

A Road Back To God

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[0 : 00] John, I'm absolutely delighted to welcome you to come and please just this evening. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Thomas. It's such a privilege to worship with you all tonight and this morning, and we look forward to next week with you as well. This morning was the first time that I've sung praise to God with God's people in something like 18 months and it was it was stirring.

It was special for us to get to do that with you all. So thank you for that. Now I guess it was two years ago when we first moved to Edinburgh that I was at a conference for missions and church planting.

And there was a church planter giving a talk about his ministry, the ministry God had called him to in one of the housing schemes. I think it was in Fife somewhere.

And he was speaking compellingly about the many problems they face in the schemes of addiction and poverty and housing crises and all of the trouble that can come in a place like that.

[1 : 08] And he was speaking of their need for the gospel and of his work to plant this church and to grow a gospel community in the schemes. And someone said, well, how, you know, I'm very, I moved by this and I want to support your ministry.

How can I do that? And this church planter said, well, move into the neighborhood. That's what you can do. Money's nice, you know, helping hands and volunteers to do projects is good.

But really long term, what we need is people to move into the neighborhood. And I'm willing to bet that most people who heard that talk won't do it, me included.

Why is it so hard for us to move into the neighborhood? Why is it so difficult for us to go where the real need is, to go where it's difficult?

Well, I think it's because as humans, we tend to value upward mobility. We want to move up in life. We want our situations to improve.

[2 : 22] We want to have nicer houses and, you know, cleaner streets, better holidays, et cetera. That comes naturally to us and it's reasonable.

But God is not like us. Isaiah 55 makes that clear. He says, my thoughts are not your thoughts. Neither are your ways, my ways, declares the Lord.

Which is such a relief. Because we value upward mobility, but God values downward mobility. His ways are not our ways.

And if we're honest about our spiritual neighborhood, we are not the spiritually posh. We are not the spiritual elites. At least I'm not.

I think we're the ones who maybe were kept awake at night by anxieties, who think about our past and worried that we've sinned ourselves out of God's good graces.

[3 : 23] Maybe we worry that since God seems so far off, maybe we've messed this up. Why would he want to be with people like us anyway?

But God moves into the neighborhood. It's what he does because it's who he is. He is the high and exalted one, the one who inhabits eternity, the one whose name is holy, and he's the one who loves to dwell with the contrite and the lowly in spirit.

We're going to focus on just verse 15, Isaiah 57-15. It splits nicely into three little sections. I think there's probably six lines in your Bible, three sections of two.

We'll just have three points covering those three sections. So point one will be the Lord of eternity. Two is the Lord with the lowly. And three, the Lord of life.

My hope and prayer for this sermon is that God will give us a bigger view of himself to his glory.

That's why I had Thomas read the first 14 less pleasant verses of Isaiah 57, is that we need to know not just that God is near and accessible and dwells with the lowly and contrite, but is high and holy

and takes sin seriously.

[4 : 51] And that bigger view of God that I'm praying for tonight is to hold both of those things together. So number one, the Lord of eternity. Let's read the first part of Isaiah 57-15 again.

For thus says the one who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy. Now to be human is to be limited. We have limits, a lot of them. But God is entirely limitless. And I want to think just a couple of ways that we are limited and God is not.

So we're limited to time. We're chronologically limited, aren't we? We've got 80, 90 years on this planet, all of us.

And you'll be sleeping for about 30 years of that time. You'll be unconscious. That's such a limitation, isn't it? And that's why time is our most valuable commodity.

[5 : 51] It's not our money or our homes or our vehicles, it's our time. Because we're so limited to it. But God inhabits eternity.

We can't even wrap our minds around that. You know, every single thing, every person, every tree, every stone, every mountain you've ever seen has had a beginning.

God has no beginning. When Moses said, who shall I tell them sent me, he just said, I am that I am. He has no beginning and no end. He doesn't exist in the constraints of time like we do. He's entirely chronologically unrestrained.

