

Isaiah 44

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[0 : 00] Isaiah 44 on page 604 and 5. We shop in Liddle. I popped in there yesterday afternoon. I was trying to get some raspberries.

! You can go down the aisle.

You can pick what you want. Liddle of an imitation for everything, don't they? Whether it's granola or Weetabix or crunching that cornflakes.

There's all sorts of varieties. Something for everyone. And the Assyrians and the Babylonians in Isaiah's day, they didn't have supermarkets. But if they did have the equivalent of Liddle, they would be jam-packed, not with breakfast seagulls, but with gods.

And with deities. That would be available for your worship. You get a different god depending on your circumstance, depending on your need, depending on your mood. You could choose from all sorts of numerous gods.

[1 : 15] And that would bring you what you're looking for. And that aisle in the Babylonian and Assyrian supermarket would have been crammed full of people all the time. It would have been on the left as you went in, the kind of prime spot.

Because everyone in Isaiah's day was looking for a god. Or gods. And here was the big challenge for the prophet of the Lord Isaiah. Because as he is right, whom God had redeemed, whom God had taken as his whole people, from all the peoples of the earth, as God's people looked at the Assyrians and the Babylonians, as they looked at those people who come in and conquered them, they looked at those people and they got the impression that maybe there was something about this idolatry gig after all.

Maybe it wasn't that bad. I mean, look at the Assyrians. And look at the Babylonians. They're rich. They're sophisticated. They live in nice houses. That's got to have something to do with the power of their god, hasn't it?

So it just seemed absurd to the conquered Israelites. Those who'd been defeated by these people, who'd been dragged off into exile, to maintain that their god was supreme over all the other gods. And these gods of the conquerors, your gods are nothing. When they compared their lifestyle to the lifestyle of those other people, it seems point away from the supremacy of the Lord God of Israel.

[2 : 46] Well, if you were with us last term, you will know that Isaiah has got something that's near for being his body on the theme of idolatry. It keeps coming back again and again. And in chapter 40 to 48, that is his main concern.

And what he keeps reminding the Israelites is not very complicated at all. The message is pretty straightforward. It's a bit like when President Calvin Coolidge came home from church one day. And the story goes that his wife asked him, what was the sin about? And Coolidge grumpily said he spoke about sin. His wife asked him, what did he say about sin? And Coolidge replied, he said he was against it.

And that is pretty much the message of Isaiah here. That God and idolatry, God is against it. Now we can all go home at this point and finish, but there's lots more to dig into.

You and I need to understand why God is so opposed to idolatry. And the reason why that is so important for you today in the 21st century is you and I find ourselves constantly facing the same kind of temptation as the Israelites.

[3 : 58] And that temptation goes far beyond the wooden statues that we read about in today's passage. Here's how Tim Callow to find an idol. He's got an excellent little book called Counterfeit Gods. And in that book he says, An idol is anything more important to you than God.

Anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God. Anything you seek to give you what only God can give you.

And so when we understand that, you and I face exactly the same temptations as the Israelites said. As we look around ourselves, we see people with money and with success. And we see people who are living in the lack of luxury. And we see people who have got what we want. They're successful. Or they're popular. They get great job satisfaction. And as far as we can tell, they've got that because they've devoted themselves to the acquisition of money, the pursuit of success, the pursuit of power, the pursuit of great reputation.

[5 : 07] And it tempts us to say, maybe there is something in this ideology gig after all. Maybe it isn't all that bad to go after those gods.

And here am I trying to tell people how great God is and that money set on power are not what they're cracked up to be, but the people, they go after those things. And the people who go after those things don't seem to be doing too badly at all, do they?

So children, your mates in school, your friends in school, who actually, they don't care about God, they don't love the Lord Jesus, and they seem to be, well, pretty happy.

They seem to be doing okay. They don't follow God's law. Why not just be like them? And Isaiah wants to expose to you the absolute absurdity, the craziness of thinking that way.

