

# The Greatness of God

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Date: 09 January 2022

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Oh man. Well, where do we find strength? Where do we find strength at the beginning of a new year?

Humanly speaking, we're perhaps on a more hopeful footing than we were this time last year. It seems to be the kind of consensus that January last year was a low point of low points, so to speak, in the recent pandemic. The crisis seemed to keep getting longer. Hope seemed to keep being put off, and in the bleakest month of the year, we were asked to stay at home and not to see anyone.

Well, praise God that in his great mercy, that is not the case this year. The threat is nothing compared to what it was. The full-on pandemic seems to be finished, and we are sweeping up the debris.

And yet, the past years have left scars on our hearts, haven't they? There's a tiredness that comes from the never-ending news cycle, the statistics, a weariness, perhaps, of living in uncertainty, changing rules and guidance, a fed-upness, maybe, of putting a mask on whenever we come to church. However helpful or unhelpful these things may or may not be, they make the pain of the past years impossible to forget, don't they? And so, where does the strength come from at the beginning of another year? So many of the things that we used to perhaps lean on for strength have been shown to be empty or not enough. Even the most basic things can be put on hold, work, socializing, human contact.

Well, where does lasting strength come from? What can we hope in that won't fold, won't let us down? Where do we turn for rescue? Well, this evening, we're turning to the second half of Isaiah chapter 40, in which God answers those questions for us. Who else is there, he says, but the everlasting God, the one who holds the oceans in his hands, who has numbered every grain of sand, who leads out the stars each night on parade, and not one is missing? Who else is there to turn to you but the creator and the sustainer of everything in existence? If you were here, and if you remember way back to my very first Sunday with you, we looked at the first half of this passage where we saw the glorious gospel of God, comfort, comfort my people, says your God. This was Isaiah's message, speak tenderly to Jerusalem, proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for. The prophet's message was that God has now come to rescue once and for all from sin and death and darkness. That's his promise.

[ 3 : 1 4 ] The question now is, can he pull it off? He's willing, but is he able? And so Isaiah, he turns from the gospel of God to the greatness of God to tell us, to confirm for us that yes, a thousand times yes, he is more than able to do all that he has promised, to save, to restore, to renew those who hope in him. Firstly, because we see from verse 12, he is the God of everything. You'll see straight away, if you glance down at those first few verses, the driving question of this passage again and again, he, he, he has held all the water of the world in his cupped hands. He has marked off the edge of heaven with his outstretched fingers. He has carried all the dust of the earth in a bucket. He has weighed the mountains and hills on his scales. Who has done that? We now know that there is an edge of space, so to speak. The universe is not infinite, but where is its edge? Where does it end? Who can tell us that?

Google reliably informs me there is something like 326 million trillion gallons of water on the earth, but it's said that we know even less about the floor of the ocean than we do about space.

The earth, again, says Google, weighs something like 13,170 billion trillion pounds. That's 21 zeros on the end, if you're wondering. But who, who could shake its orbit? Who could stop it turning? Who could put it on a set of scales? Well, verse 13 tells us the answer to all these questions is the Lord alone.

The Lord. Notice Isaiah is depicting God as a master craftsman, so to speak, in his studio. It's so hands-on, isn't it? Cupping water in his hands, marking off where to cut, carrying clay in a bucket, weighing the stuff of the earth out on scales. God personally, powerfully, uniquely creating, uniquely at work. And what is he creating here? Well, he's creating heaven. He's creating earth, creating the cosmos. And you get the impression this isn't back-breaking labor for God. It's not blood, sweat, and tears, is it? It's effortless. It's painless, totally free.

But then if he did that, well, who helped him do it, asks Isaiah. He did it, but well, how did he know how to do it? Who instructed him as his counselor, verse 14? Who helped him with the maths?

[ 6 : 25 ] Who taught him the right way? And if the answer to the who's of verse 13 are the Lord, well, the answer to the who's of verse 14 and 15 are nobody. Nobody. There's no heavenly cabinet meeting to decide plan A or plan B. No cosmic committee of scientific advisors giving projections or worst-case scenarios. God was no one's apprentice when he created everything, taking instructions, doing chores.

