

Walls of resistance

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Date: 02 November 2025

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, we finished our sort of mini-series looking at hospitality last week.! So we're diving back into our series in Isaiah.
- ! So we're in Isaiah 47 today. So Isaiah 47, it's on page 734, if you want to turn to that. It's quite a tricky passage, quite a difficult one for us to get our heads around.
- But I'm just going to pray for us before we begin. Lord God, we thank you so much for your word, the Bible. And we pray for our hearts now.
- We're dependent on you and your spirit to show us more about yourself and show us more about our own hearts too. Bless us and help us and be with us. We ask now that you'd help us to fixate our eyes on Jesus in a powerful way.
- And that you'd make us more like him. We ask for this in Jesus' name. Amen. So as I say, it's great to be back in Isaiah. We're going in this series from 40 to 55.
- [1 : 1 0] Chapters 40 to 55. We took a wee break looking at hospitality. And we're straight back into it today in chapter 47. Before we sort of dive in there, just to set the scene really.
- And what's surprising, you'll see it when you read it, is that it talks about the nation of Babylon. And it reads as if they're the ones being spoken to.
- But actually, even though they're the ones addressed, this message actually wasn't for them. It's quite surprising. This message is actually for Israel.
- It's written 150 years before Israel went into exile. And the whole of this section, 40 to 55, is written for Israel's comfort and encouragement.
- Because this is where we're at in Israel's story when they would have heard this, when they needed to hear this message. It's when they're in exile. The exile, when they were sort of in Babylon, it lasted 70 years.
- [2 : 1 0] 70 years. And this is supposed to be delivered to them towards the end of that. 70 years in Babylon, in exile. And that whole time was a time of oppression.
- It was deeply cruel, lacking compassion. That's how the Babylonians treated the Israelites. Showing not a shred of kindness. It was spiritually oppressive as well. And it was full of exploitation.
- That was kind of the status quo. And so you can imagine how Israel would have felt during that time. They would have felt that rescue was impossible.
- And that evil all-encompassing. That was what it was like. That evil, this oppression, this cruelty, was constantly there and would never go away. Now, living in the 21st century, we see real evil as well, don't we?
- All the time. Perhaps we become kind of blasé a little bit to it and try to inoculate ourselves at times. That's kind of how I sometimes cope with it.
- [3 : 1 6] There are times when I won't put on the news. Just because hearing it and seeing it and reading it, I just find too distressing. You think about even in the last year alone, and the amount of stories, you can picture them, the wars, the...

You know, that's just in the year. It can be, I find it, maybe you do too, overwhelming. That's just a year. Never mind the last 20 years, the last 100 years.

The wars, the fallout, the innocent victims, the neglect scandals in hospitals one after another. The stream of powerful men abusing their power to hurt the vulnerable. It is overwhelming and oppressive.

Corruption, addiction in families, so much. And the amount of evil, I think, if you really take it on board, if you really sit and think about it, is overwhelming.

Like Babylon for Israel, our world is full of cruelty beyond what we can fathom. It lacks compassion and kindness.

[4 : 20] It is spiritually oppressive and it is full of exploitation. And so sometimes, living in the world we live in, you know, rescue, redemption, we can sometimes feel that that can feel like, well, how's that ever going to happen?

Because the evil can feel all-encompassing. It feels like a force that cannot be resisted. The passage, that's why this passage actually is good news.

Because what it speaks of is a God whose redemption and justice truly cannot be resisted. His justice cannot be resisted.

The most common question I get asked is, why is there so much suffering and evil in our world? Because people want it to end. And let's be honest, this chapter which talks about the judgment of Babylon, let's be honest, on the surface, a chapter full of judgment against an ancient empire might not sound like good news.

It sounds dark, but it is good news. Because it shows us a God who takes evil seriously and will one day rid the whole world of it forever.

[5 : 40] That's the good news we have. With that in mind, let's jump into our passage. Isaiah 47, this is God's word. Go down.

I will spare no one. Our Redeemer, the Lord Almighty is his name, is the Holy One of Israel. Sit in silence.