Now that doesn't just mean he's not busy. John Calvin, commentating on this verse, he writes this. I can't say it better than him, so I'll just quote it.

[6 : 51] He says, we are fickle and apply our minds sometimes to one subject and sometimes to another, and our hearts do not continue to be fixed on that which we have once embraced.

Isn't that true? On this account, Isaiah distinguishes between God and men, for on him no shadow of change falls. But we have not such steadfastness as to exercise constant care about those who need our assistance.

Don't you feel that to be true? A lack of single-minded, wholeheartedness, undistractedness, we're limited people.

God is limitless. We're limited morally. We all know this about ourselves. None of us can be as good as we want to be.

When we purpose to do the right thing, the wrong thing lies just at hand, doesn't it? That's what Paul says in Romans 7, which I think is one of the most relatable chapters in all the Bible.

[7 : 58] Even if we value the good, we value the chivalrous and the noble, we shall find that we're still just like everyone else at the end of the day.

But God's very name is holy. He's not morally limited in the sense that where we are impure and like a mixed metal alloy, he's pure.

He's completely pure. He is totally set apart and different and other from us in our impurity. He's morally unstained. He needs no cleansing.

He's God Almighty. He's entirely unique and he's deeply serious about sin, where we can be flippant about it.

And because of our limitedness in things like time and morality and because of God's limitlessness, there's this vast gulf between who we are and who God is.

[9 : 04] After this week, someone sent me an article, actually it was last week, that doesn't matter. Someone sent me an article that was very fascinating about scientists speculating and researching neutron stars.

I'm no scientist, but I found this incredible and mind-blowing that in a neutron star, if you could take one teaspoon of the material of that star, it would weigh about four billion tons, a teaspoon.

God made that. He made that. The most impressive thing I made this week was a sandwich for my kids. God's making neutron stars.

That's the gulf between humanity and God Almighty. Psalm 113, verses five to six, says, Who is like the Lord our God?

Who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? I picture God is in heaven looking down on earth.

[10 : 09] Psalm 113 pictures him looking far down on heaven and earth. There's a gulf. So the beginning of Isaiah 57-15 is to get into our hearts the highness, the majesty, the transcendence of God.

We need to get it deep into our bones. But there's a danger in being unbalanced. What I mean is if we worship a God who's only majestic and high and transcendent and holy and pure, etc., he's only those things, and we overemphasize those qualities.

We get a God so distant that he becomes uninvolved and disinterested with people like us. We end up with no hope of getting rid of this feeling of being a failure.

I know that feeling. We end up with no hope of cleansing, with no hope of forgiveness, no sense of nearness and companionship, no hope of communion with him, of fellowship.

But then again, if we worship a God who's only near and accessible, we end up with a God like us. We lose our moral footing.

[11 : 33] We make moral compromises for the sake of loving others. And we end up with an anything goes religion.

Ultimately, if we theologically strip away God's majesty and holiness, we strip away his very power to save us. We must take the high aboveness of God and the accessibility of God and hold them together.

If we strip away his majesty, though, and his power and his holiness, we strip away his power to save. And he's mighty to save.

But we also need to know, not just that he can save us, that he is powerful and has the ability to save us, we need to know that God Almighty wants to save us.

We need to know that he actually is willing to. Otherwise, what good is it for us? Where's the good news? So that's point number two, the Lord with the lowly, and this is the second part of verse 15.

[12 : 45] I dwell in the high and holy place and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit.

Praise God for that also. Contrite and lowly in spirit, to be contrite is to be in the Old Testament. This word is used to describe someone who's crushed, kind of ground down. It's a metaphorical word for a person. It's the oppressed. It's the heavy burdened people who can't get their head above water.

That's to be contrite. And to be lowly in spirit, lowly is to be flying under the radar of society, to not be high and exalted, to not even be self-promoting.

It's people who the world takes no notice of. It's the unimportant.

