

Isaiah 48

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[0 : 00] I don't know whether you've ever done one of these things where you draw a line on a page and then you mark the significant points in your life.! Most of us, I expect all of us would put down the year of our birth, wouldn't we? I guess that's pretty significant. If you're married, you'd probably put that down. If you graduated, you'd stick that on the page, you'd mark that, birth of your children and so on.

And one year that I would quickly mark down would be 1990. We moved house on that date and I was 14. We moved to a village about 5 miles away from where we were living and I swapped schools.

I'd made no secret to my parents in the run-up that I thought that moving house was a disastrous idea and didn't want to go. However we did, and as you do as a 14-year-old boy, you make peace with it, don't you? And you think, well, it could have its benefits.

It could provide a fresh start. I hadn't worked particularly hard in school that year, which is normal, and I'd gone into some pretty bad friendships.

And so you imagine, don't you, a new start, a new year, and a new you. A blank canvas. A new me. A place where no one knows you, where you can kind of create for yourself a new image.

[1 : 23] And you can behave as you want others to perceive you while we moved. And I quickly discovered that the fresh start, the new me, well, it was all a bit of a pipe dream.

Even though my surroundings had changed, that didn't mean that I had changed. And I remained the same young man I was at my old school. With all the internal struggles or sins that I'd battled with there.

They didn't just disappear. They'd just become the internal struggles and battles of a new place. A change of address had not produced in me a change of heart.

It was by and large the same me in a different location. Well, that is really the message of Isaiah 48. But at a much deeper level.

Isaiah chapter 48 serves as a summary for chapters 40 to 47. And Isaiah brings together a number of the themes that we've looked at in the last few weeks. And he's wrapping up on this section where God promises, I will bring my people out of exile.

[2 : 33] I will bring them back from Babylon to the city of God's Jerusalem. And we saw last week that that rescue was going to come through the most unexpected individual, a Persian pagan king called Cyrus.

Whom God referred to in chapter 45 shockingly as his Messiah. As his anointed one. As the one who would be appointed by God to deliver them from Babylon. And as we keep moving, and the chapter before this one in chapter 47, God addresses the Babylonians.

To tell them that even though, Babylonians, you have been the agent of judgment upon Israel. That does not excuse how you live. And God tells them in chapter 47, in no uncertain terms, Babylon, I will bring you down.

Your downfall in judgment from your pride and your arrogance. And how you've treated my people. I will bring you down. But then in chapter 48, God addresses his people, the Israelites.

Those who he's going to bring back from Israel to Jerusalem. And here's the bottom line of what God wants them to understand through this chapter. And what he wants you and I to understand through this chapter.

[3 : 48] That a change of address does not produce a change of heart. A change of address does not produce a change of heart.

And that is the conclusion that we're going to move to this morning. And to do that, we look at the condition of the human heart and the reason for God's patience with the people. And then lastly, a

glimpse of God's grace that changes everything.

So first of all, the condition of the human heart. Several times through the chapter, God calls on his people to listen. Verse 12 and verse 14. But also right here at the beginning of the chapter.

Specifically, they've got to listen to him. They haven't been listening. So the first call to listen comes in verse 1. Hear this. Listen, O house of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel and who come from the waters of Judah, who swear by the name of the Lord and confess the God of Israel, but not in truth or right.

For they call themselves after the holy city and stay themselves on the God of Israel. The Lord of hosts is his name. And God says, Listen to me. Hear me.

[4 : 59] And then he addresses them in terms like the people would have understood in terms that they would have worn as part of their national identity. The honoured name of Israel.

The impeccable pedigree of being in the line of Judah. A true religious allegiance by their oath. A privileged citizenship that they were very proud of.

A mighty God on whom they could rely. But right in the middle of these glorious truths, God says, the end of verse 1, but it's not really true, is it? It's not really true.

You'd like to make these proud claims, but based on my current observations, they are all without reality. There's no genuineness in what I've just described.

