

The God who carries

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[0:00] This morning we're back with an earring God's message to exiled Israel who were stuck in Babylon.! The last few weeks we've seen God's promise that one day he'll bring them home, he'll re-inhabit Jerusalem.

And we saw that he has a bigger plan, not just for Jerusalem, but to fill the whole world with his people, his worshippers. What we hear today is another warning, another temptation.

And the temptation here is for Israel to return to their old ways. The temptation for them is once they're back in Jerusalem to behave like their ancestors did which got them kicked out in the first place.

First time round, Israel, you remember they came out of Egypt, began to believe their own hype. They believed that they were responsible for their own redemption. That temptation will be crouching at the door exactly the same.

It is the temptation to put themselves on a pedestal, to carry themselves to life with God. There is a stubbornness to continue in believing that they have got what it takes.

[1:07] If we look at the history of Israel, it would suggest otherwise and how they've lived, they've lost all right actually to be called Israel. They mustn't return to thinking that way.

Their spiritual CV is not a good one. And yet the temptation to ignore the false, believe that their CV stands up against testing. That ancient temptation to carry themselves, relying on their own record.

Does it not find a modern home in our hearts? Because in that way, we know that we're just like Israel. We can know, if we follow Jesus, we can know that Jesus is the only way in our heads.

And yet we can live as if his righteousness, the life he gives isn't enough. In our heads, maybe we can explain that being right in God's eyes comes through faith in him.

Yet we don't let it sink down. And it affects how we live. Functionally, we live as if it's not true. Exhaust ourselves with perfectionism, performance and approval seeking.

[2:19] Like Israel, we think and believe grace got us started. But it is willpower and performance that will keep us going to the end. God offers to carry us, you, all the way home to eternal life.

But we say with our actions, I think I can walk the rest of the way. It's easy to rejoice in God's promises on Sunday, but by Monday we're back to carrying ourselves.

Isaiah 46 is what we need to hear. That God reminds us all our efforts to make a name for ourselves will exhaust us. Performance-driven desire for God's love and for the approval of others cannot carry you.

It will just rest on your shoulders as a burden too heavy to carry. Spiritually, like Naomi, after a long day's play, you won't be able to go on. While the idol of self-righteousness will always weigh you down, God will always pick you up.

Let's read Isaiah 46. Bel bows down. Nebo stoops low.

- [3 : 38] Their idols are born by beasts of burden. The images that are carried about are burdensome, a burden for the weary. They stoop and bow down together, unable to rescue the burden.
- They themselves go off into captivity. Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob, all the remnant of the people of Israel. You whom I have upheld since your birth and have carried since you were born.
- Even to your old age and grey hairs, I am he. I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you.
- I will sustain you and I will rescue you. With whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared? Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales.
- They hire a goldsmith to make it into a god and they bow down and worship it. They lift it to their shoulders and carry it. They set it in its place and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move.
- [4 : 41] Even though someone cries out to it, it cannot answer. It cannot save them from their troubles. Remember this. Keep it in mind. Take it to heart, you rebels.
- Remember the former things, those of long ago. I am God and there is no other. I am God and there is none like me. I make none the end from the beginning. From ancient time is what is still to come.
- I say, my purpose will stand. And I will do all that I please. From the east I summon a bird of prey. From a far off land, a man to fulfil my purpose.
- What I have said, that I will bring about. What I have planned, that I will do. Listen to me, you stubborn hearted. You who are now far off from my righteousness.
- I am bringing my righteousness near. It is not far away. And my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion.
- [5 : 44] My splendour to Israel. The principle. God carries his people. God carries his people.
- Look with me from verse 3. Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob, all the remnant of the people of Israel. The remnant, that is the faithful few, whom God has preserved through the disaster of exile.
- He says, you whom I have upheld since your birth, and carried since you were born, even to your old age and grey hairs. I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you.
- I will sustain and I will rescue you. Isaiah is envisaging those who have survived Babylonian captivity and will return to Israel.
- God won't just carry them back to their homeland, but once they return, even to old age, he will continue to uphold them from beginning to end.
- [6 : 46] That applies to them not just as individuals, but as a people chosen. He has always been carrying them, preserving a remnant, a people for himself. And yet notice the contrast between Yahweh, the God of the Bible, and the Babylonian idols.
- Bel, he's the giver of, you want to know, he's the giver of fortune. And Nebo is the God of learning. But you see here, you see how pathetic they are?
- Humbled and brought low. Verse 1, Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low. Your idols are born by beasts of burden. Images that are carried are burdensome and burden for the weary.
- You picture the scene that Isaiah paints. On the one hand, you have these gods of the Babylonian empire, Bel and Nebo, slumped over, being loaded onto the backs of tired animals, not as objects of worship, but as baggage.

They're a dead weight, monstrous yet worthless, needing muscles and money to be lifted up and displayed. They were never able to carry anyone. And now, no one wants to carry them.