[13 : 47] I dwell in the high and holy place and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit. In other words, God is not looking for the morally pure or the spiritually posh.

He isn't looking for the hard workers who can sort themselves out. He is looking for the contrite and the lowly.

When God feels far off, this is what I tend to think. I tend to say, okay, God feels distant. He seems remote. I don't sense his nearness. I don't feel his pleasure.

It seems like we're not in a relationship, so to speak. It seems maybe he's unhappy with me. So what have I done? What sin is in my life?

Okay, so here's a sin. Now what can I do to make it right? If I can just fix it, then he'll come back and he'll smile on me again. If I can just manage my sin, purify my life, then I'll get God.

[14 : 51] I'll get the joy of the Lord again. That's close, but it's not quite right. It's not quite biblical. Because God says, you won't find me by climbing your way up.

You won't find me by self-improvement. You find me by going down. By humility. In other words, God is not waiting for you to shape up.

He's waiting for you to admit that you can't. Number three, the Lord of life.

God doesn't just come down to live with the lowly and the contrite for the sake of companionship.

He doesn't want to just sit and commiserate with us. So what does he want to do?

What's the purpose of him dwelling with the contrite and the lowly? We'll look at the last bit of verse 15. To revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of that contrite.

[15 : 57] I know Thomas is keen on preaching one word sermons. Sermons that on just one word, I can preach a sermon on the word two. To. That word is crucial.

It's a purpose word. It's a word of intent. Why does God dwell with the contrite and the lowly of spirit? It's to revive us.

It's a revival passage. God knows that our natural fallen sinful state is something like inner deadness.

A not aliveness inside of your very soul. A total lack of energy. A lack of gusto, a lack of spiritual life.

And God is the, he's the source of life. All life comes from him. And so apart from him and apart from his presence, all we can have is inner deadness. We don't have God.

[16:53] We don't really have life. And if you feel like I have done many times, if you feel spiritually dull or dying or lifeless, maybe a couple reasons for that.

On the one hand, it may be that, that the Lord has ordained for you, his child, that you would go through a season of maturation.

A season where he, as it were, hides his face from you to mature you and to sanctify you and make you holy.

That's sometimes what good parents do in a sense. But on the other hand, you may feel spiritually dull or dying because you have ongoing sin in your life. Something that's undelt with before God. And if that's you, if you, if the Lord is showing you that you have sin, ongoing perpetual sin that's like a cloud over the face of the sun.

[18:06] The answer is not to try to deal with your sin so you can get God back. The answer is to admit that you can't deal with your sin and ask him to help you and then to do it.

In other words, revival doesn't start with self-help. It starts with humility. It starts with being humble and saying, I can't give life to myself.

I'm not the source of life. You are the source of life, God. Of course, this land has a rich history of revivals. I don't need to tell you that local revivals, national revivals, but God is showing that large-scale revival, the whole community, the whole land, starts with small-scale revival.

So if we want to see revival again in our churches and our community, if we want to see the pews filled and the church building busting at the seams, it starts in our hearts.

If you read studies on periods of revival, this becomes really clear. Jonathan Edwards, from the first Great Awakening in the United States, he wrote a book describing that revival, the beginnings of that, called, with a very catchy title, a faithful narrative of the surprising work of God and the saving of many souls in Northampton.

[19:31] They don't title books like they used to. But his whole point in this little book, who was there, he saw revival, striking historical, amazing outpouring of the Spirit of God.

And the whole point of the book is that revival starts when individuals humble themselves before God, get on their knees and say, I can't manage my sin anymore and I need you to do it.

That's how it starts. So this text isn't a manual on revival in Isaiah. It's not, the core of the message of Isaiah 57 is not, here's how to get revival in your churches.

The core of the text is that God is eager to bring revival to you. He's the Lord of life.

He longs to breathe life into the very places where you feel most dull and listless. He yearns to light a fire in the heart of your hearts.