There's no righteousness, people of God, in how you're living. For the Israelite, all that language was a facade. So what was the reality? Well, we're told they're true condition in verse 4 and verse 8.

[6 : 04] Look at verse 4. Because I know that you are obstinate. And your neck is like iron sinew. And your forehead is brass. Verse 8.

You've never heard, you've never known. From of old your ear has not been opened. For I knew that you would surely deal treacherously. And that from before birth you were called a rebel.

That's the true picture of the people of God. That God was going to deliver from Babylon and shepherd home. They were stubborn.

They were idolatrous. And they were inattentive. And they were uncomprehending and treacherous and rebellious. It's quite a list when you say. The image of a neck of iron is pointing to their utter self-confidence.

Their unwillingness to submit to anyone let alone God. Their foreheads of bronze. Their hard-headed people who are closed-minded and they refuse to listen.

[7 : 10] And the accusation of treachery was particularly telling because God had made exactly the same accusation about pagan Assyria back in chapter 42. Well, in chapter 22.

God's point being here was Israel who had been called by God to demonstrate a different path. They'd been called by God to show a God-glorifying way.

And instead they'd allowed this world to squeeze it into its own mouth. And God's indictment of Israel here is a reminder to you and I that lip service means absolutely nothing to God if our hearts are devoted to something else.

Past generations would have hid behind the facade of denominational loyalty. You know the labels. I must be okay with God because I'm a Methodist.

I must be okay with God because I'm a Baptist. I'm a Presbyterian. I'm an Anglican. But no one plays really those denominational cards anymore, do they? But it doesn't mean we don't like to still play the same game.

[8 : 18] It's just we've changed the cards. So some of us know all the Christian lingo, don't we? I'm saved. I've been washed by the blood.

I've been baptised. I know the catechism. I've had some Christian experience. I went on camp. I went forward.

I prayed the prayer. And it's a badge of spiritual honour or at best fire insurance. And for some who play those cards, God says to you, I look at your heart.

I look at your heart. And all those proud things, they've got no basis in reality, have they? And actually, I see the same stubbornness and idolatry and rebellion and treachery that I saw in my people Israel.

Your words are a facade. How bad was the condition of an Israelite's heart? Well, look at verses 5-7. I declared them to you from abode.

[9 : 25] Before they came to pass, I announced them to you. Lest you should say, my idol did them, my carved image and my metal image commanded them. You've heard. Now see all this. And will you not declare it?

From this time forth, I announced you new things, hidden things that you've not known. They are created now, not long ago. Before today, you've never heard of them. Lest you should say, behold, I knew them. Here's what God is saying here.

Do you know why I prophesied in advance what was going to happen and what I was going to do? Because if I had not told you ahead of time what I was going to do in the future, when all those things happened, you would have had the gall to attribute that to your idols.

And in the future, you would have come along and said, yeah, I knew that was going to happen. In previous chapters in Isaiah, we've seen God's unique ability to predict the future, to expose the deadness and the blindness of idols.

And now he uses the same deadness to expose the deadness of his people, such as their hearts. Now all that raises an important question.

[10 : 40] Why then, from chapter 40, has God committed himself to deliver his people from exile in Babylon when he knows that they are still utterly idolatrous? Why has he done that? They're stubborn and they're rebellious.

They don't merit this rescue at all. Exile in Babylon, it hasn't reformed them. And so they're still committing the same sins that they were committing before they went into exile.

So why does God not wipe his hands of them and forget them and let them rot in Babylon? Well, God gives the answer in verses 9-11, and it is a shocking answer to modern people. Look at what it says in verses 9-11.

For my name's sake, for my name's sake, I defer my anger. For the sake of my praise, I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. Behold, I have refined you, but not a silver.

I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it. For how should my name be profaned? My glory, I will not give to another.

[11 : 43] God says, the reason I've not wiped my hands of you, the reason I've not given you what you deserve, is for the sake of my name. For the sake of my praise, for the sake of my glory.