[8:03] On the other hand, you have the living God, reaching down, not to be carried, but to carry his people. They cannot compare to him.

They cannot save. They have no purpose. And the contrast with, he contrasts their purpose with God's purpose. Well, verse 10, God's purpose.

He says, my purpose will stand and I will do all that I please. What he says, he brings about and what he plans, he does. It pleased God to carry his people, despite them returning to their old ways, because he justifies the ungodly.

That is the promise of Israel's God. When he lifts you up, he never, when he lifts them up, he will never put them down again. They stay lifted. They stay carried. They enter in the promised land by grace, but they're preserved and kept and sustained by that same grace.

Even when tempted and fallen into sin, his people stay lifted. It's the ongoing work of God in their lives that he does in and through his people. And it's always by grace.

[9:12] God carries his people. The problem then is actually Isaiah's sending a big warning ahead of time.

It's a big warning. It's after they've returned back to Jerusalem. It's the time after the exile when Jerusalem's full again, when you're eventually back in your homeland, Israel.

What he's saying is don't forget about grace. there's a rebuke into what they will think. Don't think after you've returned that your return back was down to you.

Look, verse 12, what he says, listen to me. This is a rebuke in the future. Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are now far from my righteousness. He says, if I were to look at your performance, you fail miserably.

It's the real temptation they will face to rehash that old way of thinking that they've got what it takes. They never did, they never have, and they won't now. That rehash that old way, trying to, not only to get in, but trying to maintain that standard.

[10:30] A life of trying to prove themselves day after day, again and again and again, trying to be perfect for God, but also trying to be perfect in the society, looking for approval from others and performing to gain social recognition.

It's what led to Israel's dysfunctional family in the first place, ignoring God's laws of love. Deep down, what it reveals that is that God's love and grace was never enough for them.

It was never actually enough for them, they didn't get it. That's the idol that they are warned against. That's the burden that's too heavy to carry.

And whilst it might look different to the Babylonians idolatry of having beasts carry images, in reality they're no different. And it mirrors how we act sometimes after we've turned to Jesus.

we can believe that grace is responsible for setting us free, but forget that's also what keeps us and what empowers us to change and grow and we can try to prove ourselves again and again day after day thinking we have to perform, acting like there's a standard we have to reach.

[11:50] If we're living like that, that burden is too heavy and it will crush you. the Bible uses it, it really is, it's a shockingly graphic image to describe what it's like to return to self-justification, trying to prove yourself again and again after you've tasted grace.

The Bible says that to do that it's like a dog returning to its own vomit. That image, it's meant to be disgusting because God wants to see that trying to carry our old ways of self-approval it is sickening.

We return to our idols of self-approval, we do it all the time and it brings with it a kind of spiritual unhealthiness. Don't get me wrong, we are up against it.

Not only do our hearts desire or want approval but the world operates and turns on performance related reward. We don't need to, in many ways we don't need to rubbish that because that's right isn't it?

This is the way the world turns, if you work hard at school or if you're in whatever line of work you're in generally that is what brings success and that's good and right.

[13:13] If you were hiring someone to do work on your house, you would do your homework first and look at jobs they'd done in the past. You'd look to see if they'd done a good job and when you could trust them or not.

It's only then, based on their hard work in the past that you reward them with a contract for your own work that you want doing to get the work done based on their previous performance.

They're rewarded based on their performance. The problem is we transfer that way of thinking into thinking that God operates with those on the same principle.

Now, I'm going to say something that when I say it, it sounds controversial. It might even sound heretical, but it's the very heart of the gospel.

Salvation in Jesus is 100% performance based. The reward of eternal life is performance related.

[14:24] The problem is it requires a perfect performance. And that's where the gospel comes in. Salvation is based on 100% performance, just not yours.

It's 100% works performance, but Jesus gives you his 100% performance related reward on his work.

Your righteousness wasn't enough to save you, neither is it enough to carry you to eternal life, but Jesus gives you his performance related reward. This is the gospel way of life.

Jesus is the way, the truth and life, but he's the full way. He's not just the beginning of the journey, he's the beginning, the middle and all the way forever. This is what happens on the cross.

It's when the great exchange took place. He took the burden you were carrying, he took your sin, your failure, your performance related, your performance related record that earned you condemnation.

[15:36] We have performance related condemnation and he carried it away. In its place he gives you the reward he earned, his perfect performance, his righteousness, his father's unconditional approval.

He carried your sin so you could be carried by his righteousness. His righteousness, that's his perfect good enough for God status that he gives you as a free gift.

He lifts you up because when he carried your sin it meant that he carried the cross for you exchanging performance related reward for performance related condemnation.

the idols of Babylon were burdens for beasts but Jesus at the cross becomes the beast of burden for us.

The full weight, the crushing load of every time we've tried to carry ourselves, every time we've trusted in ourselves, he carried it all so we wouldn't have to. The full weight, the full burden of all our sin, every time we've attempted to replace him with our own self, our sense of worth, every time we've attempted to wear his crown, he's carried it all so that we might be carried by his righteousness.