And he wants us to see how mad, how mad it is to mess with lifeless idols when you can know the living God. So we're going to look at that. And see in three points, the reality of the living God, the absurdity of idolatry, and then thirdly, the redemptive reasons to worship God and not idols.

[6 : 25] And all because it is mad to worship and to mess with lifeless idols when you can know the living God. So first of all, from verses 6 onwards, the reality of the living God.

Let me go to 6 of Isaiah 44. Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and His Redeemer, the Lord of hosts, I am the first and I am the last. And besides me, there is no God.

Who is like me? Let Him proclaim it. Let Him declare and set it before me. Since I appointed an ancient people, let them declare what is to come and what will happen. Fear not. Nor be afraid. Have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses. Is there a God besides me? There is no rock. I know not any.

Because there's numerous places during this book. Isaiah helps us to see how God lays out His CV as a reminder that there is absolutely no one like Him.

[7 : 24] That the Lord God is in a category all of His own. And so He points us, first of all, to His very nature. He says, He is the King of Israel. He is their Redeemer.

But not only that, He is the Lord of hosts. Literally, He is the Lord Almighty. All the powers and the armies of heaven are at His command.

He says, doesn't He, He is the first and He is the last. He is the first. That means He doesn't derive His life from elsewhere. In contrast, to what you're about to see later on in the chapter.

God is self-sufficient. He is self-sufficient and He is the last. He will outlast all things. And He will remain supreme forever.

And it's not just in His nature that He says He is unique. It is in the way that He sovereignly rules over all of history. God is alone is the one who has orchestrated everything in history.

[8 : 30] Up to this point, and He will orchestrate everything in the future. It's not that just in what happens, but in what it means.

God interprets history for us. And then Isaiah comes back to the challenge of the idols that we saw in chapter 41. It's a challenge by which you can show whether your God is the real God.

Can your God predict the future? Because the God of the Bible gets 100% success rate every time. He's never got it wrong. And God says to the idols, can you do that?

Can you predict the coming of the Babylonian domination, which God spoke to Isaiah in chapter 39? Can you predict who the world conqueror will be and bring down Babylon?

Can you tell what the ruler of that nation, who will come almost 200 years from now, what his name will be? Because Isaiah gives his name at the end of the chapter. Here is the reality of the living God when you start to take it in.

[9 : 34] You start to realise what an amazing difference this should make in your life, that we follow and we trust this God. Because if you know the God of the Bible, you know the God who holds the future in his hands.

And the God who tells you what that future will be like in prophecy. So don't you think that it makes sense that you can rest in him at the start of this year? And you can walk into that future, you don't

know what the future is for you.

None of us do. But God does. So God says to you at the start of verse 8, do not tremble. Fear not. Don't be afraid, trust me. And if you walk into the future holding my hand, you have nothing to worry about because I know what is there.

I'll be your rock, that's it. Don't look for a rock elsewhere because there is no other. There is no other.

I'm the only one. Do you see what God is doing before he gets to the absurdity of the idols? He's saying, if you have a God like me, why would you ever consider messing with idols?

[10:49] Paul Newman was a very famous actor and he was quite well known for his devotion to his wife Joanne Woodward. And Paul Newman was once asked when he worked with so many beautiful women in the Hollywood industry, why or how he stayed faithful to his wife.

And Newman famously quipped, why go out for a hamburger when you have stayed at home? Now, I'm not sure that his wife appreciated what he was saying.

I'm sure she appreciated the sentiment behind it. But that's the kind of argument you've got as I've already thought. Why mess with idols when you've got the true and the living God? when you've got the fountain of the living waters?

When you've got the first and the last of the living God? Here is the reality of the one true God. Well, at this point Isaiah says to us, we've just heard from the sovereign living God.

Stay tuned because after the break I'll be taking us on a field trip to God's shop. And you won't want to miss this one. And sure enough after the commercial we see Isaiah in the idol shop.