And there are a couple of things that we really need to consider here. The first is we actually thought about it a few weeks ago, but it's so foreign to our way of thinking, we need to think about it again. Because when you read verses 9-11, it's very easy to think, isn't God just being a tad egotistical here?

Isn't God being just a little bit self-sanguished, a bit full of himself, a bit arrogant? That everything God does is for God's own sake?

That everything God does is for God's own glory? In every group of people, there are here I am people, and here you are people.

You know the here I am people, and they say, don't they, that's enough from me about me, what do you think about me? And then there are there are you people.

[12 : 54] People are always focused on the other. It's not hard, is it, to work out who you'd rather have for lunch? The here I am people, or the here you are people.

Who would you rather have a friend, the here I am person, or the there you are person? And as you read Isaiah 48, 9 to 11, God does come across as a here I am person, doesn't he?

So why is it okay for him to be like that, and not for us? well the simple answer to that is, he is God, and you are not even though you wish you were.

Because God created everything, God created everything, and everything redounds in his glory.

And you might say, well if he defined the purpose, couldn't he have defined it in such a way that the glory goes to others?

Couldn't he share that glory? Well he could. But if he had, he would have been an idolater. That's where we landed a few weeks ago. God would be telling us that there is something more beautiful in the universe than I am, but there isn't.

[14 : 07] God would be saying there is something more satisfying in the world than I am, but there isn't. God would be suggesting that there is something more splendid and something more perfect and something more righteous and more just.

But you see there isn't anything greater than God. He would be proclaiming that there is something more loving and more passionate and more merciful and more forgiving than God, but there isn't.

God would be saying to anyone else but himself, he would be an idolater. Because he would be saying there is something more ultimate than me.

And he would be lying. As Isaiah has been telling us over and over and over again, God says, I am God and there is no other.

God and God is God's demonstration of patience, his withholding of wrath, as you say here, how does that work for the glory of his name?

[15:10] How does that delaying of his wrath for the sake of his name and glory, how does that work? Well I think we're helped in this by going back to another passage earlier on in the Bible and to know that God has been around this block before.

So keep a pause in Isaiah 48 and come with me to Exodus chapter 32. Exodus chapter 32. I'll give you the page number. Exodus chapter 32.

If you've got a black Bible, it's on page 72. And as you turn there, let me set the scene a little bit. It's on page 72 Exodus 32. And the situation in this chapter is that the people of Israel are at the bottom of Mount Sinai while Moses is up at the top receiving the law from God.

And they are a little bit tired of having to wait for Moses to come back down from the mountains. So they come up with the bright idea of melting down all their jewellery and crafting an idol the shape of a calf to worship.

The golden calf. And God decides to give Moses advance warning of what is going on at the base of the mountain. So we pick it up in Exodus chapter 32 in verse 7.

[16:23] the Lord said to Moses go down for your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them.

They have made for themselves a golden calf and they have worshipped it and sacrificed it and said these are your gods of Israel who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. And the Lord said to Moses I have seen this people and behold it is a stiff necked people.

Now therefore let me alone that my wrath may burn hot against them that I may consume them in order that I may make a great nation out of you Moses. But Moses implored the Lord his God and said O Lord why does your wrath burn hot against your people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?

Why should the Egyptians save them with evil intent to bring them out to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people.

Remember Abraham and Isaac and Israel your servants whom you swore by your own self and said to them I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring and they shall inherit it forever.

[17:36] And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. Now if you look carefully at that section all the elements are there. Israel they wanted to attribute something that God had miraculously done to this golden calf for their idols.

And they're bowing down to the golden calf and they say you brought us out of Egypt. Why? Because God says they are stiff necked people.

They've got necks of iron. But didn't you hear in Moses initial appeal to God what it was based on? Moses says consider what the Egyptians are going to say here.

