

Following God's Command

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[0 : 00] Folks, great to see you this morning. Why don't you turn back to those verses in Isaiah chapter 49. We're just going to look at the first seven verses together in that chapter, but I thought it'd be good just to get the whole context of what the Lord is saying there.

I recently heard a minister tell some stories about a time when he was in Calcutta in India, and he was telling some stories about one of the things that most entertained him while he was in Calcutta. One of the things that most entertained him was the signs at the side of the roads in Calcutta, which were trying to encourage people to drive safely. So let me just give you some of these that he mentioned.

Here's some of the signs. Drive slowly, see scenery. Drive fast, see cemetery. That's good. After whiskey, driving risky. Better to be Mr. Late than the late mister.

And then my personal favourite, I love this one. Overtaker, if he's not careful, may soon meet Undertaker. I liked it. But despite all those signs, Calcutta remains a very dangerous place to drive because people don't listen to what the signs are telling them to do.

[1 : 18] And the reason that it started like that is because what we're going to be asked to do in these verses today is to listen to a voice. To listen to a voice. Last week we stepped into this book of Isaiah and we heard God's words to a generation of his people who will soon find themselves living in exile in Babylon.

And as they contemplate why this dreadful thing has happened, here is what God wants them to know. Verse 17 of chapter 48. If you just glance slightly back from chapter 49.

This is what the Lord says. Do you see it?

Do you see it? If only you'd listened. To what? To my commands. In other words, to what I was telling you, what I was saying to you.

For if you had, your peace would have been like a river. Your well-being like the waves of the sea. Your descendants would have been like the sand. Your children like its numberless grains.

[2 : 32] Their name would never be blotted out nor destroyed from before me. So do you see what God is saying to this generation? I love you. I've called you out for myself.

I've got good plans for you. But the reason that you're in the mess that you're in is because you repeatedly and willfully failed to listen to what I was lovingly telling you.

And you've not just failed to listen to me. Actually, you've listened to every other voice out there in the world that's been telling you how to live your life. You've heard it. You've thought about it.

And then you've thought, yep, that's the voice for me. And you've sprinted over there to the idol that's been calling you. Now, my parents have got a little parson terrier dog called Charlie.

Our girls love Charlie. Charlie loves the smell of deer. Anytime we go home, we take Charlie for a walk up the moors where my parents live. He gets the slightest whiff of a deer in his little lungs.

[3 : 38] And he's off like the clappers in search of that deer. And that is what has been Israel's spiritual story so far in this book. They've got the slightest whiff of something else.

Something that they think will do for them what only God can do for them. And they have gone sprinting after it thinking that that is going to satisfy them. So true, friends, isn't it?

That if we're not satisfied with the glory of God, if we're not satisfied with the person of Jesus Christ, then we will go in search of other things to fill that hole in our lives. It's well did C.S. Lewis say, Human history is the long, terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.

It's Israel's story. It's our story. And so it's a little wonder then that in this section of this book of Isaiah from chapters 40 to 48, the idea of listening and of paying attention and of hearing, it comes up so often.

Maybe you can go home in your own time and check this out from 40 to 48. Just count how many times that image crops up. Let me just give you a few of these. Chapter 44, verse 1. It's on the screen. Listen, Jacob.

[4 : 51] God speaking. Chapter 48, verse 12. Listen to me, Jacob. Because here's the big question facing this generation of God's people. As they sit there in Babylon, remembering the words that Isaiah spoke 100 years previous.

They're being taunted by their enemies, the people that they're living with. They've been tempted to adopt the worldview. That's just the way of thinking of the culture round about them.

And they're asking some big questions about the future, what it holds for them as God's distinct people. Let me ask you, did you ever find yourself asking those kind of questions in your life as a Christian?

And I certainly do. What does the future hold? God says, listen to me. It's a big question for them. It's a big question for us.

Who will we listen to? In these verses, God's servant speaks. He speaks. Do you see it? Verse 1 of chapter 49. His message really simply, listen to me.

[5 : 51] Thunders in on the scene here. Out of nowhere. It says, listen to me. Don't listen to the voices round about. Listen to me. And you see who he is speaking to. Not just God's people.

The coastlands. The distant peoples. In other words, every person from every part of the world, from every age, this servant says, I've got news for you.

I want you to listen to me. Listen to what I'm saying. And that's why, whoever you are here today, whatever is going on in your life, whatever you think about the God of the Bible, this message affects you.

This message is for you. The servant is speaking into your story. In fact, your story that only... In fact, the servant has come to make sense of your story.

He's speaking into your story. You're in his mind. You're on his heart. As he says, listen up. Listen to me. Listen to me. But why should I listen to him, you may be asking?

