

A Lesson from the World

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[0 : 0 0] And then I'm going to pray for us. So I'll look through these seven verses and really concentrate our hearts on you and your son and that you'd encourage us, build us up, that you'd correct us where we've made mistakes and that we would be shaped more to know and love you.

We ask for this in the name of Christ. Amen. First thing we're going to just introduce sort of as we look at this together is I was thinking this week about when we watch the TV, basically I was up in the morning, I was watching My Five, the kids before they go to school, we put on Channel 5.

And it's kids' programmes, the kids' TV, and then the kids' sort of cartoons. And then in between each cartoon, there's more adverts than there is actual cartoons.

And I think, and undoubtedly, within more adverts than there are cartoons, by the end of the adverts, Angus has normally decided that almost every advert, that's what he wants for his birthday.

So you see that adverts really work with kids. But I think, do adverts work with us? Do adverts, do we buy the things? Are we interested in the things?

[1 : 4 7] Are we influenced by the way that the stuff is marketed to us? Because in my head, you can see that with Angus, you know, he wants all the toys that are sold to him.

But in my head, I like to think that I'm above all that. That I'm not influenced to get Sky TV because of Idris Elba, who's, if you don't know if you've seen the advert, where he's zooming around on a sofa.

Or I choose EE because of Kevin Bacon. And yet, the reality is, we're all more influenced, I think, by adverts than we realise. There's a reason, isn't there, that people are paid handsome sums of money to advertise cars and fragrances and clothes.

Because I think, subconsciously, we're tempted because what we, the reason they pay them is because we, they think that, well, it works, that we want to be like those people that we admire.

It's all working out for them. They've got loads of money. They look good. They're driving the right car. Maybe if I get the car that they drive, I'll be a little bit like them. It looks like they've got what they need in life.

[2 : 5 3] Maybe I could be like that. In this series, in Isaiah 40 to 55, I might have mentioned before who this part of the Bible's written to.

It's written to God's people, Israel, but after they've been kicked out of their homeland and they're in Babylon and they're exiled, they're not in their homeland and they're surrounded, they're in a foreign nation, they're surrounded by foreign nations who worship false gods.

And at times, it can seem like the people of Babylon and the nations that surround them are getting on in life pretty well. It can seem like worshipping those gods and living that way is kind of, it's attractive.

It's like an advert for worshipping a false god because things seem to be going all right. They advertise kind of to Israel what it might be like if they were to ditch their own gods and take up a new way of life.

And I think that's true in our world, isn't it? Today as Christians, it can sometimes look to us that perhaps people with no faith or who live differently to what the Bible says, if we look from the outside and we compare, sometimes it can look like they've got it all together, things are going well, that they're making it.

[4 : 17] And we, the church, as we look at that, can be tempted to think, well, maybe we should adopt some of the world's ways too. Maybe we should. Maybe they've got it right.

In our passage this morning, what we see is that the living God is pointing out to his people the nation's ways, what they're like, and how it ends up for them.

The nation's ways, what it's like, and how it ends up for them. And to not be tempted to go the way of the nations, to not be tempted to go the way of Babylon. My hope is that as we see that, that we'd get a renewed faith to keep on going and to turn away from the world's ways.

Last week, what did we see? We saw that God has no rival, that God is unrivaled, he's matchless, there is no one and nothing that compares to him.

He orders the whole world, the whole of creation, he's matchless in his wisdom, and he orders all things. And that if people would accept that, they would renew their hope, they would renew their strength and hope in the Lord.

[5 : 28] Those who grow tired and weary would be renewed in their strength and soar on wings like eagles. The temptation here is to follow the way of the nations.

Will Israel follow the Lord's way? Will they realise the order of the world that's set under the true God? Will they reject the way of the nations?

Follow the true order? Well, what we see is, the first thing is that we see that the living God actually invites the nation, he gives the same invitation to the nations as he does with his people.

The first point that we're going to look at is the invitation to the nations. The invitation to the nations is that they too can receive the same strength given to Israel if they'll acknowledge that the living God has no rival, that he is at the top of the pyramid.

God's invitation to the nations, he plays with the same idea that we looked at last week. He's at the top of the pyramid, everything is underneath him. And to make it crystal clear, what he does is he's talking about the nations' history and their future, time, what is to come for them and what has gone on in their past.

[6 : 47] You look with me at what he says in verse 1. He's talking to the nations, be silent before me, you islands. And then he offers them this, let the nations renew their strength.

If they will acknowledge him as top of the pyramid, they will be strong, just like his people. Let them come forward and speak. Let us meet together at the place of judgment. They have an opportunity to be renewed, just like his people.