Go into darkness, Queen City of the Babylonians. No more will you be called Queen of Kingdoms. I was angry with my people and desecrated my inheritance. I gave them into your hand and you showed them no mercy.

Even on the aged, you laid a very heavy yoke. You said, I am forever the eternal queen. But you did not consider these things or reflect on what might happen.

Now then, listen, you lover of pleasure, lounging in your security and saying to yourself, I am and there is none besides me. I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children.

[7 : 06] Both of these will overtake you in a moment on a single day. Loss of children and widowhood. They will come upon you in full measure in spite of your many sorceries and all your potent spells.

You have trusted in your wickedness and have said, no one sees me. Your wisdom and knowledge misled you when you say to yourself, I am and there is none besides me.

Disaster will come upon you and you will not know how and you will not know how to conjure it away. A calamity will fall upon you that you cannot ward off with a ransom. A catastrophe you cannot foresee will suddenly come upon you.

Keep on then with your magic spells and with your many sorceries which you have laboured at since childhood. Perhaps you will succeed. Perhaps you will cause terror. All the counsel you have received has only worn you out.

Let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month. Let them save you from what's coming upon you. Surely they are like stubble.

- [8 : 10] The fire will burn them up. They cannot even save themselves from the power of a flame. These are not coals for warmth. This is not a fire to sit by. That is all they are to you. These you have dealt with and laboured and since childhood.
- All of them go on in their error. There is not one that can save you. This is God's word. It sounds...
- It's very blunt language, isn't it? It's very severe. And this is the point. God's redemption redemption is all-encompassing.
- And it is a powerful force that cannot be resisted. God's redemption is all-encompassing. It is a powerful force that cannot be resisted.
- That is the primary idea, the concept. What I mean by that is not... The redemption that God has for his people, not only does it set people free, but when it sets people free, there are those that it leaves behind.
- [9 : 18] The people that he set them free from, it leaves the wicked behind in their sin. It's exactly what we see with Israel. God's redemption of his people is always from exile out of Egypt.
- It is always twofold. He sets the people free, but he leaves Egypt in the dust. He will set his people free from exile from Babylonians, but he will leave the Babylonians in the dirt.
- We know that that exile ends. We know that in history. We know that... And we saw this earlier, early on in this section we're doing, that redemption happens through Cyrus, a foreign king.
- Just a few times ago we saw that. But then there's this other side of the coin, which is those left behind, wicked Babylon, a huge reversal. They end up with their faces in the dirt.
- Look with me. You can see what we see here. Verse 1, we have Babylon is pictured as this once beautiful queen, this sort of high-ranking, amazing nation, above all other nations, so much going for her.
- [10 : 37] Yet what we see here, she loses her royal privileges. First one, go down, sit in the dust. See, sit on the ground without a throne.
- Babylon, queen city of the Babylonians. No more this beautiful queen. No more will this queen, this nation be called tender or delicate.
- And the descent for Babylon goes further still. Not only no more queen of the nations, but a slave. That's the picture we have in verse 2. Take millstones and grind flour.
- It's the nation, it's a picture of this queen, now a slave, committing hard labour. Having to take off, because the work is so hard, to wade through the streams to get the labour done.
- From a queen to a queen in the dust. From a queen in the dust to a slave. Your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered.
- [11 : 42] Verse 5, no more will you be called queen of kingdoms. Israel was exiled in Babylon, as we said, 70 years.
- That exile had a dual purpose. Yes, it was because Israel had sinned. They were kicked out of their country, their land.
- They were kicked out. And the idea was that God wanted them to turn back in repentance. But, this is very important, it was also a grace to Babylon.
- Because Babylon, for 70 years, had a faithful remnant of God's people living within their land to watch, to observe. They were faithful Israelites to the God of the Bible, to Yahweh, living in their land, where the living God performed miracles that they witnessed.
- They could see what it was like to live under Yahweh as God. Classic one we might all remember. You know, for those who know sort of their history, you've got the prophet Daniel.

[12 : 44] Remember, he refused to give up praying. He refused to give up praying to his God. And he was thrown in the lion's den and yet not harmed at all.