[12:04] And it's a haven of activity and busyness. So the verses 12 and 13 the futility of idols. The eidensmith takes a cutting tool and he works it over the coals and he fashions it with hammers and he works it with his strong arm.

He becomes hungry. His strength fails. He drinks no water and he gets faint. And the carpenter scratches a line. He marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes.

He marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man with the beauty of a man to dwell in a house. Isaiah wants you to see how much work goes into idolatry.

You've got an island over there. You've got a carpenter over here. And there are various kinds of wood. And it all involves a lot of skill to make what are obviously works of art. It's saying this isn't haphazard.

This isn't random. This is something that people take very, very seriously. And the reason they take it seriously is because they're very religious people. How do I know they are religious people?

[13:10] Because everyone, everyone is a religious person. Everyone worships something. And if you don't worship the one true God, you won't worship nothing.

You'll worship something else. in search for meaning and significance. About a year ago, a couple of years ago, there was a big fuss, wasn't there, in the media about the Sunday Assembly.

Do you remember it? It's the Atheist Church. And in the article, the Atheist Church in London met in a disused church building. And if you look at the picture, it looks very much like a regular church service.

It's got the architecture of the church building. It's got a PowerPoint. PowerPoint. You've even got the casually dressed preacher with no tie. Instead of Charles Wesley, the article said they signed Stevie Wonder.

And instead of Isaiah, they read out Alice's Wonderland. They lectured instead of sermons. Instead of the reading of the law, the Ten Commandments, the Sunday gathering has ten ethical guidelines.

[14:19] Now, doesn't that strike you as terribly ironic? That there is an effort to offer something that rejects religion, the Sunday Assembly, but all it could do was imitate religion.

All it could do is provide more religion. Because every single person in this world is a deeply religious person. And they obviously take a lot of care about this, a lot of thought and preparation has gone into it, just like in Isaiah's shop.

Because we are all religious people. And Isaiah wants us to see in the middle of this God shop the absolute absurdity of what is going on here. He says these men they come together and they work together to make this idol.

They're its creators. They've made it and now they are worshipping what they've made. And it seems a little strange. What does the idol resemble? What does the idol resemble? Surprise, surprise, the end of verse 13, it resembles them.

Looks like them. And what's it made of? It's made of wood, wood from a tree in a forest that's dependent on the rain you know. You do know don't you, you can't have a God unless the weather is quite right.

[15 : 38] And so then Isaiah asks one of the carpenters to explain, you worship an idol. You worship an idol of wood and the carpenter replies, well, yes, it's more leftover wood.

And because we've got a fire and the fire is there to keep us warm and we need the fire to cook our food over the fire, but we had some wood left over after we built the fire so we made it into a God that we worship.

And we bow down to it and we pray to it and we ask it to save us and they say it all with a straight face. Firewood, bakewood, wood and Godwood.

All from the same log. What a great deal. Buy your wood here. Two for the price of one. Got firewood, bakewood and Godwood, all from the same log.

You couldn't make it up. Archimuthier spouss out the absurdity about this. He says, the idol's ancestry is earthly. Its cultivation, human.

[16 : 44] Its life derived from the creation and its deity is the chance which allowed it to survive the needs of the kitchen fire. The idol's logic suggests that what has been given to him, the physical benefit of cooked food and the comfort of bodily warmth can also nourish his soul.

But it's how Isaiah brings an end to this section of this little field trip that I think is so instructive. Can you look at verse 9? And then verse 18. Old-fashioned idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit.

Their witnesses neither see nor know that they may be put to shame. And then verse 18. They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes so that they cannot see, and their hearts so that they cannot understand.

There's some debate about verse 9, whether the witnesses are the idols themselves or the idol makers. I think it is the idol makers.

But Isaiah is making a connection, which I really want you to make this morning, between the idols and the idol makers. And he says, just as the idols are blind and ignorant, so are the idolaters who have made their idols.

