

God Returns

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- [0:00] I want you to think back as we start to a moment in your life where you needed to be rescued.
- ! I remember quite a traumatic time. I was at the Baxter Theatre in Rondebosch for one of the plays! and we were going to go up and down the escalator. I was very young, just so you know, to give you context.
- And the escalator opened, elevator, escalator, yes, the thing goes up and down, and elevator, you see.
- And I got in, but there were people that were dressed up as bats and werewolves. It must have been Halloween, it must have been this time of year. And I thought, that's okay, my mom will come in just now.
- The door's closed. My mom is still on the outside. And then the lift starts going down. And someone says, don't worry, Sonny, we're going to hell.
- [1:06] Oh my goodness. My! Go down to the basement. I couldn't get myself out of the situation. I couldn't push the buttons.
- Please don't let me go to hell, Lord. I couldn't do it. And, but when you're stuck in a bad situation, the main thing is you need for a rescuer to come to where you are to come help and save you. You might not have had such a bad experience where someone needed to come save you.
- But if you've ever had car trouble, you'll know what I'm talking about. Unless you know how to fix your car, but most of us kind of don't. Let's say you're driving down the road and your car bugs out. It's not going to move.
- And you can't get it working. And in South Africa, you've got to get the car working fairly quickly. And so you make that phone call either to your friend or to the AA. Hey, I need help. Come and get me.
- And the best words you can hear at that point. Don't worry. We're on our way. Help is on the way. Biblical salvation works in the same way.
- [2:20] The Bible tells us that we are stuck in a really bad situation which we cannot get out of ourselves. And the only person who can help us is God. And as we look at the Gospel in Isaiah, we're going to see that a vital part of the Gospel is that God draws near to where His people are, to where the problem is, in order to save them.
- And so as we started this series of the Gospel in Isaiah, last week we saw that the Gospel proclamation is that God reigns. This week we're looking at how God returns to save His people.
- So we're going to see seeing God's return. Seeing God's return. If you've got Isaiah open, just flip it open to... Well, if you don't have it open, just open up to Isaiah 52.
- And that's where we're going to spend our time. Isaiah 52. I'm going to start at verse 7.
- But we're going to concentrate on verse 8. My version says, Remember we looked at how the feet of the messenger is beautiful because he brings this beautiful message.

- [3 : 49] Those words who brings good things or brings news of good things. That's the word gospel. In the New Testament, it's translated as the word gospel.
- We're going to look at verse 8. And it says this, So we're going to talk about seeing God's return.
- The great news of the gospel is that God doesn't expect us to come to Him to get saved. But it's about God coming to where we are. To come to get us out of the mess that we got ourselves into.
- And the way the Bible helps us understand that is by coupling how God saves His people from captivity in the Old Testament to the good news of what Jesus does for us in the New Testament.
- And in both cases, the way that God saves is by coming near to His people to save them. And we see that in verse 8. Listen, your watchmen lift up their voices.
- [5 : 07] Together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. Now in the story of Isaiah, God's people have been exiled to Babylon because of generations of sin and idolatry.
- God has warned them again and again and again through His prophets. He's warning them again through Isaiah. And Isaiah is now forecasting into the future. And he says, Boys, there's going to be a time when God has abandoned you.
- When He's left the building, there's a story in Ezekiel where God leaves the temple. He literally has left the building and now they're on their own.
- And then they get exiled into Babylon. That exile lasts 70 years. And so this picture in Isaiah 52 is of the Jews that have been gone into exile but there's a few of them remaining in Jerusalem and they're waiting, they're waiting, they're waiting, they're waiting.
- When is God going to come back? When are the people going to come back? When is He going to save them? When is He going to free them from captivity? And then they see this messenger come running over the mountains.
- [6 : 16] Good news! Victory has happened. God reigns. And then verse 8 tells us how the Lord reigns.
- He is returning to Zion. God is coming back to save His people. And so in the Bible, salvation happens when God returns to be with His people.
- And when He does, it's this awesome event. Mountains shake. There's pillars of cloud and fire and smoke.
- There's trumpets. And salvation is often described as God reaching down from heaven, ripping the cosmos apart to get to His people to save them.
- A few chapters later, in Isaiah chapter 64, He writes this. It will be on the screen. Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you.
- [7 : 15] A few verses later, it says this. For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times, no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him.
- But this picture of God who comes to where His people are, it's often accompanied by this cosmic language where the world is ripped apart as God comes down to save His people.
- Why does the Bible use this language of when God draws near, all of these big and powerful things happen? Well, firstly, because it's God doing the saving, and God is big and powerful.

