

# Godology (Part 2)

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 07 July 2013

Preacher: Neil MacMillan

- [ 0 : 00 ] We're going to look now at the passage of Scripture that we read earlier.
- So let's look at Isaiah chapter 40 and from verse 12 right through to the end of the chapter. So Isaiah 40 from verse 12 right through to the end.
- There is a lot of people in Edinburgh right now who are here on holiday here to visit and that's because Edinburgh is a beautiful city.
- A well kept secret is that just north of Edinburgh there is an even more beautiful city called Kirkcody and it's just about 15, 20 miles across the river Forth.
- I lived there for 16 years so I'm slightly biased. Other people don't seem to recognise it's charms the same way that I do. And my family, we moved into a new build house in the year 2000 in Kirkcody and the builders had thoughtfully left a little bit of lawn at the front of the house but at the back they'd left mounds of earth and rubble and just a general mess.
- [ 1 : 31 ] So faced with that kind of backyard there's a choice and the choice is do I get to work and try and cultivate a nice garden here or do I just leave it and see what happens.
- And of course if I was just to leave the ground and not do anything then the weeds would spring up and the place would get messier and messier. So for a garden to flourish it needs to be tended and cared for.
- Take that and then think about ourselves as human beings. To flourish do we just need to be left to ourselves or do we need God to tend and care for us?
- And that's a theme that runs right through the Bible and that theme is represented in the Bible by two cities, sometimes known as the city of God versus the city of man.
- In the Bible represented first of all Jerusalem as the city of God and Babylon as the city of man and they're held out in the Bible as two opposing or different ways of approaching life.
- [ 3 : 03 ] Jerusalem is there to represent what it's like to live under God's good rule. Babylon shows what it's like when human beings seek to flourish without God's rule.
- And that's a question that's actually still being asked today. Will we flourish under the rule of God as human beings or will we flourish if we find freedom from God as human beings?
- And lots of people want to answer that question and say human beings and the human race in this world will only truly flourish when we're set free from religion and from God.
- Jerusalem finds itself asking that question here in Isaiah chapter 40. How can our lives flourish? Because things aren't going well for them.
- Jerusalem was the capital city of a small nation at that time, 700 BC known as Judah, the nation is known as Judah. Jerusalem's the capital city. It's a small country, very small country and it's surrounded by superpowers.
- [ 4 : 21 ] So to the north is an amazingly strong military power called Assyria. To the west is another huge military power called Babylon or to the east, sorry.

And to the south you have Egypt and then to the west is the Mediterranean Sea. So in that sort of situation, Judah feels small and vulnerable and frightened and insecure and they're asking themselves, what should we do in order to flourish in such difficult circumstances?

And that's the theme that we're going to look at then here in Isaiah chapter 40. Will we, can we flourish better under the care of God, dependent on God or will we flourish only in freedom from God?

And what Isaiah says to people faced with that kind of dilemma and what he says to the people in Jerusalem that he's addressing in chapter 40, he is saying, look and see who God is, observe God.

If you were here last Sunday, some of you were, then that was one of the themes that came out of the earlier verses of this passage. So you look at verse 9 and 10 and three times Isaiah points people to observe who God is.

[ 5 : 53 ] At the end of verse 9, what he literally says is, behold or observe your God and then in verse 10, see the sovereign Lord comes with power, see his reward is with him.

So thinking about the dilemma, do we flourish under God or do we flourish in freedom from God? Then Isaiah's advice is, look and see who God is if you want to find an answer to that question.

And so we're going to run through the rest of this chapter in order to see more of who God is in order to try and find the answer that Isaiah is giving.

I'm going to do that under two separate kind of headings. The first is to see God's power and glory and the second is to see God's salvation.

So the first is the power and glory of God. The second is the salvation of God. In verse 25 and 26, Isaiah is really summing up everything that's been said in verses 12 and following.