You remember that, it's kind of one of the stories we learn as children in the lion's den, but not harmed at all. A miracle. It's a dramatic example where Babylon could witness what it meant for his people to live within Babylon, yet be faithful.

They went about their life with Yahweh at the center, following the God of the Bible. The Babylonians had a choice. They had a choice.

They could see this amazing new way or they could continue in their old way of life. What did the Babylonians choose? They decided to resist that opportunity.

Thought they could resist the God of the Bible. We see that resistance, don't we? Verse 8, look with me. They thought of themselves as God.

[13 : 53] See what? God is announcing the reasons why they're going to receive his judgment. Look at verse 8. Now then, listen, you lover of pleasure, lounging in your security and saying to yourself, I am and there's none besides me.

That phrase, there's none besides me, is exactly what God says about himself earlier in this part of the Bible. God says, I'm the living God and there's none besides me.

And here we have a nation saying that about themselves. They believe that they're God-like. So they resist God by thinking they're equal to him.

How else do we see that they resist God? They resist God by showing no mercy but only cruelty. Look at verse 6. This is God speaking.

God says, I was angry with my people. I was angry with Israel and desecrated my inheritance. They were punished. They were sent to you. I gave them into your hand, Babylon. And what did you do?

[14 : 56] You showed them no mercy. No mercy whatsoever. They, in one way that you might think about it, they went above their commission. They were commissioned to bring the Israelites out of Israel, exiled.

But then for 70 years, they laid on oppression after oppression, cruelly after cruelly. He said, even on the aged, you laid a very heavy yoke.

Even the frail and the elderly, those who couldn't help themselves, had a difficult life at your hands. They resisted by thinking they were God.

They resisted with cruelty to his people for 70 years. And finally, we see they resisted through worshipping the occult. Verse 12, we read of magic spells, of sorceries, verse 13, astrologers and stargazers, trusting in, what does that mean?

It means they turned to dark forces, trusting that they would save, Babylon would be saved by looking into darkness and submitting to evil forces for security.

[16 : 08] There's no doubt here when we understand this, that Babylon is an evil nation. They resisted Yahweh and had every opportunity, 70 years, to turn towards him because they had this witness, the remnant, living in their country.

God's redemption is all-encompassing and it cannot be resisted. That is the other side of the coin of being set free is staying in chains.

Wicked Babylon made their bed and must lie on it, lie in it. So, all this judgment on Babylon. Why is it in the Bible? Well, it's not for Babylon.

I said at the beginning, this message is actually for Israel. It's for their comfort. You see, that's why at the very heart of the chapter we have verse 4. Our Redeemer, the Lord Almighty is His name, is the Holy One of Israel.

You see, what the living God is saying to this suffering people is, I see your oppression. I see your suffering. I see the cruelty.

[17 : 29] I see your elderly, the aged amongst you with this heavy burden. I see it and I've not left you and I will set you free and I will deal with all the evil, every ounce, that hurt you in any way.

I'll deal with it all. In August 1961, before my time, the Berlin Wall was erected.

I'm not going to ask who remembered it. And it split Berlin in two. You might recall seeing it on news footage, a barrier, barbed wire, sealing off the west from East Berlin and the rest of East Germany.

It was a wall that for 28 years resisted anyone from crossing one side to the other and yet 1989 it all changed. There was an announcement November of that year granting Berliners the freedom to travel from East to West.

It was by 10.45 that evening crowds of people flooded the streets demanding to be let through and bewildered guards didn't know what to do. They were completely overwhelmed.

[18 : 39] And that night the wall came down a seemingly irresistible structure crumbled. The Babylonians felt that their cruel regime and false worship was an impenetrable wall that they could depend on.

But God's redemption, his justice is the truly irresistible force. It's the battering ram that knocks down every wall with ease.

His grace cannot be resisted and neither can his justice. That is a comfort to us because like we said our world's full of evil.

But the God who loves, the God who rescues, the God who judges wickedness in our world is our God. Anything we suffer, anything we see on the news, every type of evil will be dealt with.