And if He does something that's really big, like saving lots of people, you're going to see big things happen. But the other reason is it's because we are held captive, and God has to come and save us.

The Bible tells us that we're held captive by evil powers, by our own sin. That's the first thing that keeps us captive. But there's evil powers around us, spiritual forces that we don't even see.

[8 : 34] There's what's called the world. It's just what's in the atmosphere, the ideas that capture us. And we're blind to their lies, and God has to come and save us from all of that.

And so God sees us as hostages, taken by foreign powers, and because He loves us so much, He's not going to let anything get in the way of Him coming to save us.

We need a God who comes to get us. Liam Neeson delivers one of the all-time best movie lines in his action movie, Taken.

And when he's talking to the baddies that have taken his daughter hostage, he says this, If you're looking for a ransom, I can tell you I don't have money, but what I do have are a very particular set of skills.

If you let my daughter go now, that'll be the end of it. But if you don't, I will look for you. I will find you. And I will kill you.

[9 : 41] And when he says it, you believe it. The point is that nothing is going to stop Liam Neeson from getting to where his daughter is, dealing with the people that are holding her hostage, and then freeing her.

And friends, this is exactly what God does for us in Jesus Christ. God breaks open the fabric of time and space to come down to earth as one of us, as the man Jesus, to come and save us.

This is precisely what we remember at Christmastime. In fact, Christmastime starts with what's called the season of Advent. It starts just before Christmas, at the beginning of December.

And the word Advent is the Latin word for arrival. And so we commemorate Jesus, or God really, arriving in time and space to come and save his people.

In Matthew chapter 1, when the angel announces this to Joseph, he says this, and he's talking about Mary, Matthew chapter 1, he says this, She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

[10 : 56] All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

That prophecy comes from Isaiah chapter 7. What's interesting is that both Isaiah and Jesus have the same Hebrew root word. Isaiah and Jesus, we say, they don't sound the same to us, but in the Hebrew language, they would sound the same.

It would sound something like, Ishiya, and Jesus' name in Hebrew is Yeshua. We sometimes translate it as Joshua. So, Ishiya, Isaiah, and Yeshua, Jesus, have the same root word, which is that God saves.

And so you can summarize the whole book of Isaiah that is that God saves. And that's exactly what the gospel tells us. That's exactly Jesus' name. The connection in the Old Testament with Isaiah is, it's God who draws near in Jesus Christ to come and do the saving for us.

Jesus is God in the flesh coming to earth to get to where his people need him to be in order to save them. But here's the thing.

[12 : 21] It's only good news for you if you realize that you need Jesus, that you need saving. You see, we're in the same position as God's people in the Old Testament.

We've been enslaved. Maybe not politically, but it says that we're spiritually enslaved. Jesus said, if you sin, you're a slave to sin.

We're a slave to many things in our lives, things that dominate us, things that we can't control. Money, sexual lifestyles, food, alcohol.

many are slaves to their past, especially if you've been through abuse or trauma. The good news is that no matter what sin you're stuck in, no matter what part of your life is causing you problems, Jesus can save you from it.

God ripped heaven apart to come down to get you. You can trust him with all your problems. Hebrews chapter 4 says this, Hebrews 4 verse 15, it says, we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who's been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin.

[13:41] And then we can approach God's throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

So God returns to save his people and what happens then? Once we experience God coming close to save us, there's two responses that the gospel tells us that will mark the life of a Christian and that Isaiah highlights in our verse, in verse 8.

One is joy and the other is waiting. And so we're going to look at rejoicing in God's return. Rejoicing in God's return. In Isaiah, the watchmen are filled with joy and break out in wild jubilation and singing as they realize that God has come back to save his people.

Back in Isaiah 52, verse 8, listen, your watchmen lift up their voices. Together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes.

Now we don't often hear or sound like we shout for joy in our churches, but it's a bit like when you go to a rugby match and our boys are winning or it's close.

[14:58] You all remember the World Cup from the last few years ago? We won by one point each of those, the quarterfinal, the semifinal, and the final. And if you're watching, boy, you are shouting for joy.