Nor was he anyone's master when he created everything, giving out orders or supervising the workforce. No, he did it all himself with no one, because God needs nothing and no one to do what he does.

Before God, of course, there was nothing and no one, no one to teach him wisdom, no one to pass down knowledge, no one to tutor him in astrophysics or law, in justice or righteousness.

So, friends, how did he do it? How did the Lord himself create all things? Well, he did it in his own infinite strength and by his own infinite wisdom and with infinite knowledge, according only to the counsel of his own perfect will. Lots of people today perhaps would write this off as ancient mythology. Perhaps this evening you'd share that view. But actually, if you read the creation stories of the ancient world, of other nations, well, they're nothing like this. Okay, prepare for nightmares, if you dare. Wars fought between cosmic beings, hills formed from the corpses of gods, beasts rising up out of the oceans. It's horror at its best. Well, in that context, go home this evening and read the Bible's creation story from Genesis chapter 1. And there you meet a God unlike anything dreamed of by human beings before or since. A God of breathtaking power and sublime goodness of unimaginable wisdom with no equal, no companion, who alone himself created everything according to his own perfect specifications.

Some of you are scientists by trade, medics, engineers. Some of you have PhDs in science. how long did it take you to study to prepare for what you're doing now how much time and effort did it take to gain that knowledge of even a small part of this universe it takes years doesn't it decades to understand even a micro fraction of what there is to understand and our collective human knowledge is always growing and yet in the words of the astronomer johann kepler in everything that we learn everything that science might discover we are only ever thinking god's thoughts after him his greatness is beyond our capacity to grasp or understand but why does isaiah want us to know his greatness well verse 15 brings us right back down to earth the nations the nations we've moved from the cosmic to the political but we're still considering god's greatness because in god's workshop well what place do the nations have where are the big players of this world asks isaiah where is china or america russia britain surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket they are regarded as dust on the scales and god finished pouring out the oceans and seas perhaps as isaiah drop fell to the floor there are the nations when god finished weighing the hills and mountains the dust that he wiped off the scales at the end well there are the world powers says the prophet so small they don't even register in the balance and perhaps we ask really here's one writer says such a truth is hard to believe when our world is in ruins you imagine those listening to isaiah say this verse 17 before him the nations there is nothing well as syria didn't look like nothing when it came and destroyed the northern kingdom babylon doesn't look like nothing now they are coming to destroy the southern kingdom let's bring this into modern history i read an article recently written by a man who lived in moscow in 1990 well looking back at the collapse of the soviet union he said it seems inevitable now but it didn't at the time it didn't at the time it didn't at the time the great powers in this world they come and go says isaiah but when you're living through it it doesn't feel like that today you can find what's left of the great powers of isaiah's day in the british museum they were to crumble into ancient history but to god's people back then well it didn't feel like that and yet this fact should comfort us tonight that whatever's going wrong in our world now and however scary or life-changing or permanent it might feel well one day from eternity we will look back and its end will seem inevitable because it is inevitable either global politics or the national politics that fill our news feeds every day that seems so urgent and real and worrying and weighty but which nation can send god back to the drawing board which world power has ever been given a voice in heaven well none of them none of them can change his plans i looked up this week at the smallest

