

Plans and Protection

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 March 2016

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] Now, I'm sure that nobody in here would disagree that when you look at the world around us today, and even when you look back over history or however you want to approach the situation of our world, we can see that we are constantly, constantly facing problems.

The world is not characterised by perfection. We only have to look around us and we see that the world is facing immense difficulties and immense problems.

And we see proof of that simply by observing the current events in the world. You turn on the news and I've said this so many times, you never see good news. It is virtually always bad news.

We get reports of conflict, of immorality, of corruption, of suffering, of disasters. It's a continual picture of the same thing that the world is facing severe problems.

We see that globally, we see that locally. Despite the development and prosperity of our country, we still see deep, deep rooted problems in our society.

[1 : 21] And I don't need to tell any of you that that's what we see. We look around, we see lives in great difficulty and that may be something that is very close to home for all of us.

And we ourselves, you and I, we are not strangers to suffering. Now that may take different levels for different people and it may be different at different times of our lives, but we are no strangers to the problems that this world faces.

Maybe you feel today that that's exactly what you're going through. Maybe you can feel so conscious of the struggles of life and the difficulties that we have.

Maybe you feel that yourself or maybe somebody you know, someone close to you is in that situation. And the problems that the world faces means that we can be in a situation where we are facing suffering, we are battling with struggles and it can leave us questioning.

The world can very often be disillusioning and frustrating for us. And I don't know about you, but I find turning on the news a very depressing process because you see so much that is disheartening and deeply, deeply distressing.

[2 : 43] And in this situation, which we know that we are in, the question can sometimes arise in our minds. What is God doing about it?

Isn't that what we can ask quite easily? What people might ask, in fact, it's one of the most prominent objections to God because people look at the situation of the world and they say, well, if God is good, why is this happening?

Why doesn't God prevent this? Why doesn't God do something? And that's a very valid question. In fact, it's an absolutely vital question because we are living with the reality of a broken world.

And probably the most important question you can ever ask is, what is God doing about it?

What is God doing about it? Well, that's our question for today. And to find the answer, I want us to turn to Isaiah chapter 25.

[3 : 58] There are, of course, many places that we could go in the Bible to help us with this question and to help us to come to terms with the situation that the world is in. But Isaiah 25 is a particularly remarkable chapter and it is full of quite magnificent teaching.

And I want us to spend a wee while in it today. So let's just remind ourselves what the first nine verses of this chapter says. O Lord, You are my God, I will exalt You, I will praise Your name, for You have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure, for You have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin, the farmer's palace is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt.

Therefore strong peoples will glorify You, cities of ruthless nations will fear You, for You have been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in His distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat, for the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall, like heat in a dry place.

You subdue the noise of the foreigners as heat by the shade of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is put down. On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that has cast over all peoples, the veil that has spread over the nations. He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of all of His people, he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

[5 : 40] It will be said on that day, behold, this is our God, we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord, we have waited for him, let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Now these words are particularly relevant for us, because not only do they contain a vast, vast depth of biblical teaching and of the promises that God gives us, and really we really will only be able to scratch the surface of this chapter, but not only does it contain such wonderful truths, these things were written at a time of great difficulty.

This is a reminder that when we read the Bible, we are not reading writings that come from an age that is far removed from ours. We are reading things which were written out of the very same situations that we face.

The words that Isaiah writes here were written at a time of great difficulty in the experience of God's people. And just to locate ourselves, we can just pinpoint the location of Isaiah in the Old Testament timeline.

This is a very, very, very simplified summary of the events of the Old Testament. As we know it begins with creation, you have the flood then with Noah, you then have the period of the patriarchs, which is Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph.

[7 : 15] So that's taken you up. The whole book of Genesis is those first three sections. You then come to the Exodus, a familiar story which culminated with the entry into the Promised Land, which takes us through Exodus, the viticous numbers, Deuteronomy.

Joshua is entering into the Promised Land and judges this the initial aftermath of that. You then have the establishment of the monarchy, 1 Samuel threw to the end of 2 Kings.

Or 2 Chronicles. After Saul, the first king, came David, then came Solomon. Then with Solomon's son took to the throne, Rehoboam, the kingdom divided into north and south.

