

The God Who Carries

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] We may like to keep open the passage from Isaiah. We've been preaching through the book of Isaiah in recent weeks. Page 589 was the first reading and I'll be preaching from that passage.

Let's pray that God would help us to understand this passage. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who speaks and declares your hand to the world and we pray now that your spirit will help us to understand these words so that we may understand you better and serve you more faithfully.

Amen. The old man and his old wife were fleeing. They were fleeing the North Koreans who were streaming south into South Korea.

It was winter. They were freezing and starving. And they, along with hundreds and thousands of other refugees, were heading in a desperate and tragic bid for safety and survival.

They took with them just a handful of possessions. All they could get before they left their home, their town or village, before it was razed to the ground by the North Koreans.

[1 : 3 1] But the one possession that they, this old man and this old woman had, no doubt the same as all the rest, were their ancestral idols, boxes of ashes of their ancestors and other religious paraphernalia.

That was foremost for them, the thing to take. And so the story of them fleeing south to Saul and then beyond into same sort of elusive safety is tragic.

They're carrying with them heavy loads of religious paraphernalia, lugging it laboriously. And yet, ironically, the very religious things that they thought might bring them some safety or security endangered their lives, impeded their progress, slowed them down.

The story comes from a novel by Chaim Potok, a Jewish writer, *I Am the Clay*. It exposes the futility of their religion as they flee, carrying their religious idols and gods.

Hardly any food, starving, desperately malnourished, and yet lugging with them their idols and gods that are so futile.

[3 : 0 2] That's the same picture in this passage from the prophet Isaiah. At New Year's Day in ancient Babylon, there would be religious processions and the gods would be paraded from town to town, notably from the second major city of the nation, Borsippa, into Babylon itself.

It was a celebration of the gods and religion. The two main gods were Bel, the god of Marduk, as he was called. Bel's a word related to the Canaanite word, Baal, Lord.

And Nebo. Nebo was the second most important god, the son of Marduk, in ancient Babylon. And his importance is seen by the fact that so many of the Babylonian emperors of the 7th century, 6th century, had his name as part of their name.

Nebuchadnezzar, for example, Nabonidus, and so on. New Year's Day was a joyful celebration, a joyful procession, but the joy and the festivity hid the reality of the fact that the gods and idols needed to be carried from place to place.

But the picture at the beginning of this passage is not of a joyful celebration, but rather like in Kaim Podok's novel of people fleeing Babylon because the Persians are advancing.

[4 : 32] And again, they're carrying their gods, their idols. When Persia pounces though, just like for these Koreans in that story, their heavy idols impede their progress, slow them down, tire them out.

They endanger the lives of those who laboriously lug them around. The picture at the beginning of Isaiah 46 is a picture of tiredness, weariness, trudging.

It's like a television commentary of refugees fleeing and we've seen, no doubt, in recent years many pictures of refugees fleeing their homes, whether Vietnam or Korea, Kosovo, Rwanda, East Timor and countless others.

And Isaiah is like an ancient version of Monica Attard commentating on the events or, heaven forbid, a Bill Laurie. But the words are not words of excitement, but the words of slow desperation.

These refugees are not fleeing fast. They are trudging slowly under the burden of their own gods and idols. We read verses 1 and 2, we read them slowly.

[5 : 57] Bell bows down. Nebo stoops. Their idols are on beasts and cattle. These things you carry are loaded as burdens on weary animals.

They stoop. They bow down together. They cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity.

This description is daringly sarcastic about these Babylonian gods and idols. it is mocking and derisory.

The people, ironically, are rescuing their gods. The people are trying to save their gods from the Persian advance. It ought to be that the gods should save the people, but it's the reverse that's happening.

The people having to save their gods. And ironically, again, it is the gods who are bowing down and stooping. Rather than the Babylonians bowing down in worship to their gods, it is the gods who are stooping because they are heavy burdens on the backs of beasts and people.

[7 : 15] These are gods who cannot save themselves, let alone their people. But idols are always like that. Idolatry is always like that.

Whatever the idol is, ancient or modern, it is a burden that cannot save. For many people in our day and age, power and influence is their idol.

They will do anything to be influential, to exercise power and control, whether over a person or a company or an institution. And so the person for whose idol is power and influence, they cannot afford to lose an argument.