He wants to articulate to them, just like he does to his people before, that he has no rival. Look with me. He starts by talking about the events in their past.

He asks this rhetorical question, verse 2. Who has stirred up one from the east, calling him in righteousness to his service? He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him.

Like you might stir someone from a deep sleep, someone is responsible for awakening a leader to come in the nation's history and take over them.

[7 : 57] Verse 4, we get the same kind of question is repeated. Who's done this and carried it through? Who's called all the generations from the beginning?

Who was it that roused them and called forth armies to come forward in the nation's history? And we get the answer. I, the Lord, with the first of them and with the last.

I am he. Now, we're not told in this passage who this person is that God rouses from the east. We're not told, but it doesn't actually matter.

That's not the point. The identity of the one who God stirs, who God roused, who he awakens, that isn't what really matters. What it means...

That's not what really matters. What it means is that the history of that nation, the history was initiated by the living God.

[9 : 04] Their whole history, everything that has gone before in this nation's history was initiated and started by the living God. He's the first and the last and he's the one who calls forth generations from the beginning.

The idea is there to extend to our past. It extends to the history of our nation, of Scotland, and indeed to the history of the world, that the living God carries everything through from start to finish.

Everything that has gone before in the history of the world was initiated and started by the living God. We can struggle with that idea. We can struggle with that.

And the reason we struggle is because in our own personal history and maybe in the history of our family or maybe if we think back to the history of our world, we look back and we know as we look back that there is an overwhelming amount of pain and suffering.

suffering. We know that. And naturally, we have questions, why did it have to be like that? If God orders all of history, why did it have to be like that?

[10 : 17] Couldn't it have been another way? Why was war necessary? That's why we can struggle with that idea that he's in charge of the whole of history.

And yet the reality is we can't answer those questions as to why. Now that sometimes doesn't satisfy us. I know many of us in our own walk with the Christian faith will have asked those questions at times, particularly if we're in the middle of struggling circumstances or we're in the middle of seeing heartache or war or difficulty.

Why does it have to be like that? And yet we don't give them the answers as to why. I don't have the answers as to why things have to be a certain way. The reason that's the case is that none of us have the mind of the Lord.

None of us have the mind of the Lord and the living God who has a bird's eye view of time, he has a perfect understanding of what happens in the beginning and what will happen in the end. That is beyond our understanding.

That is beyond our understanding. But he does. He has a perfect view of the beginning and the end. He's the God of history.

[11 : 37] The second thing that God articulates is not only is he the God of things past, but he's also in charge of every event in the future. We jump down to verse 25 on the other side.

You see that the same language is used. I have stirred up one from the north and he comes, one from the rising sun who calls on my name. The Lord remains in charge of the operations of the one he's awakened in the future.

Like a conductor who guides an orchestra to play an amazing symphony, knowing when the music begins and how it will end, the living God has conducted history, but he also is currently conducting our present and the future and will bring it to perfect conclusion at its right time.

What we're really getting at here is the character of the God of the Bible, the God who creates and sustains the world he's made, that he doesn't change, he doesn't react to things like a hothead when things don't seem to go his way.

He's not changed by circumstances. You might say one of the way of explaining this is that there's no potential in him. What do I mean by that? Well, we often talk when people are young and younger than I am, people are described as having great potential, aren't they?

[13 : 01] In an area of life or work where they might excel, I wonder if they'll reach their potential. It means they're going to change and do something with the potential that they've got. The living God has no potential.

He already is all that he is and ever will be. He doesn't change. He's consistent and self-consistent within himself. We change, people change and we're affected by life.

What we need is a God who's not like us, who doesn't change. We need a God who's able to make objective, consistent, right decisions, not based on how we feel or how he feels, but doing what is the right, holy, concrete, sustained action.

And while we might struggle to think of God being in charge of those difficulties, the alternative is either, this is the alternative, the alternative is either that no one's in charge or something else is.

And that's more terrifying because if God's not in charge, how can he change anything? And if God's not in charge, it means something else is or no one is.

[14 : 19] It is a comfort to know that the one that we speak to, the one that we worship is in charge of my life, of your life and indeed the future of the whole world.

This is the invitation to the nations to recognise God at the top of the pyramid of creation, of wisdom, of then and of all of time.

He's the one that orders creation, our history, our past, our future. That is the place if they acknowledge that they can renew their strength like he offers Israel. The question then in the face of that is will they do that?

How will they react? How will they respond to his invitation? Move to our second point is the foolishness of the nations in verse 5.

What do we see? We see that they decline his invitation. Instead of recognising the character of God and turning to him, they turn elsewhere. In their fear and trembling, they turn to things that are not him.