The northern kingdom was called, Israel the southern kingdom was called Judah. And that was the political situation for the bulk of the nation of Israel's time.

The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrian Empire in 722 BC. Southern kingdom fell about 140 years later in 586 BC.

[8 : 20] And then the end of the Old Testament is with the exile and the return, which is books like Ezra, Nehemiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, books like that.

That's very, very, very, very, very quick. Where does Isaiah come? Let's see where he comes. There. The northern kingdom was falling. So that's around 740 to 720 BC.

This is where Isaiah fits in. Now, Isaiah was actually in the southern kingdom, but a lot of what he says relates to the northern kingdom. That was the period in which Isaiah prophesied.

And it was a period of immense difficulty. Everything was falling apart. The northern kingdom was about to be obliterated by the Assyrian Empire.

And the southern kingdom was very vulnerable to threat and attack as well. The key point is that Isaiah's world was just as bad, just as difficult, just as hard as ever.

[9 : 24] And that's great because it means, well, not great in that sense, but great in the sense that when we come to Isaiah, we can relate to what's being said. And when we're asking the question, what is God doing about all the problems in the world, we realize that we're going to get quite meaningful and helpful answers in Isaiah 25.

Now, in Isaiah 25, we're going to pick out four things that would be the answer to our question, what is God doing about it? But they're quite big things. So we're going to do two this week, and we're going to do two next week as we look at these.

So what's God doing about the situation that the world is in? Well, let's look at our first two things together. And we're going to start by seeing what it says in the first three verses of this chapter.

Oh, Lord, you are my God, I will exalt you. I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things. Plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you've made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin, the foreigners palaces, a city no more.

It will never be rebuilt. Therefore strong peoples will glorify you. Cities of ruthless nations will fear you. Now, chapters 24, 25, 26 and 27 of Isaiah are really fascinating chapters.

[10:39] Well worth going home and reading them when you get home. But they are very much taking an overall look at existence. They are looking ahead to the very end of time.

They are looking at the whole picture of creation and eternity. And the picture in verse 24, chapter 24, rather, is very, very negative.

You can read it when you get home, but it's a picture of devastation. And the key verse, well, one of the key verses in chapter 24 is verse six, when it says, A curse devours the earth.

Now, is that not true? That's not, that is exactly what we see. Adam and Eve fell, the world was cursed and bit by bit, the world has been devoured by that curse.

Sin came into the world, the wages of sin is death, and the world, including ourselves, are under the shadow of that death. We are living in a dying world.

[11:44] And of course, we only have to look around to be shown that that's true. And the Bible is telling us that that should be what we should expect.

What's God doing about it? Well, the first point I want to emphasize is that God is doing something. And this is what is emphasized here in the first three verses of this chapter.

Although the world has been left in a devastating state, God is doing something. God has a plan. When you read this verse, the word plans jumps out.

God has a plan. And so that's the first point in response to the situation in the world. God has a plan.

Now we could say many, many things in terms of God's plan. It's a massively important biblical theme, the fact that God isn't making things up as he goes along. But God is rather fulfilling and completing a definite and specific plan in order to address the problem of sin.

[12:54] And I want us to just remind ourselves of two things in particular when it comes to this. The first is that the fact that God has a plan reminds us that he is absolutely in control.

God is absolutely and completely in control. Although we see problems in the world, we should never think that God is looking on in a state of helplessness, as if he is weak and unable to do something.

God is never helpless. God is never weak. And although the state of the world would be a sort of vexation and grief to God, it is not a defeat.

God cannot be defeated. God is in complete control. And that's what has been emphasised in verses 2 to 3. It can seem a bit strange, this language. It says, you've made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin, the foreigners' palaces, a city no more.

It'll never be rebelled. What is all that about? What does that mean? Well, the key emphasis of these verses is that the strongholds of the world are being destroyed.

[14:11] The city, the fortified city, the palace are bit by bit coming to nothing. And the point that that is emphasising is that here we see the collapse of all of mankind's self-reliance.

These words are describing the collapse of all self-reliance on the part of humanity. The city and the palace are all too often statements which say, I don't need God.