They cannot afford to lose a debate. They are always playing games of one-upmanship and manipulation. They cannot afford to let a competitor win. Whatever a rival does, they must do more.

And so for the person whose idol is power and influence, what they find is a burden for their back. they are bound, controlled by their idolatry, burdened by it.

[8 : 34] Or the person for whom money or wealth and possessions is their idol, as it is for so many in our society. The insatiable desire that cannot be quenched, that always drives the idolater to seek more and gain more.

the idolater of money or wealth cannot afford to be generous, is bound by their idolatry never to be generous, always to be greedy in the end.

And whatever the neighbour has, then he or she must have more. That is the greed of the idolatry of money. And so such a person becomes captive to their idolatry, bound by it and controlled by it.

Always seeking work to pay more, more hours to work in order to get more income and so on. Desperately seeking for some sort of promotion or increase in income.

The idolater of money finds in the end that money, wealth, possessions is a burden to carry under which they are bound and controlled.

[9 : 47] people are for the person for whom the family is their idol, as again it is for so many in our society. Not that the idol in itself is a bad thing, family is good, but rather putting family on the pedestal of idolatry turns it into a burden to be born.

when the children have got to have the best of everything and keep up with the Joneses or Smiths down the street, the burden of always keeping up, always providing the best, the demands of the family or the person for that matter, become rather an act of loving service, something that is wearying and binding.

it need not be family, it may just be another person or a spouse. So many times it seems that a young person not only falls in love with somebody but ends up idolising them.

So their every wish is their demand and they become in the end captive to their idol, a burden for their back. But even in our day and age, one of the idols that seems to be liberating is the idolatry of fun or hedonism as it's called technically.

Moomba in a couple of weeks time will be another procession of the idols of hedonism processing through the city. The trouble is with fun is that it never lasts, it's fleeting.

[11 : 25] There's always the need to find more and so many people, so many young people but old people as well seek to serve the idol of enjoyment or fun.

So they're always desperately seeking more experiences, more fun experiences, becomes addictive, looking for better parties, more excitement, more exciting parties, where escapism becomes rather something of enjoyment, rather something of control, desperate, addictive, idolatry.

in the end, the one who is serving the idol of hedonism finds it ironically and tragically to be a burden to be born.

Like ancient Babylon, our world is full of idols. Some of ours may be in a sense more subtle than theirs, but none of them liberate, none of them give freedom, none of them save, all of them tie us down and tire us out.

All of them burdens, bringing captive those who serve the idols. What are your idols?

[12 : 43] What are you lugging around? What's controlling or burdening you in your life? What are you captive to? In marked contrast to any idols, ancient or modern, is God, the real God.

In the service of God, there is true freedom, not burdening. You see, God, the real God, is a burden bearing God, a carrying God.

God is never a burden to his people. Christians can never say that God is a burden for them. It's the opposite as we'll see. Because God is a burden bearing God, a God who carries his people.

He isn't carried by them, but he carries them. So Isaiah goes on to make the contrast. He says that God, the living God, is the God who has carried you from your birth, from even in the womb.

Not just thinking of an individual, but rather of a nation of God's people. So he says in verse 3, listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, that is God's people.

[13 : 58] You've been born by me, not you've born me, but you've been born by me, from your birth, carried from the womb. God's got a long track record, an impressive CV of carrying his people.

Most notably, it's a picture of salvation. It is of God rescuing his people in the past, in Egypt, under Moses, the so-called prince of Egypt, taking them through the wilderness into the promised land.

That's the carrying God, that's the burden-bearing God, the saving God at work. He's got an impressive record that Israel is meant to take notice of here in Babylon in their now second captivity.

captivity. But it's also an intimate picture, a personal picture. The images that are used of God, the carrying God elsewhere in the Old Testament, are God as a father carrying a child, or a shepherd carrying a sheep, or as an adult eagle hovering over and bearing up the young eagles.

And all of those images apply to God saving his people from Egypt, bringing them into the promised land. what God is promising in this passage is that he can and will do the same again for his people.

[15 : 18] His people now are captive in Babylon, not Egypt this time. But just as God brought them out of Egypt in the past, so is he promising here that he will do the same for them and bring them back to the promised land.