[ 13 : 13 ] nation on earth i wonder if you have any guesses smallest nation on earth well ironically it's the vatican you would have guessed the vatican vatican city well imagine the reaction in westminster if the vatican declared war on the uk i don't imagine that it would be fear confusion perhaps bafflement well picture god's reaction then when the dust on the scale or a drop in the bucket says to him i don't like your plans reaction well there's no reaction isn't why because to him the nations are less than nothing not in value of course but in insignificance in weightiness he is the god of everything the creator of heaven and earth and unimaginably great who could possibly question his plans who could overthrow his purposes what breaking news could catch him ever off guard brothers and sisters we do not know what god has planned this year and if the past couple years has taught us anything is to take nothing for granted but we know that with this god we have nothing to fear his plans his purposes his promises are unchanging and if our trust is in him this evening then we have come into a kingdom that cannot be shaken of course that doesn't mean there won't be things that worry us there will be but god's greatness puts those things into perspective in their proper place doesn't it because he is the god of everything nothing can change god's good purposes for us or or put his promises on hold throw his plans for us off course he is unimaginably great and so seeing god's greatness then isaiah points us to where we need to turn when we look for restoring renewing rescuing secondly then isaiah tells us that this god the god of everything is the god of gods and the king of kings firstly we see he is the god of gods with whom then verse 18 will you compare god to what image will you liken him he goes on to speak about idols things made by human hands that people worship and isaiah insists with the whole bible that there is nothing in creation that we can rightly compare with god terry pratchett i don't know if you've read any of his books he was a prolific author maybe you've come across his disc world series well disc world is a fantasy world but which terry pratchett kind of held up as a mirror for the way that he saw our world and in one of his books entitled small gods he kind of gives us his commentary on religion so in this world gods get more powerful the more people believe in him in them rather the most powerful gods have the most followers the worst thing that can happen to a god is that no one believes in them and they die and the story centers on a slightly dim-witted man who gets sucked in by a turtle god who depends on this one man to believe in him and so keep him alive and so the turtle sort of makes false promises he strings this guy along telling elaborate lies not for this man's good but for his own survival well that's the way that pratchett basically saw religion working we keep

the gods alive at our own expense he was very cynical about the idea of god perhaps you're here this evening and and you would agree with him but terry pratchett had an unlikely ally and that's isaiah and notice what isaiah says about the gods of the nations in verses 19 and 20 as for an idol a metal worker casts it a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashioned silver chains from it a person too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot they look for a skilled worker to set up an idol that will not topple the gods of this world says isaiah are small gods yes there are fancy ones made of gold and silver big ones there are not so fancy ones made of wood but whatever they're made of they all depend don't they on human skill human work human belief to keep them up if you don't set them up properly says isaiah with a twinkle in his eye well they just fall over don't they these so-called gods need human beings for their very survival that's isaiah's view of religion but here's the difference between isaiah and terry pratchett the difference indeed between christianity and religion in what sense asks isaiah can you compare begin to compare the god of the bible with gods like that in what sense does our god rely on our work or skill or wisdom or belief to do what he does or he doesn't there are lots of things that convince me that the bible is true one of them is that no one in a million years in a million years could ever have come up with the god that it introduces us to there are questions about him that i that i cannot answer there are sides to him that i can't get my head around aspects to his character that still surprise me after 27 years he is incomprehensible he's so far from the kind of god that our society imagines that should exist we naturally imagine that if there is a god well we would have to live a good enough life to keep him happy soft enough to be there when i need him disinterested enough not to care when i don't need him god he meets my standards created in in my image but why bother trusting that kind of god asks isaiah you perhaps tonight you wouldn't call yourself a christian but you would describe yourself maybe as as religious or spiritual well ask yourself really ask yourself what kind of being am i really trusting in what kind of god or force or being do i think is out there and let me ask you does that being deserve your trust for those of us who do trust the true and living god though perhaps isaiah's next comment is more to the point and that is that god is also the king of kings verse 23 he brings princes to naught he reduces the rulers of this world to nothing no sooner are they planted no sooner are they sown no sooner do they take root in the ground than he blows on them and they wither and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff don't turn to the gods of the nations says isaiah and don't turn to the kings of the nations either hardly if they've read their manifesto promises before they are out of office hardly if they've taken root before they're taken off notice it's god who does that