I've got a strong city. I've got a strong palace. I can rely on my own strength. And yet this verse is telling us that all of these things will crumble.

And even ruthless nations will fear God as a result. And this principle still applies.

Many, many people think, I don't need God. But whatever cities or palaces, whether it's wealth or popularity or success or whatever it is that we build up to demonstrate our own self-reliance will one day lie in ruins.

[15:25] We see this illustrated very clearly in the time of Isaiah because at that time the superpower of the world was Assyria. They were the America of the world then, the strong power.

And Assyria thought that nobody was a match for them. And it's wonderfully illustrated in an account that we have in 2 Kings chapter 18. And we're going to read a few verses from that together just now.

2 Kings chapter 18 from verse 28. This is when Assyria came to Jerusalem in order to attack them. Let's see what it says. Then the rabshaka stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah. This is the spokesperson from Assyria. Here the word of the great king, the king of Assyria. Thus says the king, do not let Hezekiah, that was the king in Jerusalem at the time, do not let Hezekiah deceive you for he will not be able to deliver you out of my hand. Do not let Hezekiah

make you trust in the Lord by saying the Lord will surely deliver us and this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.

[16:31] Do not listen to Hezekiah for thus says the king of Assyria, make your peace with me and come out to me. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine and each one of his own fig tree and each one of you will drink the water of his own cistern until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey that you may live and not die.

Basically saying you've got no chance, make your peace with me. Do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you by saying the Lord will deliver us. Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria?

Where are the gods of Harmath and Ath-Athpat? Where are the gods of Sefa-Vein, Hena and Eva? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand?

Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand? Isn't that a brilliant illustration of an attitude of self-reliance? Assyria had a massive army, immense resources, they went to Jerusalem and they said, you have got no chance against us.

[17:48] Not even God can deliver you. And of course what happened? Well, you can go home and read King's, Bush King's 18 and 19 and you'll find out what happened.

The spokesman was wrong. And of course, Assyria has long since been reduced to nothing. Long since reduced to nothing.

And we still see the same thing today. We see on a global scale, people's whose attitudes say we don't need God. Communism was a massive ideology that said we don't need God.

And now where is it? It lies in ruins and what remains of it has had to move on immensely from what it began as. And whether it's on a global scale, on a personal scale, we see people who say they don't need God and their lives are miserable.

King Ahab is a wonderful example of that. He was a king of the Northern Kingdom. He was perhaps the most rebellious of all the kings. He was the first to say, I don't need God.

[18:57] If you read about Ahab, first Kings 18, 19, 20, you will see that he was miserable. So there's your homework.

First Kings and second Kings, starting in chapter 18 and 19 of both of them, well worth going and reading. And all of this is a reminder of what the New Testament says when it tells us that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Now some people will bow gladly before the Lord on that day, but other people will bow before him in the realization that their self-reliance was completely unfounded.

God is sovereign. God is in absolute control. And so that's why it's a mistake to say, why isn't God doing anything about the state of the world?

Because God is doing something about it. And that brings us to the second thing I want to emphasize here. Not only is God doing something about the situation, he is doing something wonderful.

[20:12] That's what Isaiah 25 verse 1 says, you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old. God is doing something wonderful.

And this is why the message of Christianity is such brilliant, brilliant news. God is not just doing something about the state of the world, he is doing something wonderful.

And this is a vitally important thing to remember. Not only is God sovereign, he is also good.

God is sovereign and God is good. Now this raises a crucial question. Do you really believe that God is good?

Now you might think that's a crazy question. Everybody thinks that God is good. Everyone knows that God is good. But we have to think about it because a lot of people might believe that on paper.

[21:16] But we don't always believe it in practice. Because very often we can hold back from following God. We can hold back from doing things because we don't completely trust him to be good.

And that can happen in various ways. Perhaps we can feel drawn to do something for God, maybe to get involved in the church more, or to get involved in some work, maybe a youth work or a camp, or maybe something even further afield.

Perhaps we feel drawn to these things but then we hold back because we think well, what if something goes wrong? What if it doesn't work out?

Maybe people have thought about coming to the prayer meeting or becoming a member of the church or becoming more involved or something like that. And yet you think well, but I'm not sure. Maybe it won't work out. Maybe it won't be that good. And perhaps most of all you might worry that by becoming a Christian it's going to spoil your life.