[18 : 04] The idolaters, can you get it, have become like the idols. And we've already seen that in the prophet Isaiah. But let me take you to another passage in Psalms, which says the same thing.

Psalms 115 says, why do the Neesians say, where is their God? Our God is in heaven. He does whatever it pleases him, but their idols are silver and gold made by the hands of men.

They have mouths, but they cannot speak. They have eyes, but they cannot see. They have ears, but they cannot hear. They have noses, but they cannot smell. They have hands, but they cannot feel.

They have feet, but they cannot walk. Nor can they suffer after a sound of their throats. Then what does he say? He says, those who make them will be like them. And so will all who trust in him.

And that is what Isaiah is really wanting to say to you and I this morning. Those who make idols will be like the idols. And so will all them put their trust in idols.

[19 : 08] You get like the people you live with. You get like the people you worship. Greg Beal says, we resemble what we revere, either for ruin or restoration.

I try to think about this. The last few months as we've been going through these passages, how do we become like the idols that we worship? what does it mean?

It can't mean, can it, that if you make money, you're idols, that somehow you become like money.

That isn't it. That you take on some characteristics, or if you make your career the central thing, which you derive all your significance that you become like your career.

I don't think that's the right train of thought. And it makes me think that Isaiah has got something that is more general in mind. At its most basic level, he's telling you and I that if we choose to devote ourselves to anything other than God, something that is lifeless, it will render us spiritually dense.

Spiritually blind and just like the idol, which in the end will bring us to ruin. I've been milling back and forth with a friend on this.

[20 : 32] And I do think that Jesus gives us a wonderful illustration of this. He gives us an illustration of what Isaiah 44 is talking about. About how we can resemble what we revere and worship, either for ruin or for restoration.

And the illustration comes in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. So can you put a paw in Isaiah 44, a finger in Isaiah 44, and turn over to Luke 16, which is on page 875.

And in the most famous, this famous parable, Luke tells us, in Luke 16, verses 14 to 15, which is on page 875, the Pharisees were lovers of money.

And they heard all these things and they ridiculed him. They were lovers of money, money is an idol for them. And they ridiculed him. And he said to them, you are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your heart, for what is exalted amongst men is an abomination.

And it's God, in God's sight. So here are religious church-grown people, and they are steeped in idols. They are steeped in idols to which they're oblivious.

[21 : 46] Here are people who are consumed by money, with wealth, and with accumulation. They found their identity in their bank balances, houses, and the size of their homes, and what job they had, and what phone they had.

And so Jesus tells them a parable, and the parable involves two people, a rich man and Lazarus.

And Jesus introduces his characters to the listeners like this, look at verse 19.

There's a rich man who's clothed in purple and fine linen, and who feasted sumptuously every day.

And on his gate was laid out a poor man named Lazarus covered with sores.

Jesus sets up a really simple story of compare and contrast between the rich man and Lazarus.

And the contrast is between what they wear. The rich man is clothed in purple, and Lazarus, well, he is barely covered, really.

[22 : 57] There's a contrast in their diet. The rich man had really great food. The Lazarus long scraps are falling on the table. But they're not the big differences.

What is the big difference in the story of the rich man and Lazarus? What is the main contrast? It's very, very easy to miss it. The big contrast is one of the men has got a name and one of them hasn't.

This is the only parable in the Gospels where Jesus gives someone a name. But here's the thing. You would think if Jesus was going to give one character a name, he would give both characters a name, wouldn't you?

wouldn't he? But he doesn't do that, and he doesn't do that deliberately. And he gives Lazarus a name, but the rich man has none. And I think in that, we have the greatest illustration of Isaiah 44. The consequence of running after idols. Why does Jesus not give the rich man a name? The rich man, I think, does not get a name because a rich man is all that he is. He's just a rich man.

[24 : 15] And he's nothing. Or he's nothing. Him being a rich man with all his identity. And he has become what he worships.