says isaiah he rules the rulers he brings them to nothing we saw before didn't we what the nations are to god but how tempting is it how easy brothers and sisters to put our hope in a human leader to get us out of a tough corner to follow this candidate to trust to believe in in this leader to lose faith in in another government in short to let the fragility and the fickleness of human power rule our inner lives again isaiah gives us perspective on that we could put it this way maybe if you were to count back through the prime ministers of this country i wonder how far you would get before you couldn't remember the one before some of you maybe could count back to blair maybe some of you could get as far as thatcher some of you maybe further but none of us perhaps i think could get to churchill you could tell me he was prime minister of this country 50 years ago or you could tell me he will be prime minister of this country in five years time brothers and sisters it is easy isn't it to let our faith or our fear or frustration rest on human leaders yes they are given by god but only for a time and so who is to be trusted above all the kings and all the rulers of the earth well surely it is the king of kings and the lord of lords so then asks isaiah why put your trust why bother putting your trust in the gods or the kings of the nations when we can put our trust in this god the god of gods the king of kings who rules all things for our good and that brings us to our final point this evening that the god of everything the god of gods and the king of kings is the god of his people let read with me famous verses from verse 27 why do you complain jacob why do you say israel my way is hidden from the lord my cause is disregarded by my god do you not know have you not heard the lord is the everlasting god the creator of the ends of the earth see the kind of questions that god's people back then were asking where is god in this mess why doesn't he hear our prayers why doesn't he seem to care about our good perhaps you have asked those questions yourself in recent times where is god well don't you know asks isaiah well perhaps have you forgotten that your god the lord he is god of all the world or to put it the other way around the god of all the world is your god you see what isaiah has done in this chapter if this is the god you trust he says if the god you trust is is the one who created and upholds and rules everything in existence then how can you possibly doubt that he is able to do all that he promises why would you think that you can't trust what he says don't you know who your god is he is the god he says you cause each star into the sky each night and because of his power and his strength not one is ever missing that image there of the night sky is a show of strength new strong countries might have a military parade to show off their big rockets their big armies to the world well says isaiah every night god brings out his starry host on parade across the sky

as a display of his strength look what i made he says look what i sustain look at my power look at my strength look at my greatness and trust me trust me he will not grow tired or weary his understanding no one can fathom he gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak even youths grow tired and weary young men stumble and fall but those who hope in the lord renew their strength they will soar on wings like eagles they will run and not grow weary they will walk and not be faint see this god of infinite strength is the strength of his people we are learning in our house how much we need sleep it's true what they say what isaiah says even youths grow tired and weary we all need sleep don't we we all need rest we run out of strength every day sometimes multiple times a day but the everlasting god never runs out of strength he doesn't get tired he doesn't grow weary wonderfully verse 29 he gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak he is willing says isaiah and he is able to keep you from falling so trust him out of his own infinite power he gives strength to us weary souls weary souls needy people when we turn and we throw ourselves on him the god of the universe is for his people says isaiah he is for us you perhaps at the start of 2022 it doesn't feel to you much like that's true perhaps you are wondering with god's people back then whether perhaps you have been forgotten by god or is he just ignoring your prayers perhaps this evening life seems big and god seems small but isaiah would point us back to god again and ask us have you really seen how big god is when was the last time you considered his greatness and have you forgotten that this god is your god he would ask with paul if this god is for us well who can be against us surely nobody surely nothing and the proof positive for us is this he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things we heard earlier in our service didn't we if the god of everything was willing to give his son for us to save us from sin and death well how can he then hold back from us anything that we need to live in this world this side of eternity and so it is in christ and with our hope in him at verse 31 those who hope in the lord will renew their strength they will soar on wings like eagles they will run and not be weary they will walk and not be faint perhaps this evening it's enough for you just to consider to take in that god is much much much bigger than you thought when you came this evening perhaps this evening you were wondering whether perhaps this god could be your god and whether perhaps

he will give you strength if you do hope in him if you're wondering that please come and speak to me afterwards i'd love to hear more about that but brothers and sisters whatever this year holds for us whatever god has planned for us well let us find our strength not in this world not in its gods not in its nations or its rulers but instead let us find strength in the everlasting god in the creator of the ends of the earth let us trust him for our god is worthy of all our trust and he is willing and able to rescue to restore and to renew all who come to him through jesus christ let's come to him together now as we pray let's pray together god our father we are lost for words before ye the creator of all things the infinite and the eternal he who has no beginning and no end who changes all things and yet remains unchanged he creates and created all things and yet is uncreated our father how can we wrap our minds around ye so our father we thank you that you have revealed yourself to us in ways that even we can understand to convince us and to compel us towards you in faith we thank you that you gave your son for us and that your word promises that if you have done that then surely you will give us all things that we need and so we turn to you for strength tonight we pray lord each of us that you would strengthen our hearts lord we commit to you our brothers and sisters who are feeling particularly weakened we pray lord for them that they would know your strength your power your greatness lord each and every day lord we commit our church family to you lord we know that apart from you we can do nothing and so we turn to you for strength help us lord by your power show us our weakness that we might find our strength in you who we ask in jesus name amen we'll be we'll be that words