[22 : 25] It's going to make things worse. It's going to bring a cost that's not worth it. All of these thoughts can make us hesitant in terms of following God and all of these thoughts come from a failure to believe that God is good.

And if God calls you to follow him and if God calls you to work for him, whether that's here or in Carlyway or wherever it may be, he promises that he will be good to you.

If God is calling you into his kingdom or into service, he will be good. He will be good.

God is not the spoiler of life. God is the giver of life. That doesn't mean that everything will always be easy, but it does mean that God will never, ever let you down.

That's why we have these amazing words in Jeremiah 29, 11. For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not of evil to give you a future and a hope.

[23 : 40] If God is calling you to follow him today, he is calling you on the basis of that promise that he will be good. God is not just sovereign.

God is good. He has a wonderful plan. So that immediately raises the question, what do God's plans look like?

What is it that he's doing? And well, that leads us on to the next key point that we want to raise from this chapter. Indeed, it brings us to the next three, but we'll be looking at the final two next week.

Let's go to verses four and five and see what it tells us. For you have been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy and his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat for the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall like heat in a dry place.

You subdue the noise of the foreigners as heat by the shade of a cloud. So the song of the ruthless is put down. Now, the first three verses were emphasizing God's plan.

[24 : 45] These two verses are emphasizing God's protection. Now, it's a remarkable contrast being made in these verses in comparison to the verses behind previously.

In the first three verses, you have the picture of the strong and the ruthless, the powerful. You've got all the palaces, all the cities, all the fortresses in the world. And yet in the end, they have nothing.

But here you have the poor and the needy, who in terms of their own strength have nothing, but they are protected by God. And I would love this verse because it uses imagery that we can relate to so well.

Well, it uses two elements of imagery, one of which we can relate to very well, because the two elements of imagery are a violent rainstorm, which is the one we can relate to and intense sunshine, which we can't so easily relate to in Lewis.

But we can certainly get the idea of what's being presented here that whatever is in the picture, that whatever it is, it's a picture of totality, whether it's violent rainstorm or intense desert heat from the sun, God will protect his people with absolute effectiveness, just like a storm can't get past a wall and the sun cannot get past a cloud, God protects his people.

[26 : 07] Now, we're going to just mention four very quick things under this heading of God's protection. And we'll have to go through them quite quickly because time is running away.

The first thing to note is that in this imagery of a storm and of problems and of difficulties, we are the ones who have created the storm.

We are the ones who have created the problems. That's a key biblical principle. If you go back to Genesis 3 at the fall, it is our own doing. But yet God is not abandoning us to the consequences of our own actions.

Rather, he is willing to help us and protect us. People are so quick to blame God. And yet when we stand back and analyze things, how many of the social and health and behavioral problems that we see are a result of our own doing, of our own mismanagement of the world.

We blame God for everything when in reality, God has every right to abandon us with the words, this is you at fault.

[27 : 17] But that's not what God's doing because he graciously wants to help us. And that's why in many ways, the more valid question is not why isn't God doing anything about the state of the world.

A far more, I think, appropriate question is why is God doing anything? Because we haven't done anything to deserve it or to earn it.

And yet he does it. Because in the midst of all our problems and all our mistakes, God's great desire is to help us. Now please, please let that sink in.

That whatever your situation, whatever circumstances in your life, God's desire is to help you. And the wonderful thing about God is that he helps us with the huge things that we face, but he also helps us with the little things.

And he simply desires that we would come to him for help in our time of need.

[28 : 23] So that's the first thing that we see. God is not abandoning us, even though we are the ones who have created this problem. And in terms of not abandoning us, God wants to provide us with refuge and protection.

And so when we're asking, what is God doing about the problems in the world? The first part of the answer is that he is providing us with shelter, with refuge and with safety.

And this is why the imagery here is wonderful, because you have the picture here of a storm or of intense heat, and a wall is something that will shelter us from a storm, a cloud will shade us from the sun.

And in many other ways, we see that principle applied, whereby we are protected from harm, whether it's by a, by gloves or by a hat or by a mask or whatever it may be.