He says that God your reputation will be tarnished and the Egyptians take on events would have been completely wrong. So God holds back pouring out his wrath because he will not allow his name to be famed.

He has made promises to his people and he will keep them. And he doesn't want it to be seen that he will not keep them. So whether it's defamation by the Egyptians or defamation by these idolatrous Israelites God acts to guard his name.

[18:54] And God acts to guard his reputation because he says I am God. There is only one God and there is no other.

Now all of this leaves us on a sticky wicket doesn't it? Because of our predicament. This is a big predicament. The human heart, your heart and my heart is idolatrous and stubborn and treacherous.

That is God's words not mine. And for the sake of his glory God says I will delay my wrath. But it's just a delay. It's just a delay.

It means his righteousness and his justice demand that his wrath will at some stage be poured out on sin. God will be God if he did not do that he would not be just.

And that sounds rather ominous for the Israelites and it sounds ominous for us too because I've got news for you and I and the news is this that you and I are no better we are no better in our natural state than the Israelites at the bottom of Mount Sinai than the Israelites in exile.

[20 : 08] But in this last section we get a glimpse of the Greece that changes everything. Thirdly the Greece that changes everything. Look at verses 17 to 19 and God reveals with the Israelites their failure to listen and he says your failure to listen only harms you because what God was teaching them was best for them and how God was guiding them was best for them but no they closed up their ears to God and consequently they forfeited the blessings of the covenant that God made with their father Abraham.

And then in verse 20 comes this sudden and abrupt command verse 20 go out from Babylon flee from Coltia declare this with a shout of joy proclaim it set it out to the ends of the earth they say the Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob they did not thirst when he led them through the desert he made water flow from the rock and despite the spiritual condition of their heart despite what they deserved God is going to summon these rights out of Babylon so the summons comes to flee but it's flee with a shout of joy not anguish despite the condition of your hearts God says I will provide for you on the journey through the wilderness back to Judah just like I provided for your forefathers in the wilderness on their way to the promised land you're going to get thirsty and you'll have no water but it will be no problem

I'll get water out of a rock I did it then and I'll do it now and he says that you need to trust me completely that I will take care of you on the way home but it's the last phrase isn't it of the chapter that I didn't read do you see it so shocking isn't it and often when you come to a chapter and you see a verse that sticks out like a sore thumb and it doesn't seem to fit that is the key to the whole chapter because after everything we've read in this chapter it seems really bleak doesn't it and then verse 20 and 21 lift the gloom it's so positive it seems like a hopeful journey maybe everything will be okay after all and happy ever after but to say that we just speak too soon because verse 22 there is no peace there is no peace says the Lord for the wicked there is no peace says the Lord for the wicked what is

Isaiah saying Isaiah is saying that exchanging a Babylonian postcode for a Jerusalem postcode is not going to fix your heart you're still inherently wicked and there is no peace there is no shalom there is no flourishing for the wicked a change of address does not produce a change of heart and that is so fundamental for you children and for us grownups to understand about how God brings change in your life and in my life how does God transform us it is not by some mechanical compliance it is not through some external force you cannot just rearrange the furniture of your life or change the circumstances or mechanically say right

I'm going to be different this morning or force yourself to act in another way if you want genuine transformation in your life because it's not the way that God works moving from Babylon to Jerusalem never fixes anything idolatrous stubborn treacherous hearts deserve the wrath of God and God is delaying his wrath praise God he delays his wrath but it is only a delay and the wrath of God is coming here end of the sermon oh no that's how it ends isn't it verse 22 sit tight the wrath of God is coming but I want to say to you there's a great glimmer of hope here verse 16 there's a glimmer of grace come here to me draw near come here listen to this listen from the beginning [24 : 51] I have not spoken in secret from the time it came to be I came to be and now the Lord God has sent me has sent me and his spirit now look quietly who is speaking who is speaking the Lord is the one who is speaking God is speaking in the first part he's calling them isn't he he's been calling to them to listen all the way through chapter 48 but then the speaker changes in verse 16 can you spot it because now someone is saying the Lord the sovereign Lord Yahweh has sent me and the question is who's the me who's the me here could be Isaiah could be Cyrus Cyrus but I think Isaiah gives us a very strong clue that it's neither of those and the clue is those three words isn't it and his spirit because we've already seen this connection haven't we in Isaiah do you remember