[ 7 : 04 ] And he sums it up by saying, to whom will you compare me or who is my equal says the Holy One. Lift your eyes, look to the heavens, who created all these?

Who brings out the starry hosts one by one and calls them each by name because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. Now there in verse 25, Isaiah refers to God as the Holy One.

And the language of the Holy One is immediately suggesting to us that God is someone utterly different from ourselves. And in these verses, Isaiah is trying to help us to understand that God doesn't exist within nature or as part of nature, but rather that God exists outside of nature, that God exists before nature, that God exists above nature, that God is the one who created the world, who caused it, who sustains it and who keeps it.

And so he wants us to understand that God is someone utterly different from anyone or anything else that we've ever encountered.

And in verse 12, 13, 14 and 15, one of the things that Isaiah points out in relation to God's power and glory is this, that God is without equal.

[ 8 : 33 ] So God is without equal. Verse 12, who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand? So picture your hand and the hollow of your hand and you're cupping just a little bit of water.

And Isaiah says, the oceans of the earth are like a little drip of water held in the hand of God. He's trying to give us a sense of scale to the immensity, the majesty and the power of God.

And then the next thing he says is, who with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens in Jerusalem in Judah, people would use the distance between their thumb and their forefinger, that kind of span there, as a measurement.

And taking God sort of metaphorically to have a thumb and a forefinger, Isaiah says, listen, God would stretch out his thumb and his forefinger and they would stretch over the entire universe.

That's the scale of God's greatness, glory, power and being. And then he goes on to emphasize the wisdom of God in verses 13 and 14, who has understood the mind of God.

[ 9 : 54 ] God's wisdom is incomparable. Who instructed him? Who did God have to turn to for advice in creation? Who does God have to turn to for advice in the ways in which he rules over this world and our lives?

And what he wants us to see by asking all these rhetorical questions is that there is no one who compares with God in power or in wisdom.

And then in verse 15 he compares the nations to God and he says, surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket, they're regarded as dust on the scale. So think of yourself with a full pail of water and you take out one drop.

You don't really notice it. And that's what the nations are like in the sight of God. They could all disappear. He'd hardly notice. Think about dust on your scales if you're measuring out something in the kitchen or if you're in the bathroom seeing how many pounds you've gained or lost and there's a little bit of dust in the scales.

You don't worry about it. And so the nations are like dust in the scales before God. He's so immense. He's so great. It's not that the nations don't matter to God, but it's just that God's so great in comparison with them.

[ 11 : 13 ] And that's an important thing for the Jerusalem people to hear because to them Babylon a Syria and Egypt seem enormous.

They're global powers. They've got massive military strength. They've got huge reserves of wealth. And so from the point of view of Jerusalem, these nations are magnificent and intimidating.

And God says, well, that's your point of view, but step back a minute. Lift up your eyes. Take my perspective on things.

And you'll see that in comparison with me, these nations are small. They're like dust on the scales. So God's power and glory is evident in the fact that he's without equal.

God's power and glory are also evident in that he outguns every alternative that we can come up with to him and dependence on him.

[ 12 : 19 ] So if Judah is asking itself, how can we flourish if the people of Jerusalem are saying, how are our lives going to flourish and prosper? How can art flourish?

How can culture flourish? How can we grow economically? How can we enjoy peace? That's what we mean by flourishing. How can we enjoy such benevolent circumstances in our life or in our city?

What alternatives are there to God? Well, God says, one of the alternatives you found is idolatry. And so he comes up in verses 18, 19 and 20 and asks, well, how viable are these idols as a source of human flourishing?

To whom then will you compare God? What image will you compare him to? As for an idol, a craftsman crafts it, a goldsmith overlays it with gold, fashioned silver chains for it.

A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple. So you can almost see Isaiah's ironic smile as he writes those lines about their idols.

[ 13 : 33 ] Obviously, God is saying, if you have to prop up your idol so it's not going to fall over, then it's not really going to be the foundation in which your life can flourish and be blessed.