[15 : 27] The first place they turn is end of verse 5. You see that? And part of verse 6, they turn to each other. End of verse 5. They approach and come forward.

They help each other and say to their companions, be strong. It's quite natural, isn't it? In the face of difficulty, we often turn to one another.

And in many ways, there's nothing wrong with that. In trying circumstances, we might read that that seems a little bit harsh, doesn't it? A bit that we're saying that that's wrong. We know God has provided relationships with one another where we can turn to one another and provide support.

So we need to understand this rightly. It's not saying that helping others when we're in difficulty is bad. But it's turning to one another but leaving God out of the picture.

Our world is full of that. I saw a book on the shops the other day, Life Lessons from Winnie the Pooh. A Hundred Ideas to Nurture Your Inner Bear. Now perhaps, perhaps, I'm sure he does, Pooh Bear and Piglet, perhaps they're unknown wise sages of our day.

[16 : 42] But that's not, you know, that's not the only one. The sales of self-help books has exploded.

And those things aren't bad in and of themselves. But the point is, the world, what he's saying is the nations will turn for help from that to those things without acknowledging and leaving him out of the picture.

Pointing out, turn to people for wisdom and guidance and help and strength and motivational tidbits instead of him. the wisdom of Winnie the Pooh replacing the wisdom of the living God.

When we know, when we see that, we know that there's something wrong with that. That's the first place the nations turn to. They turn to each other. The second place is that they turn to their false gods.

And in verse 6, it's the image that they've been making a statue to worship. One says of the welding of the statue, it's good. It's great welding.

[17 : 51] You've done a great job there making this brilliant statue. The other, nails down the idol so that it will not topple. They make an idol and it's made well because it won't topple.

It's nailed down. The nails keep the idol securely fastened to the ground and as long as the thought goes, as long as the idol doesn't fall down, we're going to be alright. And again, we don't doubt, well, I don't think we, I've not seen that in our world that we, particularly in this country, that we bow down to statues.

But we do have the idols of our modern day and we do try to, not with nails, but they do, we do nail them down, that we do hammer them into our lives and the more we hammer them in, we do that to provide security during times of stress and anxiety.

I said last week, what is an idol? An idol is anything that you substitute for God, that you swap in the place of God. Instead of God directing the way that you live, you let this other thing do it instead.

And so the pursuit of the idol, whatever it is, will affect the life choices and the way that you live, your decision making. I'm going to go just in on a big one, I think, that's part that's prevalent in our world.

[19 : 09] We're just going to spend a few moments talking about, and I think it's the idol of wanting people's approval is a big one. Wanting their acceptance. Other life choices, if you notice, can actually find their way back to this root cause of wanting people's approval.

It's there everywhere. Social media exacerbates the need to be liked, doesn't it? When you've posted a photo or a comment, do you check how many likes it has and who has liked it?

The more thumbs up and hearts boost your confidence. Our post photo has been approved by our friend group. The more, we hammer it down, it's like hammering the nails in so that it won't topple because the more approval we receive, the more secure we feel in life.

And it's everywhere, isn't it? We want to be approved in our job, people to approve the way we parent, we want people to approve of our children, we want people to approve the holidays we go on, we want to, there's a thirst and a need to be accepted and approved.

And naturally, there's, I think there's two responses that we go for. We either look for approval and because we're confident that we're going to get it, we go hunting or we fear we're not going to get it and so we withdraw because we fear potential disapproval or rejection because of our choices.

[20 : 40] Go hunting for it and get it or run away from it because we fear we're going to not get it. That is, that's exactly what's happening when we see the nations.

That's what happened, that's what's happened if we look at our world it is everywhere. Substituting our approval rating for the living God's opinion of you is what, is a modern day way of this passage works out.

If our approval rating looks like it will topple, looks like we're going to, it's going to get lower, it brings on the worry and the anxiety and we need to put some more nails in.

Do something about it, do something, say something, buy something that others will commend us for or withdraw. Don't let ourselves be known. Comfort in being anonymous and private and no chance of disapproval.

God challenges the idols here. He challenges the idols. That's what we see from verse 21. Can these idols, can they order the history, our past or govern the future like I can?

[21 : 53] That is what he's saying, verse 21. It's like, it's a courtroom scene. Present your case, says the Lord. Set forth your arguments. Come on then. Tell us what, tell us what went before.

Say what's going to come in the future. Declare to us the things to come. Tell us what the future holds so that we may know that these idols really are gods. Do something at least, whether good or bad.

The point is this, that the way of the nations, this is how they live. And this is all they know. And when put to the test, they don't compare.