[6 : 48] And that's a great question. Because let's be honest, our world at the minute is not short on voices telling us who is right and who is wrong, is it? Given the political situation, you may be thinking, to be honest, I really don't know who to listen to anymore.

And our default mode is to not listen to people out there, but to listen to our own voice. And I don't blame you if that's what you're thinking. But let me urge you today to let this servant tell you why you should listen to him, why you should base your life on him.

That generation in exile in Babylon, he says, listen to me, to the world. He says, listen to me, to Brunfield in the 21st century. He says, listen to me. This morning we're going to learn four wonderful things about who this servant is and what he's come to do.

And wonderfully, four things that we see so beautifully fulfilled in the life and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. So come with me to chapter 49, servant, four things about him.

Here's the first one. This servant will speak up. Look at the verses here. We pick it up halfway through verse 1. Listen to me.

[8 : 25] He will have a mum. Mum's day today. There will be a human womb in which he grows. And the same idea is repeated down at verse 5 as if to underscore the point that this servant, God, is going to take on our skin, our sinful humanity.

And he's going to do what we could not do for ourselves. And he will step in and save us. Get your heads around this. He will be born in a stable.

He will be wrapped in cloth. He will cry. He will feed. He will be born into poverty. I mean, you can't get more involved in our broken human story than that. He steps into this mess and says, I am here.

This is not like when we watch the TV at election time and you hear the politicians telling us that they understand us because they've spent five hours in our community. Here is one who has stepped into the trenches of our broken lives.

He knows our struggles. He knows our pains. No one will ever love us more, know us better or care for us more deeply than Jesus Christ.

[9 : 35] And the words of that Stuart Townend song that we sometimes sing, yes, he walked my road and he felt my pain. Joys and sorrows that I know so well, yet his righteous steps give me hope again.

I will follow my Emmanuel. Do you see, that is his name. Earlier in Isaiah 7, those verses that we read at Christmas time, God said he would send Emmanuel.

Emmanuel, God with us. Matthew chapter 1, as Gabriel speaks to Joseph, we learn that Emmanuel is Jesus. You see, this servant is not going to be a distant sympathizer.

He's going to come and be God with us. He will step into our story. And when he comes, do you see verse 2? He will not be silent. He will speak. Feel the imagery in these verses.

His words will be like a weapon. Like a sharp sword. Dangerous. Powerful. And as you see Jesus in action in the Gospels, boy, are his words that.

[10:46] They leave people astounded. They illuminate minds. They calm storms. They bestow dignity. They offer hope. And they lift up broken people. And they even raise a guy from the dead.

But it's not just out there where his word pierces. It's in here. It's the testimony of every follower of Jesus Christ that this word has penetrated our lives.

And it's flipped life as we know it upside down. When we were running our race, chasing our dreams, living for me, like we were seeing in the kids talk, Jesus Christ burst in. And God's word flipped it upside down.

And now we run his way. Gives us true knowledge of who we are, of who God is, of this world in which we live. As the spirit of God comes and takes the words of Jesus as we encounter him in the pages of the Bible.

And he transforms us. You know, I wonder if you're here today and you think to yourself, I need this word in my life. And if that's you, just speak to somebody that's been on stage or up the front this morning.

[11:52] We'd love to read the Bible with you. Introduce you to the person of Jesus. This servant will come. This servant, secondly, will step in.

You see, verse 3 isn't a reference to physical Israel. This is God calling his servant Israel. Now, how does that work?

That's a good question. Well, it centers on his understanding God's grand design for his people. God's missionary heart in calling out a people for himself.

The people who he called out of Egypt to himself and said, I will be your God and you will be my people. And as we live together in joyous harmony, you will display my glory to the watching worlds. Who will look in and say to themselves, how good is Israel's God? God, the bestower of joy, the giver of life, how good is he? Let's go and meet him for ourselves.

[12:51] But you see, earlier on in Isaiah, the imagery that's used is that Israel were like a vine that God planted with the express purpose of producing good fruit for his glory and for their good.

But what did they produce? What did the vine produce? It produced bad fruit. When was the last time you discovered some bad fruit? You know, a horrible feeling when you've gone shopping and you come home and you start unpacking and you come to the fruit bowl and you discover that there was a rogue tangerine that's got a fusty color of green at the bottom of your tangerines.

That feeling, how you're feeling, you're livid, you're straight on to customer services, asking for a refund, you're taking a picture, you're putting it on Twitter, maybe that's just me. But bad fruit, how much more disappointed was God when he looked at his people, knowing what he wanted them to produce, and then seeing what they did produce?