Now we probably don't craft idols for ourselves, but what is an idol? Well, an idol is any kind of God replacement in the Bible.

Anything that we put our hope in, our faith in, anything that we depend on in place of God in order that we can prosper and flourish as human beings.

And sometimes we take things that are perfectly good in themselves and we make an idol out of them because we give them the place that God alone deserves. So an idol for us might be money, it might be material, things like a house or a car.

We can make idols out of relationships. People can become our functional saviour. This is the person who's going to make me happy. This is the relationship that's just going to change my life and make it just so beautiful.

[ 14 : 44 ] So we can take all kinds of things and make idols out of them. And what God says about an idol is this, it's an absolutely insecure foundation for life because like the little idols and their shrines that topple over, so relationships break, money disappears, success evaporates.

And so God is saying, compare me with your idols. There is no comparison. The other comparison though that he wants to make is with the superpowers, the great nations of the world.

Just at the end of the previous chapter, verse 39, envoys had come from the Babylonian Emperor and Hezekiah, king of Judah, had invited them in to this in order that he could show them all the wealth of Jerusalem and its power and glory.

And from a biblical point of view, from a God point of view, that's a catastrophic error because suddenly Jerusalem, the city of God, is allying itself with Babylon, which in the Bible, the city of Babylon always represents human culture in opposition to God.

So this is a bad alliance. They've gone into alliance with one of the superpowers because they're under threat from a Syria, the northern superpower.

[ 16 : 23 ] And God is asking, what can he move is that? What can he move is it to put your hope and faith in the systems of this world and in cultures that seek to flourish without God?

And so in verse 22 to 24, he again compares himself with the nations and the rulers of the nations. He sits, God sits enthroned above the circle of the earth.

He's other. It's people who are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, spreads them out like a tent to live in. Think of putting up your tent.

If you ever go camping, there's people out in the links in front of my house today in Brunfield with little tents to shade them from the blistering sun of Edinburgh. And you just get up a little frame, you stretch out a wee bit of canvas over it.

That's your tent. Well to God, the universe is like that. The stars and the planets and the solar systems. It's just like stretching out the canvas on a tent free.

[ 17 : 32 ] He brings princes to naught, reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, the superpowers. He reduces them to nothing.

They're transient. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground than he blows on them and they wither and whirlwinds sweep them away like chaff.

And so God says you can look to Babylon, you can look wherever you want. And hope that by following them and their wisdom and their ways and relying on their power that somehow you as a people and as a city will flourish.

But God knew that Babylon would be destroyed one day. 536 BC, Cyrus Persian emperor comes and destroys the Babylonian empire.

To God these things are like a flash in the pan. They come, they go. Who stands forever? What stands forever? Well as Isaiah says earlier on, it's the word of God that stands forever, God's purposes.

[ 18 : 50 ] So the question then is what's the alternative? Can we flourish if we find a freedom away from God?

And the answer Isaiah gives very clearly is no. For human life to flourish, there is only one logical place to go and that is to God himself.

For your life to flourish, for my life to flourish, for this church to flourish, for our city to flourish, for our nation to flourish, for humanity to flourish, we need to learn what it is to live under God's good will.

So human life flourishes, independence in God. And Isaiah says in that question there is no contest. The second thing in observing God, one is his power and glory.

The second is God is saviour. And because there's another question here, the first question is how can human life flourish?

[ 20 : 01 ] And the answer is only under the good will of God. The second question though is how can we know God? How can we come and live under that great good, kingly, just, perfect rule?

Imagine you try to phone somebody or text somebody again, touch with them, so you text them a couple of times, they don't text you back.

You're a little bit frustrated, so you try phoning. They're not answering their phone. You really want to speak to them. And you're emailing, you're texting, you're phoning, you're snap chatting, you're Facebooking, you're instant messaging, every kind of communication that you can come up with, you're WhatsApping, you're doing it all and they just won't reply.