[20:42] But when he does, when revival in the small scale, the personal revival, when that breaks out, what we want to happen is we want our circumstances to change.

We want God to fix all the things in our life that aren't quite right and put them all in order so that life goes smoothly. But that's not what he does.

Revival is the Lord of life imparting his vitality into our dull hearts. It's like resurrecting someone from death to life.

Fixing circumstances is like mowing the lawn of the graveyard. It's helpful to have a nice aesthetic, but it doesn't give life.

We don't need the lawn mowing. We need our inner spiritual death overcome by the surging life of God, the Lord of life.

[21:40] And that's who God is for us. That's why he dwells with the contrite and the lowly in spirit. And if you're looking for proof in conclusion, if you're looking for proof, look to Jesus.

Jesus didn't just talk the talk. He didn't just send money and volunteer on weekends. He moved into the neighborhood. He was crushed for our iniquities.

You know this. You've heard the gospel, but hear it with new ears for a moment if you can. All the sins that you've committed, Jesus was crushed for.

He was grounded to dust as it were on our behalf. And Jesus was lowly in spirit. He was the least prideful person to ever walk this earth. There was not one self-promoting bone in Jesus's body.

This is the king of the universe who did not count equality with God, a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself in the form of a servant and took on human flesh.

[22 : 54] He moved into the neighborhood. Jesus, the king of the universe, wrapped a towel around his waist and he washed the dirty feet of his friends. And we, the crushed, we, the lowly, are invited by Jesus himself to go to him for life, for rest.

He says in Matthew 11, 28, which is like a lens through which you can read the whole Bible. Jesus stood up and said, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. And you will find rest for your souls.

Who doesn't want rest for your soul? There is a way back to God for the worst of us.

And it's not up. The way back to God is not the direction of self-help. It's going down, the direction of humility, to our knees to say, Lord, I can't, but you can and you want to.

[24 : 18] We cling to Jesus when we're at our lowest and we find that he's right there. Right next to us and we run to Jesus with all of our grief and anxiety and our sins.

And there he is, eager to forgive, not just able to forgive, but wanting to. Eager to revive our weary souls.

Now if that's true, there's four quick implications. If everything I just said is true, I think it's really good news. And here's four implications of that. One, we never have to fear confessing our sins to God.

We never have to be nervous about it. We don't need to be afraid to face our weakness and failure if that's who he is for us. Number two, we can expect God to meet us sweetly in the very place of our deepest failure and our deepest need.

I would think the places of my biggest failure are the places most, you know, repellent to God. And actually it's the very place he wants to revive you.

[25 : 30] Number three, we can experience true spiritual freedom because Jesus has met us when we were low and humble and not impressive, which means the gospel is us being freed from the need to try to be impressive, to put on a show.

It's freedom. And number four, we can begin to make it our life's work to move into the neighborhood, to be near the crushed and the lowly around us and to be lifters of the lowly.

And we can do it with a nuisance of vigor, with a sense of joy, because it's fellowship with Jesus, the King. We're doing what Jesus does and he's with us in the work.

Let me close by reading from Psalm 113. The Lord is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens.

Who is like the Lord our God, the one who sits enthroned on high, who stooped down to look on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap.

[26 : 42] He seats them with princes. Amen. Now we're going to sing Psalm 23 to close tonight from SingSum.

So if you'd please stand and join us in singing. Thank you. The Lord is like shepherds, no one shall I know.

He makes me like I wear the green pasture's robe. He leads me to rest where the computers move. My wandering steps he brings back to his way. This day has a righteousness making me stay.

At this he has done this great thing to display.

[27 : 58] Though I'm only there, spot me where darkness is near.

For all your staff bring me comfort and cheer. In the skies of my head is that day a new spread.

So cheer the earth, how in and mercy and grace will follow me closely in all of my grace.

I will dwell in the highest home, the Lord knows what I am.

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be in abide with you all now and forever.

[29 : 42] Amen.