And in contrast, Lazarus, who is the one who trusts God in this picture, he has nothing, but he still has a name, he has an identity. And Lazarus knows who he is, and who he is, and he knows what his purpose is.

And despite all the terrible circumstances in his life, there's still an identity, there's still a self through it all. But when it comes to the rich man, his whole life was built around riches. His status, his wealth, his sins, and if those things were to go, there would be no one and nothing left.

And so when the rich man died as he did, his identity died with him, and he's simply the man with no name. And I think that is Jesus' way of pointing to us the result of rejecting God and following idols. the rich man, his idol was his wealth, his identity was that he was a rich man. But if that is your idol, isn't it, something happens, you lose your money, the bottom drops out of the market, and you melt down, you become what you worshipped.

[25 : 35] And it could well be, couldn't it, that this morning your idol actually is not money, it is your reputation. or it is sport, or it is your popularity, or it is your looks, or it is your career.

And whatever it is, that idol has become your whole self, so if it was taken away, life wouldn't be worth living anymore. And you've lost yourself. And that wasn't what you built your life on, but now you've lost it, and you've become a shell of who you were.

And you resemble what you revere in the worst case for ruin. And so in hell this morning there are people who are fathers because they made their children an idol.

And they are architects because they made their architecture an idol. And they are rich men. And there are people that bound their identity in anything but God, and they've lost their identity.

You become a shell of who you were, you resemble what you revere, and in the worst case for ruin. And the irony of all this is while these idols that Isaiah is speaking about are nothing, he wants us to

understand, therefore, that they do have a power in our lives.

[27 : 00] So go back with me to Isaiah 44, verse 20. Isaiah 44, verse 20. He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself. Is there not a lie in my right hand?

Why can't he save himself? He can't save himself because he's enslaved. Sin enslaved. And the idolater is hooked on the idol, and he's lost all capacity to free himself or herself.

And so we see, don't we, the wonderful irony at the end of verse 20. Is there not a lie that I am holding in my right hand?

And the idolater thinks that he is holding on to the idol, but the truth of Isaiah 44 is that the idol is holding on to him. And he cannot break away from the bondage or of what he calls a lie that is false in God.

He's still holding on to it. Is this no lie? He won't give it up. He's lost his freedom, the absurdity of idolatry, and Isaiah shows you how futile it is, and how enslaving it is, and how you should run away from it.

[28 : 07] Isaiah's commentary drips with sarcasm, but you and I need to feel the weight. That the one true God has revealed himself, and there is no one like him. But if you and I decide to run after other things for your significance, for your meaning, for your glory, for your identity, you will become spiritually lifeless, and dense, like those lifeless idols that you pursue, in the end.

In the end, you lose your very self, and you become nameless. Well, Isaiah isn't quite done yet, and he wants to come back to give you and I the good news, and that is the redemptive reasons why you and I should worship God.

Thirdly, the redemptive reasons why you and I should worship God, and the reason comes in verses 21-23, can you see that? Remember these things, O Jacob and Israel, for you are my servant, I formed you, you are my servant, O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me, I blotted out your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like mist, return to me, for I have redeemed you. Sing, O heavens, for the Lord is dead, shout, depths of the earth, break forth into singing of mountains, of forest and every tree in it, for the Lord has redeemed God says to his people, his church, do you see how the idolaters fashioned you?

They're gods of wood, I fashion you, I fashion you, you're my people to whom I committed. And he calls on the people and he calls on us to remember two things which we need to remember as we come to the table, two things which set God apart from an idol, every other God in this world, first of all he says I always keep my promises, it's what he's saying when he says I will not forget you, remembering and forgetfulness in the Old Testament, it's covenantal language, it's not that God suddenly, oh I have forgotten and now I remember, no of course not, God has said I made promises to you and I will act on those promises, and you can be sure about that, I will never break my promises to you in 2017, I don't care what your idol of choice is today, and there's probably as many as there are people today, I guarantee you whatever idol you're tempted to pursue, it never keeps its promises, that's it, the relationship that you thought would bring you all the satisfaction in the world, has it done that?