Bad fruit. Bad fruit, good for nothing. Bad fruit. So when God calls his servant Israel, it's an indication that this servant will be everything that Israel was supposed to be and wasn't.

And boy, will this servant be that. I mean, as you read the Gospels, there's a captivating beauty about Jesus. As you meet him in the pages of the Bible, I don't know about you, but it was my experience when I started reading about Jesus for myself.

[14:21] Remember, being blown away, captivated by the person, his person. His affection for his father, his devotion to the law of God, his compassion for the outcast, his gentleness to the broken, his welcome to the shunned, his provision for the needy, his strong words for the hypocrite as he steps in.

And says, here I am. Of course, as New Testament Christians, knowing the forgiveness and knowing the newness of life that we have in him, as the Spirit living in us transforms us more into his likeness, as we abide in him, we're called to reflect that same beauty to the watching world.

And that takes us to the third thing about this servant he will send out. See his mission at verse 5? God will send this servant into the world to bring the people of Israel back to the Lord.

Yes, but do you see God declared at verse 6 that his mission will not stop at physical Israel's borders? Do you see what God calls that? And I love this. He calls that too small a thing. Love that. Too small a thing. Here is the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, the creator of the ends of the earth.

[15:51] And here he is showing his heart that he wants to bring light and life to the peoples of this world. The people who he has made in his image, but the people who have wandered far in rebellion from him.

God is sending his servant to be the answer to our biggest problem, that we are separated from him because of our sin. We are living in darkness without a hope of saving ourselves.

That is what this servant has come to be. And we will see over the next few weeks exactly how that will come to pass. But for now, let's take in the fact that God wants to reach the nations.

That as we were singing, the light of the world was sent into darkness to be light for the world. God's heart to win the peoples of this world.

I was thinking this week, I wonder if God, if he were to give us his take on our ambitions and our plans as a church, I wonder if he would tell us that your plans are too small a thing.

[17:07] Do you know, are our plans and our thoughts for Brunsfield, are they too insular? Have we got dreams of putting on great coffee mornings, of fantastic small groups, of great Kayleys?

Do you know, are our plans for ourselves too comfortable? Could we easily do them without God? And because we think we can do them without God, we don't pray. We don't go on our knees and say, Father, we need you.

Particularly when it comes to mission, and seeing people come to know Jesus for themselves, I wonder if our ambitions are too small.

You know, let me ask you, when was the last time you got a conversation to Jesus? You know, we were down south at a funeral on Friday. Great opportunities, I find funerals to speak to people about life.

What's going on? What's it about? What happens? Why are we here? But anyway, at lunch afterwards, I got chatting to this, um, older man called John. John's telling me about his life, how he used to be in the Navy, how he's lived in Birmingham his whole life, that's where the funeral was.

[18:21] Great Brummie accent. And for some reason, he starts telling me about how gentlemen were gentlemen in his day, and that they knew how to properly treat a lady with respect.

I don't know why John told me that, he just did. And with these verses in mind, I said, John, let me tell you about Jesus. And let me tell you about a time when he crossed every barrier possible in that culture to bestow dignity and transform the life of a Samaritan woman.

I mean, I'm never going to see John again in my life, I don't think. Just went for it. Inspired by these verses. Boy, let me tell you that letter, great conversation. Great conversation. Friends, we've got no idea how the Lord is working.

We've got no idea. But here's what I do know. That the Lord knows who are his. He knows those who he's called to himself. And he uses his ordinary, unspectacular, yet spirit-filled people, like you and like me, as the means through which he spreads the news of this servant, Jesus Christ, to the people of this world.

The words of missionary Henry Martin, the spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions, and the nearer we get to him, the more intensely missionary we become.

[19:44] God's heart for this world, and for the lost people who we rub shoulders with every single day, let me ask us as a church, do we have a heart to see them come to know this Savior Jesus Christ for themselves?

It's great. It's greatly convicting, isn't it, I find, in my own prayer life. If God, somebody asked me this recently, if God was to answer every prayer of mine, for one of my friends to come to know Jesus, how many people would come into the kingdom that day?

And I have to say, it would be incredibly small. Here is God's heart for the people of our world. Praise him that he has a heart like this, otherwise this church, we, would not exist.

This is our God. This servant will send out. And fourthly and finally, this servant will stoop down.

Verse 7, if you've still got it there, God talking.

The Holy One of Israel. It's incredible how often God calls himself this in this little section, instead of to remind his people who he is. The Holy One of Israel.

[20 : 48] What does he say to his servant? He says about his servant that his servant will be deeply despised. Do you see it? So when he comes, people, this will be like Marmite, they will love him or they will hate him.

