

The God Who Redeems

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 28th of February 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled The God Who Redeems and is from Isaiah chapter 48 verses 1 to 22.

While we are seated let us pray. O God we pray that you will speak to us through your word. Give us ears to hear it and heed it and obey it for Jesus sake. Amen.

And you may like to have the passage from Isaiah 48 open in front of you on page 591. But you don't have to be a parent to know that parents get tired of telling their children something that the children refuse to hear and listen.

How many times do I have to tell you to pick up your bag? Dozens presumably. You see children so often hear but they don't hear.

The words seem to just go in one ear and out the other and their action is not changed by the words that they've heard. They hear audibly but they don't hear in the sense of heeding or obeying or following the words that they hear.

[1 : 2 8] And so too in the Old Testament especially but in the New as well. God's people and God. God is like that frustrated parent. God, how many times do I have to tell you?

The children of God in both Old and New Testaments hearing the words but not heeding or obeying them. That's what we find in this passage from Isaiah.

Way back in Isaiah chapter 6 when God called Isaiah to his ministry as a prophet, he warned him that this would be the case. The people to whom you go will be people who hear but don't hear.

That is, they'll hear with their ears the words but they won't hear in the sense of heeding and obeying what God says. And time and again throughout Isaiah we've seen in the last few weeks and months these accusations against the people of God.

They hear but they don't hear. Back in chapter 42, listen, you that are deaf. And then in last week's passage, listen to me you stubborn of heart.

[2 : 3 8] They hear the words but they seem to go in one ear and out the other. They don't heed or obey. That accusation against the people of God comes to a climax in Isaiah 48.

The chapter begins with a very strident and urgent sound. Hear this. It's almost as if God is saying, how many times do I have to tell you?

It implies that the people are deaf to God's word. They hear the words audibly but they don't heed or obey them. There's a sense of irony in the opening verses.

Hear this, O house of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel, who came forth from the loins of Judah, who swear by the name of the Lord and invoke the God of Israel.

Words that evoke the privilege that God's people have with God, the uniqueness of their relationship with God. Isaiah is trying to rouse them to listen. He's trying to win them on side by reminding them of their privileged position and relationship with God.

[3 : 50] He's trying to make them realise that they ought to be people who listen because of the relationship that God has established with them. But then abruptly and shockingly, verse 1 finishes, but not in truth or right.

You have all these titles and privileges and position and relationship with God, but it's all a sham. It's all a pretense. Because your religious practice is not in truth or in right.

God has established these privileges for you, but you abuse them because you fail to heed and obey God's word. Their religion is presumptuous.

They think that God has established a relationship for them so they can sit back and wallow in that privilege. They pretend to be what they are, in fact not.

Verse 2 continues the irony. For they call themselves after the holy city, after Jerusalem. They lean on the God of Israel. And yet, though that looks on the surface to be something that they're doing aright, it is clear that Isaiah is speaking rather ironically.

[5 : 08] They are not, in fact, acting aright in their relationship with God. So Isaiah is appealing to them over the privileges that God has given them, trying to win them to hear what he's saying.

The end of verse 1 is so shocking, it's to jar their minds, it's to make them stop and pay attention to these words that Isaiah is now speaking. In the past, Isaiah says, God has spoken to you, he's wanted you to hear his word, and he's done that in order so that when he fulfils what he says, you'll stop and listen and realise that God is God.

That's the argument of verses 3 to the beginning of verse 6. The former things I declared long ago. They went out from my mouth and literally I caused you to hear them.

Then suddenly I did them and they came to pass. That is, God has announced in the early part of the Old Testament some of the things that he would later do. And now in Isaiah's time, he's done them.

And the point of that was that they would hear the word and then when they saw the event fulfilled, they would recognise again that God is God, he's kept his word, and they ought to trust him.

[6 : 26] Israel ought to have known and ought to have heeded God's word. But of course their history is not that. Their history is of deafness to God's word. Indeed, Isaiah acknowledges that in verse 4.

Because I know that you are obstinate and your neck is an iron sinew and your forehead brass, the picture is of an animal that is being yoked to plough a field.