[16:54] And that doesn't just mean the sins of yesterday, but the sins of today and tomorrow and all the way into the future. When Jesus lifts you up, it's like a father putting his child on his shoulders and he carries you all the way home.

the burden, that burden, that heavy crushing burden of trying to prove yourself again and again, day after day is gone because you have the highest approval rating that can be given.

You have God the Father's approval for his son is the approval rating that rests on your shoulders. He approves of his son because if he approves of his son, what that means is that he adopts you into a spiritual family.

The only opinion in this world that matters is that of your Father in heaven and he accepts you unconditionally. Jesus says in Matthew 11, come to me or you are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.

he takes our burdens and gives us rest. The weight of not measuring up is removed. Weary free living means you can make mistakes. It means you can have peace rather than perfectionism.

[18:20] Admit when you mess up and no rejection doesn't define you because Jesus has received you. Verse 13, what does the living God say about Jerusalem, about Zion?

He says, I'm bringing my righteousness near. It is not far away and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendor to Israel. Jesus is the fulfillment of this verse.

He is the righteousness brought near. In his life, he comes physically to the very heart, the center of religious life and he brings salvation to Israel.

But there's more, he doesn't just fill Israel with righteousness but he fulfills it spiritually when he fills the church with righteousness.

When he fills the church with himself, when he chooses the church, his people, as the place he will dwell. He is closer than we could have ever have dreamt.

[19:24] Jesus, his righteousness is at the heart of the very center of his people. That salvation doesn't delay. It's for today. And you and I receive everything that Jesus has in him.

You receive a new mindset, you're loved, accepted and carried by his spirit. And so what it means is that it changes the way that we live when we absorb and consider and think this through because instead of seeking approval, you're free to live knowing you're accepted.

When we really imbibe this, it changes the way that we live. If what people think of you doesn't define you anymore, then you're set free from trying to meet their standards.

Whether they approve of your life choices or not, it really doesn't matter because you're accepted by the one whose opinion is the only one that matters. Rather than striving for perfection, you can rest.

Rather than fearing, you can trust. Obedience to God becomes joy-filled rather than duty-bound. Because God's love for you is not dependent on the outcome. He loves you regardless and it is constant and unchanging.

[20:41] A parent loves their child not for what they do, but because of who they are, because their flesh and blood. Even when my shoulders hurt, I will carry Naomi all the way home because she's my daughter.

God loves you and carries you not because of what you do, but because you're his. Through the cross, he hasn't just forgiven you, he's adopted you, you are his child and he will carry his children all the way home.

I want to make this incredibly practical for us. The next time you feel the pressure to perform, that anxiety about what someone thinks of you, I want you to do this, try this.

I want you to physically stop, take a breath and pray this simple prayer. Jesus, you carried my sin, now carry me in this moment.

I'm trying to carry myself again. Please take this burden. Trade your striving for a simple prayer of dependence.

[21 : 56] the more we take this on, not just as individuals but as a church, as a community, as the body of Christ, it will impact us individually but it will impact our relationships.

When we soak and believe and trust in who we are in Jesus, forgiven, free, accepted and loved, it frees us to serve one another without meeting a set standard.

Without having to think it has to be just so for somebody to think it's what needs to be done. We can forgive one another and love without hidden agendas because we're carried, we're invited to rest in our relationships with each other.

That striving can end. The constant effort to prove yourself can cease. Jesus offers you his rest, not as another thing to achieve but as a gift. Not as another thing to achieve but as a gift to receive.

And as we draw in Queen Philando, I want to think, if you were to picture God's face, what do you see? Do you know it's never an angry scowl?

[23 : 18] It's just permanently beaming with joy. I wonder today, as the community of God's people, could we reconnect with God's view of us?

Remember Naomi, too tired to take another step, finding her rest on my shoulders. That is the picture of grace God is offering you right now.

God's stop trying to walk in your own strength. Let your father put you on his shoulders and let him carry you the rest of the way home.

Let's pray. Amen. Almighty God, we praise you for what you have done for us.

We praise you that you've taken our sins away and you've called us by grace and that you'll sustain us and carry us all the way home to eternal life freely, out of love.

[24 : 36] And we know in our hearts that we try to prove ourselves again and again to you, but we try to prove it in the social groups that we exist in.

We try to meet standards that either we've made up ourselves or that exist. we think that we have to earn other people's approval.

And Lord, it is crushing, it is a burden and it causes anxiety. We're perfectionists at times or we want other people to admire us.

Lord, I pray that you would set us free from this. I pray that you'd work in our hearts and I pray that we'd know as you carry us that this is all taken away.

And so we want to come to you, Lord. We are weary and heavy laden with this and I pray that you'd give each one of us rest and that we would trust you and pray that simple prayer that we would know that you carry us because you've carried all our sin at the cross.

[25 : 45] We ask for this in the name of Christ. Amen.