[30 : 36] Of course it hasn't, you've got the money, you've got the job, has it brought the satisfaction? Of course it doesn't, whatever cares, my idol dangles in front of you, whether it's success, prosperity, or happy family life, or perfect children, or a fat bank balance, the promise will be broken, and yet God says to you, I have never, I have never, and I will never ever break my promises to you, and secondly God says I want you to remember also that I've forgiven you when you failed me, I love the picture of verse 22, I've blotted out your transgressions, swiped them away, I've swiped them away, I've blotted mouths like a cloud, and your sins like the morning mist, an idol will never forgive you when you fail it, let's say your idol is your career, and that's where you gain this great reputation, and it's where you derive your ultimate sense of significance, and importance in life, and you've been so diligent in making offerings, you've worked long hours, when other people have gone home, you've been there, you've missed really important times with your friends and your families, because you had to work, and then you back off maybe a little bit, you realise it's beginning to affect your health, or your family tells you, you've got to back off, or because of your conscience, and does your idol say, no that's okay,

I'll be there for you, no chance does it, it says no more offerings to deal it off, an idol never forgives you when you fail it, but the Bible, he'll forgive you, because he has forgiven you, have you failed God this morning, I know I have, and I've got pretty good sense listening to my Christian life, what the idols in my heart are, and they tend to pull me away from God, and when I fail him, when I go

after these other things, because I think they're promising me things, and they're promising me things that they can never give, how foolish, what does God require of me when I fail him, look again at what he says in verse 22, he says, I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like a mist, return to me, return to me, for I have redeemed, just notice at the end of verse 22, return to me, for I will redeem you, is that what it says, no it's not, fear not, for I have redeemed you,

God doesn't say, come back to me this morning, and maybe, you know, we can talk about it, we can work this through, you try harder, and I'll redeem you, I'll forgive you this time, no return to me, because I've redeemed you, return to me, because I've already slept, away your offences are a cloud, you see the order, that is the gospel, you and I, we don't earn our way out of idolatry, we can only turn back to God when we've gone the other direction, because he has already done for us by his grace, he's dealt with our sins, he's dealt with our idolatry already, he's redeemed us already, you say, how has he done that, well for the Israelites they would have looked back to the Exodus, that redemption of which God is speaking about, but for the Christian today our focus is different isn't it, we look back to another day, we come to the Lord's table and we look back to a greater redemption, a greater Exodus, because the New Testament says you look back to the cross, and that's where he redeemed you, and so the

Apostle Paul writing in Colossians 1 says he's delivered us from the domain of darkness, and he's transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son, in whom we have redemption, forgiveness of sins, it is on the cross that God redeemed us through the death of Jesus, it is on the cross that God swept our offenses like a cloud away, on the cross the Lord Jesus bore the penalty for our offenses, Jesus bore the penalty for our idolatry, and it's through the cross God says to you I want you now to have a new start, I want you to have a new life, and I want you to experience transformation, and to know what real significance is, and what real meaning is, and the things that the idol promised you that they will never deliver, he says in Christ redemption is already yours, in Christ the forgiveness of sins is guaranteed, God says I've done it, and so return to me, or for those who are here this morning who can't return because you've never turned to begin with, he says to you this morning, turn to me, because if you turn to me, and you trust in me, this can be true of you as well, your sin has been painful, it's been wiped clear, and you this morning can be redeemed to you, and as you read through this chapter like

I have this week, you think why on earth do I ever go after those other things, why do I look at the Babylonians and the Assyrians around me and think maybe there is something to this idolatry do, and you read a passage like this and you realise how absolutely mad it is to mess with lifeless and dead idols, when the living God invites you to know him, you shall not have any gods before you, you shall not make for yourself an idol, why, because the living God invites you to know him.