Isaiah chapter 42 the first servant song here is my servant whom I uphold my chosen one in whom I delight and I will pour out my spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations this is in Isaiah 48 the servant of the Lord speaking at the end of verse 16 Isaiah gives you a little glimpse a little trailer of what's going to dominate the next few chapters that we'll look at in the next few weeks but from

Isaiah 42 we already know who this servant is because it is Jesus why would Isaiah in just a few little words in the middle of this chapter introduce a servant like this and the reason is because he is the only hope he is the only hope for the wicked to have peace he's your only hope for you to have peace we read about that back in

Isaiah chapter 9 do you remember that he is called the prince of peace we sing about it and we hear it every Christmas don't we do you see what he's saying a change of heart does not come from a change of address or a change of your circumstances a change of heart comes through the gift of sheer grace a change of heart your heart cannot be changed by mechanical compliance or external force or turning over a new leaf it comes through an organic change through an internal dynamic in our lives that the bible calls grace so that while there is no peace for the wicked there is only alienation and wrath and hostility there is good news here and it is good news that projects forward hundreds of years to an upper room in Jerusalem and the first encounter with Jesus with his gathered disciples after he died and he rose again and do you know what his very first words to his disciples were in that room do you remember what they were peace be with you and the disciples they're hardly hot stuff are they they've just all scattered denied him they are sinners too they are in the wicked category they've blown it like you and I have this week they've abandoned Jesus in his time of need how can they have peace if they are wicked and here is what John writes immediately after those words of Jesus he said peace to them he showed them his hands and his side and the disciples were overjoyed because they had seen the Lord and Jesus gives them the evidence of why peace can be theirs evidence now not of words but of scars scars from the crucifixion where the servant took our alienation where the servant of the Lord bore the wrath that was no longer delayed but was poured out upon him was unleashed on him so that you and I this morning could have peace the servant of the Lord bore the penalty that you and I deserve because we are idolaters and we are stubborn and I am treacherous towards

God but he bore it all so that you could be forgiven this morning and that you could be restored and here is how our hearts are changed they are changed by this internal dynamic of God's grace where God works by his love by his spirit to say here is my love for you I sent my servant I sent my son to die in your place and if you will take that and if you will build your life upon that it will change you from the inside out and what will that bring it will bring peace and shalom in every dimension so that you can flourish in life and in eternity and your heart is transformed it's not a change of address that produces a change of heart it's a gift of grace the grace that comes to us through the sacrificial death of his own servant

[31 : 07] Jesus you know that timeline that I started with on that timeline for many of you you don't have a date in your timeline do you where you can say God categorically changed my heart and he transferred me from a subject of wrath to a subject of grace there isn't a date where I can point to and say that is where that happened that's fine that's normal I'd argue for many of you here that change felt much more like a process over time and a point and all of us on our timeline would mark key turning points that God used to bring us to trust in Jesus but I want to suggest to you as I close that there is a date in the timeline of your lives I think there is one date that matters to God more than any other date more than any other date in your life and in my life and it is today it is today and God is asking you this morning are you listening to my word today are you willing to trust in my provision for you today it is where we are

January the 29th 2017 we will worry about tomorrow when we get to tomorrow but will you do this today are you looking to Jesus as your only source of peace today God asks you are you willing to live for my renown and my glory and my praise today because these are the signs of a changed heart change that comes not through the change of an address or change of circumstances but only through the grace the gift of the grace of God through his servant the Lord Jesus Christ that's bow our heads and let us pray Thank you.