How frustrated are you and how annoyed? Well, that's how Israel or Judah feels here. Verse 27 to the end we're looking at for the second part of God is saviour.

Why do you say, oh Jacob, and complain to Israel, two historic names for this people? My way is hidden from the Lord, my cause is disregarded by my God.

[ 21 : 14 ] You see, they thought they were being ignored by God. They were trying to get in touch, they thought, but God wasn't answering. He was ignoring, he disregarded them, he cut them off.

How frustrating that feels. Now, how much worse it is if that happens to you in a crisis situation? I remember, not quite a crisis, but birth of one of my children, I was away 10 pin bowling.

This was almost just at the invention of the mobile phone. So because I knew that my wife was about to go into labour, I'd taken a phone with me, I'd borrowed one and taken it with me, but the noise of the 10 pin bowling alley, the fun we were having, I forgot all about it.

So I got out of the 10 pin bowling alley a while later and found all these missed calls, labour had started. So she's trying to get in touch with me, I'm not answering, it's a little bit of an emergency.

Sometimes we find ourselves in kind of emergency situations, we're crying out to God and God isn't answering. Somebody wrote to me this week and he said, I don't think I can take any more of this.

[ 22 : 26 ] We're talking about circumstances he found himself in. Somebody said, I don't think I can go on. And that's how Jude and Jerusalem fell.

And often we find ourselves affected by suffering, by sickness, by sorrow, by sadness, and by struggle of many different kinds.

And in those situations we sometimes find ourselves at the point where we think, I cannot, I can't keep going.

And everything seems bleak and hopeless for us. That's the situation that Jude is in.

They had an army, they had young men, but you know what was wrong, they got tired and weary, verse 20 or verse 30.

[ 23 : 33 ] Even youths grow tired and weary, young men stumble and fall. Young men is actually a reference to men who'd be through military training. So these were the guys that they'd trained up for war and battle, the ones they relied on most, even they stumble and fall.

So they feel they have no human resources to face the situation that they're in of threat, danger. Isaiah is prophesying about the future of Judah.

Do you know what he's prophesying for them? He's prophesying warfare, siege, starvation, defeat, deportation, and slavery and Babylon.

And they're thinking, if that's the future, what are we going to do? When I was a sort of adolescent, one of my past times was to wonder about derelict railway tunnels in Glasgow.

So me and my pals, we used to find all these old abandoned railway tunnels and go wandering through them. And there was two things in those railway tunnels that you often found.

[ 24 : 59 ] One was lots of empty beer cans. People must have gone drinking in them, and the other was rats. So this was the attraction was all the rats running about in these dark tunnels.

And it was just a little bit of bravado, I think, like, hey, who wants to go down? And so I, yeah, let's go. And we're all wishing, no, I'd really rather not, but nobody's going to say it.

So you all end up creeping through these really long, dark tunnels, waiting for the rats to come scampering around your feet. And some of these tunnels were pretty long.

And so you get in there and it's just dark and claustrophobic and smelly and damp. And you're listening for the rats, and you're all trying to wind each other up and frighten each other. And of course, what are you looking for?

You're just looking for the light at the end of the tunnel. And you think, OK, five minutes or 10 minutes or 15 minutes, whatever it is, we'll be at the end of the tunnel.

[ 25 : 54 ] Be OK. Stay cool. Don't panic. Don't panic. And that's what Israel or Judah here needs. It needed light at the end of the tunnel.

The friend who wrote to me this week saying, I can't take this anymore. What was he looking for? He's looking for light at the end of the tunnel.

What do we call light at the end of the tunnel? We call it hope. That's what we're looking for in life, isn't it? That despite the suffering, the sickness, the sadness, the sorrow, the struggles, the sin, that despite all of that, that we'll come through it to a place where we can flourish.