And the yoke would be the way that the farmer would guide the animal to the left and to the right or straight ahead. But the animal pictured in verse 4 is so stubborn and obstinate, its neck is like an iron sinew, that is it will not bend its neck with the yoke's encouragement.

It is resisting the guidance and direction of the farmer. And its forehead is brass, that it is determined on one path of action, one direction to take.

And it is determined not to heed the guidance of the yoke of the farmer. Israel is like that animal. Israel is refused consistently in its history to yield to the direction of God's word, to the left or to the right or to straight ahead.

[7 : 44] It has been so stubborn, so intractable, determined to be deaf. So because Israel is like that, Isaiah says, God declared things to you from long ago.

Before they came to pass, I announced them to you. So that you would not say, my idol did them. My carved image or my cast image commanded them.

That is, it's trying to make Israel hear that God said something and then fulfilled it. So that when the event of fulfillment occurs, they cannot say, oh, the idols have done this or the false gods have done this.

Now the implication seems to be that Israel in exile, far away from its land, is turning to the idols. It is thinking that the reason why Jerusalem was destroyed is not because God was involved, but because the idols or the false images have somehow triumphed over their God.

And so in exile, it seems they're abandoning God and they're turning to the idols of the Babylonians. We saw last week the foolishness of that. But God is saying here, if you'd heard my word, you would realise that I predicted this centuries ago.

[8 : 59] So why think it's an idol that's doing it? You've been deaf to me and that has made you turn to other idols who are themselves even deaf.

The frustrated parent comes out at the beginning of verse 6. You have heard. I told you in the past.

How many times do I have to tell you? Now look and see all this. See that what I announced beforehand has now been fulfilled. Why don't you declare it?

Why don't you tell the world that this is God's doing? But rather, you turn to the idols and think that they are powerful. Can't you see that my words have been fulfilled?

Why have you been so deaf to what I've said in the past? Well, God will, in a sense, give them another chance. He takes a slightly different tack, I guess, from the middle of verse 6.

[9 : 59] From this time forward, I make you hear new things. Not the old things that have already been fulfilled and come to pass. But now God speaks of a new thing.

Hidden things that you've not known in the past. They're created now, not long ago. Before today, you've never heard of them. And the reason God is doing this is so that you could not say, I already knew them.

Now the point of what's being said here is this. Israel, it seems, likes to think that its future is mapped out and they're in control of it. So God has held back, he's kept hidden some of his words of what's going to happen.

And only now he announces it, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, that he will bring his people from exile back to the Promised Land through a pagan ruler called Cyrus. He didn't announce it long ago so that Israel didn't think, oh yes, we know what's happening and we're all in control of the situation.

The point of keeping back some of God's word to this time is that it makes Israel stop and trust what God is saying. But indeed, that's no different from what he was doing early on as well.

[11 : 16] When God announced in the early times what later took place, the whole point of that was that Israel should trust his word and then see it fulfilled in later time. Now all of us are a bit like Israel at this point.

All of us like to know the future and have it mapped out and to feel a bit in control and secure about it. You only have to go into a Christian bookshop to see how many books there are about the end times and when it's going to happen and what it's going to be like and what the weather will be like and what you ought to wear and eat on that day, probably.

That just shows how much we like to think we're in control of the future. God is telling Israel here, I'm only now announcing what's going to happen because you're not in control, I am and you must trust what I say.

Open your ears, hear and heed. You've never heard, you've never known from of old your ear has not been opened, he goes on to say in verse 8.

For I knew that you would deal very treacherously and that from birth you were called a rebel. You see, Israel's history is a long history of failing to hear God's word.