We know what it's like to have protection between ourselves and harm. And that is what God wants to do. God's wonderful plan is to provide you and me with protection and with shelter from all the chaos and all the violence of sin.

[29 : 31] That's a reminder that the gospel is a call to safety. This message of the Bible is a call to safety.

And we can easily forget that because we can easily forget the danger that we are in. But if you feel exposed and if you feel vulnerable, God is calling you to come to him and find safety.

That's what we read at the very start. The name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous man runs into it and is safe. Isn't that a brilliant image?

Running in to safety and shelter in God. It's a wonderful feeling to get shelter from a storm. You know when there's a huge gale in the winter and you get out of the car and you're being absolutely battered by the wind and you get inside and you close the door and there is such a sense of relief and safety when you are protected from that.

That's what God is providing for us in Christ. A place of refuge, a place of safety. And this is where the word stronghold is just brilliant. It says you've been a stronghold to the poor.

[30 : 49] I love that word, a stronghold. God is strong, the strongest of everyone, the strongest, most mighty, most powerful force that this universe knows.

Nothing can threaten him, nothing can match his strength. God is strong but he will also hold you. He will hold you in his arms.

He will protect you. That's why no one can snatch you out of God's hand if you are trusting in Jesus. He is strong, he is holding you. He is a stronghold. But the third thing we see here, which is perhaps the most important of all, I probably shouldn't say the words most important because it's all so important but this is really important.

You're thinking in terms of God providing protection but the key point is that nothing can provide protection unless it is willing to be exposed itself.

[31 : 56] If you think of a shade from the sun, if a cloud is shading you, it is being beaten down with the sunshine itself. If a wall is protecting you from a storm, the other side of that wall is getting battered.

If a hard hat protects your head, it's because the hard hat gets hit and gets damaged itself. Protection only comes through exposure.

And God is saying that he will protect us from the effects of sin, all the awful effects of sin and God will do that because he himself will expose himself to all the violence and chaos of sin and that's exactly what Jesus did on the cross.

There on the cross you see all the aggression and horribleness of sin being hurled on Jesus Christ and he can only say that he is your protection because he is willing to be hit himself because he is willing to take the punishment and the exposure in our place.

That's why the Gospel is so amazing because for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[33 : 32] Jesus protects you because he exposed himself and that's why God is the place that we should go when we feel under threat and in difficulty in midst of all the chaos that's in the world.

But the last thing and my apologies for running on too long. The last thing is that this protection, this wonderful protection, who is it given to? Who gets this protection?

Well it tells us it's for the poor and it's for the needy. Now these key words remind us of something wonderful that when God offers this protection he is offering it to those who have nothing.

Now the emphasis here is not really on economic status, it's on spiritual status. The fact that we have nothing. The word poor basically means to be low and it conveys the idea of being powerless and insignificant.

The idea of basically having nothing and the word needy expresses the idea of being in want of lacking and so these two words are building up a very clear picture of somebody who has nothing and who desperately needs something and that is exactly the condition in which we come to God.

[34 : 58] We come as those who have nothing and as those who desperately need something. We do not have anything that makes us worthy of God's protection but we have a desperate and urgent need for the protection and the rescue that God provides and this verse is just a wonderful reminder that if that's how you feel, if you feel you've got nothing to offer God and if you feel that you are lacking everything that you should have then you are perfectly qualified to come to God for help.

That's why Jesus said come to me all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls.

The only thing that you need to do is recognise your need and to hear God's call to come to him. So for asking the question what's God doing about it, the first two things that we've seen this week and the next two that will come to the next Lord's Day all being well.

God has made a wonderful, wonderful plan which he has implemented across the ages of history reminding us that he is sovereign and that he is good and as a key part of that plan he is offering you protection.

Now I want to emphasise the absolute reality of this. This isn't just a sort of theological exercise that we're engaged in. If you go home today and turn on the news and are devastated by what you see or if you face something in the week ahead that absolutely destroys your world and breaks your heart then you must go to God for protection because there's nowhere else we can go and the door of that strong tower is open for you and for me to run into.

[37 : 21] And so let us lay hold of these things and may God grant that we would all put your trust in him. Amen. Let us pray. Amen.