Not in a British passive aggressive kind of way. They're not going to tut at him for taking too long in the queue at Waitrose. This is Brunnsfield after all. God's servant is going to be on the receiving end of people's anger.

People will find God's servant offensive. He will be abhorred. The word means they're disgusted at him. Early at verse 4, his life will be one of hard toil.

And you see, at times, it will feel like it is in vain. And yet he will entrust himself to the Lord. Fully, completely. That's what life is going to be like for this servant.

And that's, by implication, what life is going to be like for everyone who follows after him. And 700 years before Jesus stepped foot on the earth, as these words are spoken, God is speaking here about what life is going to be like for his servant and his followers.

[22 : 00] And there's over 2,700 years after these words were first spoken. As we sit here today, let me ask you, has anything changed? Do you not know that to be true in your life?

Think of the people that I've spoken to about Jesus in my life. Some greatly attracted to him. Tell me more. How does that work? I'd love to find out. Others? How arrogant. That he would say that he's the only way to God.

How dare he tell me how to live my life? I was doing an interview recently with Stephen Fry, who was asked about Jesus. And about what Jesus said about getting into heaven.

And Stephen Fry simply responded, I would not want to get in on Jesus' terms because they are wrong. They're wrong. Let me encourage you.

If that's your experience this morning, today. If that's what you're going through right now, is you take up your cross, deny self and follow him. I want you to take heart and be encouraged that that was the life and the experience of the servant.

[23 : 10] His life looked anything other than victory. It looked like defeat all the way through. And we're called to follow him and do what he did and trust the Lord.

But I want you to know the promise at the end of verse 7. That God will see him honoured in the eyes of the watching world.

And humiliation will one day give way to exaltation. You see, Jesus will be seen to be not just a Lord of some things and some people.

He will be one day seen to be the spectacular and all-encompassing Lord of all things and all people. And to him all knees will one day bow.

Of course, it's words we see gloriously true. The resurrection God exalted him. Now think about that as you're sitting there in exile in Babylon. Imagine getting your head around that.

[24 : 09] As it looks like defeat. As it looks like the end of the story. Tempted to run after anything else in the world that will give you some kind of satisfaction. And God is saying, the servant says, listen to me. God says, this servant will be seen in the eyes of the world.

To be the king of the universe. Words hard to get your heads around in that day. Imagine that.

Getting your head around that in that day. And words hard to get our heads around in this day.

But words that God says, remember how he said last week, I am the one that tells you things before they happen. So that when they happen, you know it's because of me that they happened.

God says, one day that will be gloriously true. My servant will be exalted. I will exalt him. This is God's servant. This is God's servant.

Pages of Isaiah. Here he is speaking. In the words of Tim Keller, Jesus cannot just be liked. His claims will make us either kill him or crown him.

[25 : 13] Which will it be? And just as we close, that's exactly what we see Paul declare in Philippians chapter 2. Maybe your mind went there as we were reading it together. Paul writing, speaking of the crucified, the risen, ascended and one day returning Jesus.

He writes, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself. By becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place. And gave him the name that is above every name.

That at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

And every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. This is what God will do for his servant.

So why should I listen to this servant? Why should I listen to him? Well, because he is the one who speaks up. He has come to reveal the Father. He's the one who stands in.

[26 : 23] He's the one come to be the true Israel. He's come to be the one who lives the life that we could not live before a holy God. He is the one who sends out, sends his people, his light into the world. And he's the one who stoops down.

The one who made himself nothing. Became obedient even to death on a cross. And so this servant says today through his words as he rules the church. He says, listen to me. Listen to me. So friends, as we close, let me ask us all, just in a quiet moment of contemplation. Will we listen to him? Why don't we just be quiet for a moment. And then I'll pray.

And then we'll close our service. Father God, we thank you so much for the incredible grace that you have shown us and giving us the Lord Jesus Christ.

And it's our prayer this morning, Father, as we thought about a lot of stuff. That these words spoken by Isaiah, that were fulfilled so wonderfully in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, they wouldn't be snatched away from our minds.

[27 : 37] So it's our prayer that you would take this word and plant it deep in us. Thank you that in the Lord Jesus Christ we have one who is simply incomparable. And we ask us, Lord, that you would help us in all the competing voices of our world.

That we would listen to him. Lord, we know our own hearts well enough to know how prone to wander we are. And so, Lord, we want to make the words of that great hymn true for us.

That you would take our hearts and take and seal them. And seal them for your courts above.

Thank you so much for your incredible love for us. And we pray, knowing that you hear us, not because of anything in us, but because of everything that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.