- [12 : 34] They've turned deaf ears to it, determined to block out the sounds of God's word. Their rebellion comes from their not hearing God's word and heeding and obeying it.
- hence the need for a new thing. The former things that have been spoken of surround the events of the Exodus, God bringing the people from Egypt to the promised land.
- Now the new thing is that God will do something like that by bringing the people this time from Babylon into the promised land and that's a similarity with the past old things but one of the newnesses about it is that it will do it for a pagan ruler.
- Something that Israel we saw two weeks ago will turn a deaf ear to. They don't want to hear that. How can God deal with a pagan ruler to bring them salvation? But the other new thing which we'll see in weeks to come is that God will also change their state of deafness to make them attentive to his word.
- For their rebellion and their treachery, for their history of deafness, God has sufficient grounds and justification to cut Israel off, to destroy it.
- [13 : 46] It's forfeited its right as God's people. It's forfeited its claim to the privileges and gifts of God in making them his own people.
- God has every justification to cut them off and destroy them. But God hasn't done that. He sent them into exile, far from their land under the rule of the Babylonians.
- Not to destroy them, to punish them, yes, but not to destroy them. That's what verse 10 is saying. See, I have refined you, but not like silver.
- I have tested you in the furnace of adversity. The model is of purifying metal. Pour in some silver into a crucible, I guess, and out comes pure silver.
- All the dross is consumed and burned away. And the pure silver is kept and refined. Now, if God had done that for Israel, there'd be nothing left.
- [14 : 52] The very first chapter of Isaiah tells us that all your silver is as dross. So if God had put them into a furnace like silver, nothing would be refined and purified.
- So God has held back his judgment and his wrath. He sent them into exile, but not destroyed them. He's limited the punishment that he's given to them.
- That in itself is a refining process. In order that in exile they sit up and take notice and realise that they've failed God and come to their senses and return to God. It doesn't seem to be happening, but nonetheless the exile was some limited refining process.
- But the reason why God has held his wrath back is not just to preserve Israel. rather it's for the sake of his own name and reputation in the world.
- See verses 9 and 11. For my name's sake I defer my anger. Not because I love you Israel am I going to defer my anger, but for my name's sake I defer my anger.
- [16 : 02] For the sake of my praise I restrain it for you. And verse 11 for my own sake and then repeated for emphasis for my own sake I do it. For why should my name be profaned?
- My glory I will not give to another. What God is saying here is that if he had let Israel be destroyed as Israel deserved, then the other nations would just mock Israel's God.
- What a silly God the Israelites worshipped. I mean, he's failed them. The Israelites are destroyed. Our gods are better. Israel's God is a nonsense, a weakling. That's what God is seeking to avoid.
- So the reason he's going to save Israel and bring them back to their promised land is not for something inherently good about them, but rather for the sake of his glory in the world.
- That nations, not just Israel, but that nations would sit up and pay attention and realise that God is God and their idols are nothing.

[17 : 07] When he says in verse 11, for why should my name be profaned? He's thinking of the other nations and the gods of those nations, ridiculing and mocking him. And God will not let any idol or false god take the glory for what is happening in the world.

If Israel were destroyed, then the Babylonian gods would be boasting and claiming the glory for the destruction of Israel. God says, my glory I will share with no other.

That is why he will save the people of Israel. It's a sobering thought. There is nothing in them to warrant their salvation, but for God's own glory he will act in mercy.

The sadness of this is that Israel keeps failing to hear God. Again he pleads with them in verse 12, listen to me O Jacob and Israel whom I called.

I am he, I am the first, I am the last. That is, I am God, I am the one who's spoken. Listen to me. The idols are deaf and dumb. Why think you're paying attention to them?

[18 : 19] Listen to me is what he's saying. He's beseeching them to hear and heed and obey. my hand laid the foundation of the earth and my right hand spread out the heavens.

When I summoned them they stand at attention. He's saying the heavens and earth they hear my word and they heed it. When I call them the heavens and the earth do what I say.

Read the first chapter of the Bible to see that happening. So if they can do that so to you Israel who are in a privileged position and relationship with me you also ought to hear and heed.