But you'll only feel this kind of joy if you know what you've been saved from. In Isaiah, God's people have been waiting for 70 years to see God come back.

I don't think any of us have waited that long for anything in our life. Maybe you get that kind of a feeling when you go down to Plumstead, to the office, to the Cape Town City office.

You know, you've got to sit in the queue to renew your license and they give you that number. Yeah, when they call it, oh, this is a happy feeling. 70 years.

They will be singing at the top of their voices. The more you realize what God has saved you from, the more thankful you'll be.

[16:08] Thankful people live a life of joyful abandonment. in what has already happened and look forward to even more blessings. If you want to get a picture of how God wants us to live, just picture in your mind those stories, or you might see it on the internet, where there's a little kid at school and he's going on his daily business and his dad, who's away in the army and he's in uniform, and then they walk into the classroom and he hasn't seen them for months, and they just jump up, run over, dead, and they just give each other a huge hug.

Maybe you've seen the videos recently of the hostages that were held in Gaza, the Israeli hostages. Did you see them being released?

Oh my goodness. If you want to tearjoke a moment, just Google the release of the Israeli hostages. they've been there for about two years. Underground.

Not knowing if they're going to live or die. And they're sitting there and their family walks in and it's the happiest moment. Once you realize you've been freed from being a hostage to foreign powers, your own sin, your own past, from things outside you that you can't control, bad things that might have happened to you, Jesus frees you from all of that.

And when you realize you've been freed, then there's a lot of things in life that don't necessarily need to bug you anymore. Joyful hope is the hallmark of the Christian life.

[17:56] The New Testament is literally the happiest book in the world. And so if you're lacking joy, then if you're lacking this feeling of joy, of release, of freedom, come to Christ.

He's the one who has come to give us life. He says, I've come to give life and give it to the full. Giving freedom, letting us enjoy ourselves. Enjoy the salvation you've got.

If your life is filled with this joy of being freed, of being saved, and you're going to be able to handle adversity so much better. I had a friend who suffered from cystic fibrosis.

It's when your lungs fill up with fibers, you can't breathe, you eventually die from asphyxiation, from fluid on the lungs. You'd normally die young.

And you know you've got it, and you know that death is coming. He was a Christian, and he just exuded the joy of Jesus. When small things went wrong, he had this stop phrase, thank you, Jesus.

[19:07] Thank you, Jesus. He never let his sickness stop him from enjoying life, and by doing that, he impacted so many people, because they could see he's facing death, but he's got so much joy.

He's not letting the small things bug him. Just think of your life for a minute. If you, as a Christian, are very easily overthrown, or upset by small things, or if you're easily anxious, or easily worried, you've not yet fully appreciated what God has done for you.

Reckon to yourself, but God has come near to save me. You were a hostage. You are now free. Anyone who has freed a hostage wants them to go and enjoy their life, not to stay in fear, go, and enjoy your life with God.

Stop worrying about small, silly things that don't matter. But you might say to me, well, but my life is not full of small, silly things. I've got some big things that I need to worry about.

There's an answer to that in the Bible as well. The Bible says, look to Jesus and look to the salvation that has happened as well as the salvation that is still to come.

[20:38] Here's a quote from 2 Corinthians 4. This is Paul writing, and he's had a hard life serving Jesus. Yet his life was always filled with joy.

all those New Testament letters that are written to encourage people are written by Paul, many of them from a jail cell. Not even a jail cell.

That's luxury compared to what Paul went through. Anyway, he writes these words, though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

How do you reckon this? This is how you do that. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, that is our troubles in front of us, but what is unseen, that is what's going to happen in the future, since what is seen is temporary.

[21:45] But what is unseen is going to last forever. It's eternal. Well, that brings us to the last aspect of salvation that our verse in Isaiah speaks about, which is, although God has come near to save us, there is still a period of expectant waiting we go through, because although our salvation has happened, it's not yet fully complete.

And so we wait for God's return. We wait for God's return. We think to yourself, okay, hang on, if God has saved us and come close to where we are, what are we still waiting for?

Well, the reason is our salvation is not complete. Now, when I say it's not complete, I'm not saying it's lacking anything from God's side, but there's still a fulfillment to come.

We're not yet in the promised land. We're like the programs coming back from Babylon, or like the Exodus generation in the wilderness.