Justice will prevail. The justice we all long for will be carried out perfectly. And it won't be justice where we have to gather the evidence and need it to be proved by a jury.

[19 : 54] It will be much more comprehensive because the living God who created all things has the whole picture at his disposal. Every thought, every word, every deed. Comprehensive justice, what we all long for.

That is a comfort. The problem, I think this is the problem, is we've heard all that and that's great, we know that it's true, but in the day-to-day of our lives, we can still, the scale of it, the scale of it can feel so bad and so overwhelming that it feels like that wall is insurmountable.

And it affects how we think about God. we can end up ourselves building our own wall of resistance where we struggle to believe that God will ever change the status quo.

That must be how Israel felt. They built their own wall of resistance, not the wall of arrogance, not the wall of defiant resistance like Babylon, but the walls built of fear and doubt, the wall of resisting the idea of his goodness, maybe resisting the temptation to resist will his promises ever come true?

Maybe even resisting the idea that God was powerful enough, all good enough to ever scale the Babylonian wall of cruelty and oppression. That must be how Israel felt. You see, 70 years is not abstract, it's a lifetime.

[21 : 29] A whole generation born and died under their cruel way. It's no wonder they looked at that impenetrable empire and thought that wall's too high. God just simply can't scale it.

He simply just can't knock it down and we, like Israel, we might know that truth in our heads that he can but sometimes we struggle to believe it and we feel the same, the same despair.

The wall of evil seems high and we ask the question will he ever do it? How long, oh Lord? Gaza, Ukraine, Epstein, Mohammed Al-Fayed. There's that evil out there and at times it feels too close for comfort, doesn't it?

The seasons of intense personal suffering. Will it ever end? Day after day feels like an uphill battle and we wake not wanting to fight again physical pain, emotional trauma, ill health, fear over the health of family that we love.

It feels oppressive. At times the only way we cope is to turn to other places for comfort. Maybe you're like me. Pretend it doesn't exist.

[22 : 47] Don't watch the news. Don't watch movies based on real world events. Isolate an inoculation. If I don't know about it, I can't get distressed. Now, there is wisdom in not watching 24 hour news all the time but I don't think that's not healthy but complete removal is probably not godly either.

Maybe we turn to humour, works as a bit of a defence make light of it but there's more seriously there's those destructive thought patterns.

The anxiety that we can't escape. Even that can be addictive in its messed up twisted way. At least if I'm worrying about I'm doing something kind of controlling your emotions.

It's at those moments we feel like God has deserted not only us but maybe even just the world itself we doubt his goodness and his redemption feels far. When we look under the bonnet under the surface our reaction just reveals our hearts.

It shows us what's going on at a deeper level. Deep down we're doubting God's power. We run into our own wall of resistance and we take matters into our hands.

[24 : 05] Avoidance offers peace anxiety offers control and instead the opposite happens. anxiety spiles avoidance leads to isolation and deeper despair and our wall of resistance just hurts us more and leaves us in chains.

We need someone to come down and knock over our wall. We need someone to come at us and meet us where we're at.

we need the battering ram of the gospel because it's good news. You see the good news the battering ram of the gospel is that Jesus himself could have resisted resisted but he chose not to.

In Gethsemane we know Jesus could have called 10,000 angels but he didn't. He willingly let the wall of our sin our resistance our evil the world and God's just wrath crashed down on him and he was overcome by it so that in his resurrection he could overcome it for us.

he smashed the wall down into rubble. He didn't just redeem us the whole world will be lifted up and made new with evil left behind evil sin and suffering will sit in the dust will be silenced and sent to darkness will be shown no mercy and the living God Jesus says of himself the true statement there is none besides me and it rings with truth.