Again he pleads with them to hear in verse 14 assemble all of you and hear who among them that is the idols of the nations and false gods of the nations who among them has declared these things none of them they don't speak but God the God of the Bible speaks hear him he's saying and he's saying I'm God and I'll do what I like verse 14 goes on to say about Cyrus again that the Lord loves Cyrus he shall perform Cyrus shall perform his purpose on Babylon and Cyrus arm shall be against the Chaldeans I God have spoken and called him I God have brought him and he will prosper in his way I'm God and I'll do what I like and you listen to my word is what this frustrated parent is saying to his treacherous children draw draw draw come on listen to what

I'm saying from the beginning I've not spoken in secret from the beginning of the Bible God is a God who speaks clearly and calls people to listen and all through Israel's history from the time that it came to be I've been there that is I'm a God who's been speaking to you listen to me and now at this point in your history the Lord God has sent me the inspired prophet Isaiah and his spirit so listen to my words is what he's saying but there's another reason why Israel should listen not just because God is God not just because his words actually come true but also for Israel's own benefit verse 17 thus says the Lord your Redeemer the Holy One of Israel I am the Lord your God who teaches you for your own good who leads you in the way you should go listen to me because it's for your benefit if you turn a deaf ear to my words and commands then it will be to your detriment and then

[21 : 18] God expresses the wistful longing of a parent oh that only you had paid attention to my commandments because if you had he goes on to say then your prosperity will have been like a river your success like the waves of the sea your offspring would have been like the sand your descendants like its grains their name would never be cut off or destroyed from before me if you had paid attention to my commands and words you would be now enjoying the most enormous blessings of God listen to God's words it's for your own good so God issues the command in verse 20 speaking 150 years before the actual time but anticipating the certainty of the event of allowing God's people to go from Babylon back to

Jerusalem go out from Babylon flee from Chaldea another name for Babylon and declare this with a shout of joy proclaim it send it forth to the end of the earth say the Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob this will be a proclamation to the world when Israelites go home from Babylon to Jerusalem it's not for their benefit but it's for the sake of God's name in the world so shout it out proclaim your redemption and salvation tell the world that your God has done this and that he is God and the idols are nothing at all it'll be like a new exodus verse 21 says you won't thirst in the wilderness water will flow from a rock just as it did when Moses led you out of Egypt hundreds of years before so will it be again this is God's glory proclaim it and shout it with joy but the chapter ends with a solemn note a sombre warning almost out of place we've forgotten the deafness of

God's people almost it looks positive to finish with this shout of joy that they return but no there is no peace says the Lord for the wicked a proverb that we often quote in our daily life deriving from Isaiah there is no peace for the wicked such a jolt from the joy of verses 20 and 21 why does the chapter end with such a note because if the people go back to their land of Canaan that does not mean they go back to God Cyrus the Persian pagan ruler would issue an edict in 538 BC allowing the Israelites and other conquered peoples to go back to their homelands Israel's return would only be half the answer to their problem you see Israel remains death it remains rebellious treacherous and sinful in fact when the edict came in 538 most

Israelites didn't heed it they stayed in Babylon they'd given up on their God their life in Babylon wasn't too bad so they stayed and over the next few decades dribs and drabs of them went back to Jerusalem but many if not most never went and they stayed in Babylon in the Persian Empire far away from their land you see most of them were even deaf to this shout to go home to Jerusalem in verse 20 that's why there's no peace for the wicked because getting back to the land itself doesn't solve all the problem it only solves the political problem of bringing them to the geographical land but it doesn't restore Israel to God another servant is needed for that a greater servant than Cyrus needed not to bring them to land but bring them to God to cure their intractability to deal with Israel's sin

Isaiah will talk about that servant in the next chapter and we'll see that in two weeks time but this chapter chapter 48 is a stern warning to us as well in many respects we also are the privileged people of God Christians have a continuous heritage with the people of God of the Old Testament so the epithets that are used in verses 1 and 2 about Israel who are called by the name of Israel who come forth from the loins of Judah that's us if we're Christian people yet for us too religious practice can be a pretense a sham and hypocrisy if we are not people who hear God's word you see God our God is a God who speaks he's not silent or dumb like an idol he spoke on the first day of creation he spoke to form the people of God the descendants of Abraham he spoke through the prophets of old in the

[26 : 45] Old Testament he spoke preeminently through his son Jesus Christ and he spoke through his apostles of the New Testament and his word is kept and preserved for us to hear and heed and obey we turn a deaf ear to God's word at our peril for there is no peace for those who are deaf to God's word the psalmist said oh that today you would listen to his voice do not harden your hearts may we take heed of that warning for the glory of God amen