So that's what it means in verse 4 when it says, even to your old age I am he. Even when you turn grey I will carry you. You see God has not just carried his people in their infancy and then let them walk around and live as adults independent of him, but he is the God who carries throughout all of their life.

And my father doesn't carry me anymore. He did though when I was a few years old and I can just remember him occasionally carrying me I suppose when I was four or five.

But I guess from about that age I was too big for him to carry. Most of us are the same. But with God it's different.

God doesn't give up carrying us when we get too big. God doesn't give up carrying us when we become adults. God doesn't give us, give up carrying us when we become old.

[16 : 36] God carries us from beginning to end. What he began he will complete.

He is faithful. You may remember the Beatles song, when I'm 64. And the fear expressed in that song of what's it going to be like when I reach that incredibly old age of 64 and will you look after me?

With God we never need express such fear. For when we're 64, 74, 84 or 94 or in case there's anybody else here, 104, God will never abandon you.

He will never stop carrying you. He will never just set you apart to do your own thing. He is always the God who carries us from beginning to end.

That's a great statement, isn't it, of God? A great statement of his power, his ability, his faithfulness and his love. And what a contrast to the idols that are being processed around out of Babylon as it falls before Persia.

[17 : 52] What a burden they are for the people. But what a burden bearing God our God is. The contrast is between false and true religion.

Any false religion, whether it's explicitly not Christian and idolatrous or even some distortions of Christian faith, any false religion is a religion of effort and work, of carrying your God, of bearing your God, supporting your God, of achieving something for your God.

But only Christian faith is a religion of God expending the effort, carrying his people.

Only Christian faith is a faith of what's called grace, not works, in order to find the salvation that God brings. So God says at the end of verse 4, I have made.

That is, I, not Bel, not Nebo, not any other God or idol, I, the God of the Bible, I have made. And I, not Bel, not Nebo, not any other God or idol, I, the God of the Bible, will bear.

[19 : 15] And I, not Bel, not Nebo, not any other God or idol, but I, the God of the Bible, will carry. And I, that same God, will save.

And I, and I alone, is what the end of verse 4 is saying. So God, you see, is incomparable. There's nobody else like him. That's what verse 5 raises as a rhetorical question.

To whom will you liken me and make me equal? The answer is nobody. Who, to whom will you compare me? As though we were alike. There is no one. It's not as though God is just one of a whole pantheon of gods for which we have a sort of smorgasbord choice.

There is but one God. And he is vastly, extraordinarily different. From any other claimant to a throne of God.

Oh yes, it's true that idols are lavish and beautiful. Verse 6 says that those who lavish gold from the person weigh out silver in the scales. They hire a goldsmith who makes it into a god.

[20 : 23] And then they fall down and worship it. Beautiful, extravagant, costly, precious, gold and silver being used. But don't be deceived by its magnificence.

Because so often false religion is extravagant and costly and beautiful, isn't it? You only have to look at the temples and shrines in the world of eastern religions to see that.

But not only there either. So often when Christian faith loses its gospel heart, it turns to extravagance and costliness. And we can see that in many parts of the world as well.

The gods that are made so beautiful and out of such precious metal are complete failures. Verse 7 tells us that firstly they're immobile.

The people lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place and then the last part of the statement is very sarcastic and fancy that it stands there. It doesn't move.

[21 : 26] It can't move. It's just a lump of gold after all. But not only can it not move, it can't answer either. If anyone cries out to it, it does not answer.

It's like a child talking to a teddy bear. A teddy bear only answers in the imagination. It's like that for an idol as well. But not only is it immobile and silent, it is also unable to save anyone from trouble.

The end of verse 7 finishes. You see, don't be deceived by religious magnificence. Don't be deceived by the use of gold and silver and ornateness.

Maybe impressive, but impotent. Maybe quite gaudy, but far from godly. In contrast to these idols, the God of the Bible is mobile, he answers and he saves.

God pleads with his people to think about this in verse 8. Remember this, consider it, recall it to mind, you transgressors. He's trying to awaken them from their idolatrous stupor.

[22 : 40] How dare you doubt my goodness, he's saying. How dare you doubt my ability. How dare you turn to idols that are nothing and think that they can save you where I can't. And to cure their unbelief, he pleads with them to remember the past in verse 9.