[25 : 45] Jesus ransoms us he pays to bring us rescuers and set us free by experiencing evil himself and it's evil itself that's left to face the disaster calamity and catastrophe what that means is sobering because Babylon here is just a picture of our world without God but evil when we talk about just like evil we're talking about a concept but it's not a concept is it it's it's real things that are carried out by people real people there's a brilliant book maybe you've read I've read bits of it because it's long it's called the gulag archipelago by a man called Alexander Solzhenitsyn I can never say his name Solz Solz Solz Solz it's a great book I'll give you this poem later he

Soltz was a political prisoner of Lenin in a Soviet labor camp and he was tortured horrifically and when you read it's horrible what he went through and he was a Christian man and yet he writes this about his persecutors he says if only it were all so simple if only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them but the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being what he's saying is in every one of us there is the capacity to go against God to do evil that the line dividing cuts through our own hearts what that means is that the arrogance of

Babylon is in us in some way because we we know we all have a part of our hearts that wants to say I am and there's none besides me and that is why if it were not for the grace of Jesus we would face judgment as well Jesus' total complete victory is good news because it means the line of evil that runs through our hearts has been destroyed because Jesus is judged and receives the judgment the death sentence Jesus' victory means that we have hope and that we can have hope twofold we can have hope that we as a redeemed people have a redeemed future ahead of us because we have been set free from judgment from our own from ourselves we are free personally but also we're full of hope because he will judge the evil in our world it means that I can we can watch the news and not be filled with despair or avoidance because evil is dealt with evil is dealt with in here in our hearts and it's dealt with out there what does that mean about how we live how do we take what we've here today and make it impact how we live day to day because tomorrow and every day we might encounter the evil in here and evil out there well let's start with the evil out there because Jesus overcame we can stop building our own flimsy walls of resistance our avoidance our anxiety and our despair and instead in him we can resist being overwhelmed in him by the power of his spirit you can resist that you can watch the news or face that awful situation not because evil isn't real but because

God's justice is more real it's more real because we don't need to take it into our own hands because God takes it into his hands we don't take revenge because God says I'll take the revenge I'll take vengeance now you might say well come on I mean that just sounds kind of callous and wrong or perhaps a little bit vindictive picture yourself as a Nigerian Christian the night comes in and you hear the screams as militants make their way around your village houses being torched and maybe the church as well fearing for your life or your children what about being the wife to an abusive husband after many years is it wrong for them to pray to see a foretaste of the

Lord's vengeance it's absolutely not that doesn't mean that we become stoic and emotionless either we can still go and plead how long oh Lord how long till this is over but we do that with hope that's how we respond to the evil out there what about the sin in here well that sinful pattern that addiction the anger that feels like the impenetrable wall in your life God's all encompassing redemption is for that too his grace is a battering ram against that wall because you're in Christ that sin has no power over you anymore victory is yours today in him and you can say yes to him and no to that old way of life this is this is the promise that we have from our passage today to take home the invitation to each of us because

[32 : 09] Jesus did not resist the cross you can be fully forgiven for your own resistance and because he gives you new life in him by his spirit you can be filled with hope in a world mixed and filled up that is hopeless and full of evil and suffering it has no power over you and so instead of building our own walls of resistance we are invited to be built by Jesus himself back together and to be made impenetrable in him that's the promise of the gospel let's pray almighty almighty god there's hard things in our world that we have to wrestle with and it's not always comfortable to address it and sometimes we don't want to it's easier just to wash over it and pretend it doesn't happen in conversations but also in our own hearts we'd rather just avoid it and yet that's not good for us and so I thank you that your word addresses the things that we wouldn't address

I thank you that with you there is justice and it's comprehensive I thank you that the things that make us despair whilst it's still hard to see and observe that we can come to you with hope knowing that you have lifted and will lift us completely out of the mess and that you will make all things new that you're going to redeem everything that the world itself will be a place where there is no pain or suffering and that there will be no evil there will just be goodness we long for that day help us to live in light of that being a reality forgive us when we've built up walls of resistance and Lord I thank you that the battering ram of the gospel smashes it smashes those smashes our sin into rubble and as we just prepare we're going to in a moment prepare our hearts to take the supper

I pray that you'd just remind us that the sign and the symbol of what that means is that we're not only are our sins forgiven but it points to a day when we'll drink in the new heavens and the earth the perfect world with you again so bless us we pray have mercy upon us we ask in Jesus name amen amen