Hope, verse 31, those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. There is light at the end of the tunnel, God says to Judah.

Yes, you're going to go through terrible times, but do you know what? One day you will renew your strength. One day you'll, by light the eagle soaring above Jerusalem, riding on the thermals, above the kind of conflict and the hardship of the human situation.

[ 27 : 16 ] Your young men will run and not wear out. They'll walk and they won't become faint. They'll be given strength to persevere, to go on and on and on and on and on and that's what God says.

Now what makes the difference between walking and fainting and walking and not fainting?

It's hope. What is the essence of that hope? Well the essence of that hope is the presence of God. That's what makes all the difference.

It's the presence of God. So when God comes, that there is hope that we can flourish as human beings.

Verse 31 is also translated as those who wait in the Lord. Verse 29, He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

[ 28 : 24 ] It's God's presence that makes the difference. It's God's presence that allows for human flourishing. It's God's presence that allows us to persevere through the dark tunnel towards the light.

It's God's presence that allows us to flourish as people. How can God be present with sinful people? That's really the question here and the answer that Isaiah gives is found in chapter 53.

So I want you to turn to chapter 53 just as we come to the conclusion of our sermon. And it's a very, it's a, I'm not going to read the whole chapter but it's a very compelling passage of the Bible if you've never read it.

It's worth going back to it. And I'm going to read from verse 3 to verse 6. Isaiah writes this about somebody called the suffering servant of the Lord.

And it is a poem that describes for us very clearly Jesus 700 years later suffering outside Jerusalem on a cross.

[ 29 : 30 ] So 53, he was despised and rejected by men. A man of sorrows and familiar with suffering like one from whom men hide their faces. He was despised, we esteemed him not.

Maybe he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows yet we considered him stricken by God smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities.

The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray.

Each of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. We all run from God.

We all try and work out what it's like to live a life in freedom from God. And Isaiah describes that in verse 6 as being like a sheep going astray turning to its own way.

[ 30 : 29 ] We rebel against God and we reject him. We break the relationship with God. And there is a price to pay for that broken relationship if it's going to be healed and reconciled.

What's the price? Verse 6 says the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

How can people who have turned from God and chosen life without God come to know the presence of God that brings hope and flourishing only in one way through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Unless you go to Jesus, the mediator, the one who carries sin, unless you go to him you cannot know God.

And so central to this whole idea of knowing the presence of God and flourishing in the presence of God is the cross and Jesus.

[ 31 : 49 ] And so the question then is what does Jesus mean to us personally tonight then? See, God has come in the love of the gospel.

He's come in the love of the cross. He's coming saying I want to restore relationship with you. I want to allow you to flourish. I want to give you hope in the misery of your struggles.

And I'm giving it to you in my son Jesus who loves you with an everlasting and a life sacrificing love.

Now we have to then respond to what God offers. We can respond in two ways and one is to say, no, I will find my life in freedom from you.

But whoever seeks to find his life in this way, Jesus says he will lose his life. And the alternative is to say, wow, I'm loved by this great powerful, glorious God who stretches out the heavens, who rules over the universe.

[ 33 : 08 ] He loves me and he gave himself for me. And God asks us to respond to that love with love, to love him in return, to say, God, you are all glory.

You are all goodness. And you are worthy of my love, my life, my worship, and my praise.

And so each of us has God's word before us tonight. Each of us is invited to respond to God's word tonight.

And God calls us to respond with love and worship. I'm going to pray and then we're going to sing. Lord God, help us to hear your word this evening.

We may think that we'll be happier without you, that if only we could be free from God and from religion, then the world would be so much better.

[ 34 : 20 ] But you teach us something different in the Bible, that freedom is only really found in you and through you. And so we ask that we will find our freedom in Christ this evening and that you will be the one who creates the conditions for our lives to flourish.

To those who feel without hope here this evening, we pray that you will become their everlasting hope. Amen.