Remember the former things of old. That is, think back to when Moses led you out of Egypt. It was God who did that. It was God who conquered the Pharaoh's army. It was God who brought you through the Red Sea.

It was God who brought you through the wilderness and into the promised land and conquered all the nations that were there. It was God who did all that. For I am God, he says in verse 9, and there is no other. I am God and there is no one like me.

To cure unbelief, look to God's past acts. As John Newton, the hymn writer, says, be gone unbelief, my saviour is near and for my relief will surely appear.

His love in time past forbids me to think he'll leave me at last in trouble to sink. As God has saved in the past, so is he here promising to do for Israel again.

[23 : 52] Verse 10, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times, things not yet done, saying my purpose shall stand and I will fulfil my intention. God has purposed to save his people and he will do it.

And the means by which he'll do it, as we saw in more detail last week, is by calling a bird of prey from the east. Not literally a bird, but rather the man for my purpose from a far country.

We saw that to be the Persian Emperor Cyrus, a pagan ruler, the man whose insignia was an eagle, a bird of prey. And he came from Persia to the east. That's the means by which God was going to save his people.

They objected to it. They thought it was rather odd and peculiar at the best that God should use a pagan to bring about salvation. But God assures them that that's what he said will happen and that's what indeed will happen.

The end of verse 7 expresses great certainty. Literally, it's I have surely spoken. Certainly I'll bring it to pass. Indeed, I have planned it and I will do it.

[24 : 57] God can be depended upon. Now the irony is that his own people refuse to believe those words. Verse 12, listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from deliverance.

Israel doesn't believe his words. Their lack of faith means that they're far away from the deliverance that he's promising. And yet despite that, despite their transgression and their sin, God still promises to deliver them.

I will bring near my deliverance. It's not far off. And my salvation will not tarry. I will put salvation in Zion, another word for Jerusalem, for Israel, my glory.

That's one of the most extraordinary things about God. Not only does he carry his people, but he carries his transgressing, sinning, faithless, rebellious people.

Israel is unwilling to turn to God. It refuses to place its faith in him. Disbelieves his promises. And God nonetheless says to them, despite all their transgression and sin and rebellion, I will carry you.

[26 : 20] I'll save you. I'll deliver you. I've promised it and I'll fulfil it. It's an extraordinary act of God. He doesn't offer to carry those who are good or righteous, but he carries sinful, rebellious, transgressing people to salvation.

It's not an easy thing for God to carry us. It's not an easy thing for God to carry Israel here. Not because we're human, not because we're overweight.

That doesn't make us heavy for God. The thing that's a burden, a weight for God to carry is our sin, our iniquity, our lack of faith in God, our refusal to trust his promises.

You might remember of two or three weeks ago a verse from chapter 43. God speaking says, you have burdened me with your sins. You have wearied me with your iniquities.

Iniquities. And yet despite that, God will carry. He'll pick up the burden of sin and iniquity. It's heavy, but not too heavy for God.

[27 : 41] And in a few weeks' time, we'll see in a few chapters hence in Isaiah, the servant that God will send to do just that. Who was that servant?

The one who ironically stooped low under the burden of a cross. The one who ironically was made immobile on that same cross.

The one who ironically was silent and dumb before his accusers. The one who ironically was mocked by those saying he cannot save himself, himself, let alone others.

But this one was no idol. This one was God. The one who bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might be righteous.

This is the God who carries. The God who carries our sins and our iniquities all the way to the cross. Not easy for God to do that.

[29 : 10] It cost him his son's life. But out of his extraordinary love, he carried our sins there and carries us home to heaven.

The God who carries. And we need no other God to save us, even to old age. This God is never a burden to us. This God is never one for us to lug around, but rather the one who invites us to take his easy yoke and light burden.

No wonder the hymn writer sang with praise, what a friend we have in Jesus, for that's his name of course, all our sins and griefs to bear.

So put away your idols. Put away the things that burden you spiritually, that bind you in your life, that you serve but find really in the end bondage and no salvation.

Put them away. Turn to the living God, the God of the Bible. He alone can save. As he said, I have made and I will bear, I will carry and I will save.

[30 : 30] For I am God and there is no other. I am God and there is none like me. Thank you.