Whether it's looking to people, whether it's looking to Winnie the Pooh, or even something good, looking to the things in our life, looking for approval, or anything else to feel secure in difficulty.

They are no substitute for the living God. He's the one who orders our history and our future. He's the one who orders our history and orders our future.

[22 : 57] And he's good. And so we can trust him to do that. Living like we see the nations do is not what God intended for anyone.

We move to our final point. The plight of the nations. The plight of the nations. What we see is that the way that the nations have acted is foolish.

And in a sense, what we're really talking about here is we're going deep on actually the essence of what we might say sin is. It's saying, shove off God.

I'm in charge. And I'm going to put my own thing on top of you. I'm going to replace God with something else that helps me in my life. The living God has the final say on this.

Look with me, verse 24. He speaks to the idols. In the courtroom scene, the idols are dumb and mute. And the judge does the summing up.

[23 : 59] You're less than nothing. Your work's utterly worthless. You're non-existent. People become like their gods, he says. Whoever chooses you is detestable.

People become like what they worship. The idols are nothing and worthless. You see in verse 28, I look, but there is no one, no one among the gods to give counsel, no one to give answer when I ask them.

Did you notice at the beginning, verse 1, he invited the nations to speak. Let them come forward and speak. And at the end of the chapter, they have nothing to say.

There is no one that is able to speak and give counsel to anyone else. It is a false delusion, like a mist that disappears, like trying to catch hold of wind and put it in a jar.

It's a false delusion that vanishes. Like a magician with a sleight of hand pulling the wool over their eyes and making them believe something that was never real.

[25 : 06] Idols offer something. They offer peace and security and hope, but it is smoke and mirrors that will never come through. And if it's this one that we've zoned in on today, or maybe something else, approval rating, or something else that directs the way that we live, then if we worship it, you'll only need that approval rating more and more and more.

It's not like eventually you'll get it and then you'll be satisfied. And you'll be traumatized and full of insecurity when you don't get it, tossed up and down by life, like a ship in a storm, never finding peace and calm.

And you see, this is the point of what he's saying. He's pointing out to his people, look at the nations turning elsewhere. Replacing me at the top of my pyramid.

He's appalled and he's making it. Is this what you want for yourselves? Is this what you want? Is this the way that you want to live? Don't be drawn in by them.

Don't be sucked in by the way the world lives. This is, they might look, it might seem like they advertise this way of life as good and wholesome and pure and it'll breed success and you'll feel great.

[26 : 24] But he's saying, look, it doesn't, it doesn't work. So resist it. Turn and acknowledge me, the living God, as the one who's in charge of your life, of your history and all your future.

And so we, the same questions come to us today as the church, as God's people, will we choose God's way or will we copy the way of the world?

Will we replace God with something else? That's not a better tactic, it doesn't work, it appeals because at times it looks like it does. But all our days have been numbered in God's book.

Better turn to him than something that doesn't last. This offer to see God in this way, to acknowledge God in this way, to have him at the top of the pyramid is made to all people.

We see he makes it to the nations, he doesn't just make it to his people, he makes it to everyone. And I said, my suggestion is that today if we can see that pattern of putting other things in God's place and we all will because we all do it, he offers us to rethink that and redress it, to put God in charge of your life and when trouble happens turn to him because he's the one in charge.

[27 : 44] These things, he's the only one who can help you in the big things of life. When you're grieving, when you're hurting, when there's economic turmoil, when there's war, these things that we have can't help but the living God can because he's in charge of it all.

I am the first and the last. I, the Lord, with the first of them and with the last, I am he. Again, he has no rival.

He's in charge of me and you and he's in charge of our lives. Let me pray. Almighty God, we come to you knowing that we have done this in many ways.

Perhaps it is some of the issues that we've spoken about where we've put things ahead of you, we've put things in place of you, we've substituted you out and Lord, this is, we say that this is the way that those who, we see the difficulty and the strain and the stress and the problems that it causes in our world and Lord, we're tempted, we see it, sometimes it appeals and it looks good and we're tempted to follow in that same vein but Lord, we see that it comes to nothing here.

We see that those things can't help us but you can. I thank you that you are in charge. It's the reason we can pray and trust that you can intervene because you are in charge and so we come to you with all of our history, all the things that have gone in our past.

[29 : 18] We don't, and yet we come to you knowing that you have every day written in your book and you have our future in your hands and so we come to you asking that you would lead and guide and strengthen us that you would, like we saw last week, that you would give us hope in you, renew our strength so that we would soar with wings like eagles and so that we would, the difficulties, the circumstances of our life that we wouldn't be tempted to turn away from you but to turn to you for strength.

We ask for this in the name of Christ. Amen.