Our full and final, complete salvation is still on its way. Just back to Isaiah 52, verse 8. It says again, listen, your watchmen lift up their voices, together they shout for joy.

[23:07] When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. They know God is coming, but He hasn't arrived yet. They will still see their full salvation.

In fact, that term watchmen is better translated as those who wait. the people who are waiting. God is there, they can see Him, but He's still got to arrive in Jerusalem.

They're eagerly looking forward to God's return. Now, biblically, while God has come close to save us, He has not yet fully taken up residence with His people.

That's why we go through the troubles in life that we do. God has returned, but His return in the New Testament is a bit like His return in the Old Testament.

It's partial, yet there's still a more full return to come. In the New Testament, Jesus has come, but He's coming again.

[24:13] And so everything that the New Testament says we have as a Christian, the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, the joy that we've got in Christ, all of that, the New Testament describes as a deposit or a foretaste of what is to come.

Both Isaiah and the New Testament end with a vision of God finally and fully dwelling with His people in a renewed heaven and a renewed earth.

The New Testament constantly points to Jesus' return to earth as the fulfillment of our hope of salvation. That's why the New Testament doesn't point to our death and going to be with Jesus in heaven when we die as our full and!

looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells. And you think, okay, where's resurrection there? In the words, new earth.

This world is going to get remade. Yes, it's going to go up in flames, but it's flames that don't destroy everything. What happens is the flames destroy everything that's bad and purifies everything that's good.

[26:19] and then the whole world is remade. It's a physical place with physical people that will live physically for eternity.

That's the hope we've got to look forward to. Our resurrected bodies being purified of everything that causes us problems, both internally and there's going to be nothing else and no one else outside us to cause us problems.

It's just going to be total bliss and Jesus is going to be there with us and we're just going to have a lovely time. Before the new heavens and new earth arrive, Peter writes this from verse 8, verse 8, But do not forget this one thing, dear friends, with the Lord, a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day.

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promises, as some understand slowness, instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

And so friends, if you're not yet right with God, you've got this time available to you to get right with God. But that time is now, and that time is running out.

[27:45] There's a cosmic clock ticking. These things are going to happen. Don't turn to God before it's too late. In fact, you can't turn to God if it's too late.

I'm not saying he's going to come back in our lifetimes, but once you're dead, you're dead. You can't do anything. You can't make right with God. It's over. He's given you the time available to you now to come to repentance.

And he doesn't want anyone to die. He wants us to live. Verse 10, that day, the day of the Lord, this is what's called, it's the Lord's return, will come like a thief.

The heavens will disappear with the roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Again, that picture of God rending the heavens apart as he comes to prepare to be with his people.

And this is the final occasion. when a king comes to a city and wants to be enthroned and they prepare everything, they make it clean, they make it neat, they make it tidy.

[29 : 03] That's what's happening here to the cosmos. The world is preparing to receive her king and her God. What that means for us as Christians is we can be sure that Jesus is coming back.

Our hope is not in vain. This is going to happen. It's a real hope. God knows his plan of salvation is not yet finished and it will one day be complete.

But if you're not a Christian, it means your time is running out. So turn to Christ while you can. And instead of fearing death and judgment, you get forgiveness, you get to experience joy, and you've got eternal life to look forward to.

And so friends, that's the same, that's true for us as Christians as well. While all of these things will be laid bare, all our sins will be judged, but if you're in Christ, all your sins are forgiven.

You pass the test. You become this pure being of goodness and light. holiness and joy and love and happiness.

[30 : 21] All your relationships work. Nothing is left that is going to cause any problems. And so God will be with his people forever and this is the hope that we've got to look forward to.

Is that your hope as a Christian? Make sure that your hope as a Christian is the same hope that the Bible points to, which is to Christ's return and our resurrection and eternal life on a brand new planet where nothing can go wrong.

Is that something to look forward to? I think so. Well, let me pray for us. Oh, Lord Jesus, that day is indeed going to be the day of days.

I don't think any of us are fully prepared for that. So, Lord, we take shelter, we cower, we humble ourselves, Lord, in your protection, in your mercy, and in your love.

Thank you, Lord, that you've come to earth the first time to save us. We know that you're coming back to rule and to be with your people and to give us the fullness of our blessings that we're waiting for.

[31 : 34] Help us to remember that, Lord, and to hope for that day and not to worry about the small things in life that get in the way. Amen.