Cares for us, That God, Who is so great, Speaks his word to us, After all, Think about it for a minute, Why did God send us his word?

Why did he send us Jesus? He did those things surely, Because he cares for us, Because he wants to rescue our life, From its meaninglessness, Its fragility, Its vulnerability, And give us true security, And of course, He can't do that, Unless he's greater than we are, And later on in this book, Isaiah is going on, To be attacking people, Who trust in idols, We'll come to that in a moment, So, This God, This God, Controls history, And in that, He shows his glory, This God, Keeps his word, Sometimes we make promises, Don't we, And we fail to keep them, Sometimes it's because, We're thoughtless, And we made the promise, But more often, It's because, Circumstances beyond our control, How often do we use that phrase, Circumstances beyond our control, Isaiah is saying, There is never a circumstance, Which is beyond the control, Of this God, Otherwise he wouldn't be God,

And then a third voice speaks, In verses 9 to 11, And this third voice is saying, God will save, His people, There's a sense here of excitement, Go up into the high mountain, O Zion, Herald of good news, Get off your, Get up off your seats, I'm not telling, By the way, That's not an order for the moment, Get up off your seats, Go to the top of the mountain, And proclaim, That God is on his way, Proclaim, That he is, Proclaim that he is coming, And he's coming with good news, You see, Isaiah speaks, Knowing, That one day, Jerusalem is going to be destroyed, The temple burned, The people carried away, Into exile, But knowing as well, That one day, They're going to return, That Jerusalem will be rebuilt, And knowing too, That that points forward, To a future, That's still to come, Lift up your voice, With strength, O Jerusalem, Herald of good news,

Lift it up, Fear not, Say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God, Literally look, It's God, That God you thought was dead, That God whom you thought, Had been overthrown, By the gods of Babylon, This God is on the march, This God is, This God is, Is going to overthrow, His enemies, And Isaiah says, Two things about this, First of all, He talks about God's power, Verse 10, See the Lord God, Comes with might, And his arm, Rules for him, When you read in the Bible, About the arm of God, It means the power of God, To carry out, What he intends to do, He is, And here he intends, To save his people, His reward is with him, And his recompense, Before him, He is a powerful God, But the second thing, It talks about, In verse 11, Is this God, Is also a gentle God, He will tend his flock, Like a shepherd, He will gather the lambs,

[15 : 56] In his arms, He will carry them, In his bosom, And gently lead those, With the young, In other words, He is not just the warrior, He is the shepherd, He is not just power, But he is love, Now, Isaiah later on, In chapter 46, He is going to mock, The Babylonian gods, He is going to say, In chapter 46, Baal bows down, Nebo stoops, These are the Babylonian gods, Our idols are on beasts, And livestock, The things you carry, Are burdens, On weary beasts, Now, On New Year's Day, In ancient Babylon, There was an enormous procession, Went along, The so called, Ishtar Way, The main road, In the city of Babylon, And the gods, Were carried, In procession, On donkeys, Now, What kind of a god, Is that, That needs to be carried, What a useless, Ineffective object, What,

How is this god different, This god, Is the one, Who does the carrying, He will carry them, In his bosom, So I say, If you have a proper god, You don't need to carry him, He'll carry you, You don't need to defend him, He'll defend you, But you see, In order to do that, He's got to be big enough, Not enough that he's gentle, He's got to be powerful, And it's not enough that he's powerful, Because if you were simply powerful, And not gentle, Then we wouldn't know whether to trust in him, So the question we ask ourselves today, And the question the prophet is telling us to ask is, Is our god big enough, Think for a moment, Of the big issues, That are troubling you at the moment, Whatever they may be, Some people here may have personal problems, Which are overwhelming them, Some people here may have problems in their job, Some people may have problems finding a job, Some people maybe have financial problems,

All kinds of problems, Now they're real problems, And they're not to be despised, But Isaiah is saying, Is our god more powerful, Than these problems, Let me finish with this, Can we sing along with the children, These are not asking us to sing it, I'm simply going to quote the words to you, My god is so big, So strong, And so mighty, There's nothing, That he cannot do, Is your god, Big enough, Amen, Let's pray, God our father, How we make you, In our image, How we limit you, How we try to cut you down to size, Open our eyes, To your greatness, To your goodness, To your power, And to your gentleness, And may we live our lives, Sent in with the, Conviction, And the knowledge, That you will carry us, That you will lead us, That you will guide us, And that we can trust in you, Amen,