

Do we want God with us? - Rev. Calum Murdo Smith

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[0 : 00] We can turn back to what we read in Isaiah chapter 58. We're going to look through the whole of this chapter, just taking some things out of it.

As we see Isaiah bringing God's word to his people here in the midst of their relationship, they feel it is right with God, that God is making clear to them that things are far from right.

And he's calling them back to himself. What one thing in life could you not live without? What comes to your mind when you think of that question?

I'm sure there's many and varied answers to what might come to mind. You think of your life and there's different things. They can be something maybe personal to you.

It can be something you hold dear. It can be something you feel is just important for your day-to-day life. So what comes to your mind? What could you do, not do, without?

[1 : 07] It can be something practical maybe. So many people today, if you leave home without your mobile phone, you just feel you're lost. You're checking your pockets.

You're thinking, what am I going to do without it? How am I going to survive without my mobile phone? I'll have to go back and get it. It could be a car. Maybe the car is just something that's precious in your life.

You can't do without it a certain kind of food, perhaps. There's something you enjoy and you think, well, if they stopped making that, if I couldn't get that, I would just feel lost.

There's also the essential things that come to mind. You think, well, we can't live without food, without water, without air. The essentials to life.

But the Bible reminds us of the one thing that is essential. The one thing that we often think we can do without.

[2 : 04] But the reality is we can't. And that is God himself. We cannot do without God.

The Bible says in him we live, move, and have our being. Yes, we need all the other things. We need food and water and air. But is that not from the Lord?

Is that not what he gives to us? Is that not the way that he gives us life? But it is in him that we live, move, and have our being.

We can live without certain things in life. But we cannot live and we cannot die without God or we are lost.

And the Bible speaks to us about God calling his people into relationship with him. A people, just as we are, who have fallen away from him.

[3 : 02] Because we are all sinners. We all fall short in that sense. There are things that we do that we know are wrong. There's things that we forget to do. There's sins that we're unaware of.

Yet we are all sinners before God. And God calls us back to himself. And he gives us so many promises in his word that if we return to him, that he will be with us.

He will never leave us or forsake us. One of these wonderful promises that he gives throughout his word. To different people. He says to his disciples, Lo, I am with you always, as he is about to ascend to heaven.

But that he will be with them. There's this promise of God. There's so many promises that God gives to us that reassure us, that comfort us, and that help us in life.

But so often we can look at these promises and think of God's side to it. And that's a little of what the people in Isaiah's day. They were looking at God's promise to him.

[4 : 06] And even as you think of them fasting here, they have questions there in verse 3. Why are we fasting? And you see it's not. You know, we're kind of doing our part.

You're not God. I said, it's God's fault. But what God is about to say to them, no, it's not my fault. It's yours. Because you're thinking, you can just treat me in this way where I'll be there when you want me.

And that's not all the time. You can do without me for a time. And then when you think you need me, you'll call upon me and I'll be there. Well, God is saying that's not the way this relationship works. The one thing that we cannot do without is God.

And it's not us questioning God's promise to us, but us asking the question of ourselves. And the question this evening for us is, do we want God with us?

Do we want God with us? Individually, collectively, as a nation, asking that question of ourselves. Do we want God's presence with us?

[5 : 19] The American evangelist, Billy Graham, his daughter was once interviewed. And in her interview, she said this, For years, we have been telling God to get out of our schools.

We've been telling God to get out of our governments. We've been telling God to get out of our lives. And then she said, how can we expect God to give us his blessing and his presence and his protection if we demand that he leaves us alone?

Isn't that the kind of world that we live in today? Where we're telling God to get out of every aspect of life.

That God is, if you want God, it's got to be in your own private space. We don't want God in the public sphere of life. And yet, there are times when we give God a token gesture.

You think of the coronation of the king. And God is there. His word is read. And prayers are offered. But is it just that? A token gesture. And then we move on and let's do without God now.

[6 : 37] But then the next crisis comes and we might mention God in some way. And think, well, maybe we could pray. You don't hear that even now, though. A call for prayer.

So the question is, do we want God with us? And that's the question that Isaiah was putting before the people here as well. Do you want God with you?

And if you do, how do you want God with you? And so in chapter 58 here, there's three things I want us to see from it as Isaiah brings this word to them.

The first is what we will call this trumpet call. You see that in verse 1. Cry aloud and do not hold back. Lift up your voice like a trumpet.

So there's this trumpet call in verse 1 to verse 5. Then we'll see, secondly, there's a change of direction called for. And then at the end of the chapter, we'll see a call to a commitment to worship.

[7 : 41] But we begin with this trumpet call. The world in which we live in, it's a noisy world. There's noise all around us, as it were, all the time.

There's so many noises that we hear in life. We hear people around us all the time. We hear machinery. We hear transport. The list goes on.

Technology is always making a noise in our ear. There's always something trying to grab for our attention.

But when you think back just over four years ago now, our world came to a shuddering halt all of a sudden. When the COVID pandemic hit, it was almost as if the world fell silent.

So much of the noise and familiarity that we had around us, it was no more. The place just became silent. I was reflecting on that just recently when I was down in Edinburgh.

[8 : 49] And I was on the Royal Mile. I was going up to where the Free Church Seminary is for a meeting. And as I was going up the Royal Mile, this was just about half past eight in the morning.

And the place was just chocker with people. People just going here, there, and everywhere. Cars and buses and noise just everywhere. And it reminded me that four years previous, a friend of mine, Thomas Davis, who's back in Carleby now, he was in Edinburgh at that time when lockdown came.

And he sent me this picture that he took midday on a Saturday on the Royal Mile at a busy crossing on the road. And the only people in the photo were his family.

They were out for a cycle. We were allowed out for a short time in the day. They were out for a cycle. And you could see almost right down the Royal Mile. And there was nobody else.

Silence. Silence. If you had said that just a few months previously, that this would be so, nobody would believe you. And yet, in so many ways, the world just fell silent.

[10 : 02] God was reminding us of just how much he is in control. And for a time, there was a sense of people needing something in the midst of this silence.

And that God may be the answer in this silence. God was being spoken of in a new way. Prayer was being spoken of in a new way.

And I heard a quote at the time. When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful. We need to hear the voice of God.

But so little do we make time to listen. In the silence that we had then, the noise has returned. And the clamor for our attention has returned.

And it's only increasing. The noise is becoming greater. And we're not listening to God. In Isaiah's day, the same things would happen.

[11:12] There would be times of crisis in the people's life. There would be times when all the noise around them would stop. When the voice of God was calling out for their attention. But the choice was there.

Would they listen? Or would they just go on without him? Do we want God with us? And so in Isaiah's day, there was this trumpet call.

And it was a trumpet call in the midst of a nation that was in disarray in so many ways. And if you just go back, chapter 56 and 57, there's a few places there that make it clear just the kind of crisis that they were in.

That they were not listening to God. They were not wanting God with them. In chapter 56 at verse 12, this is the leaders of the nation saying, We can go on just as we are without God. We don't need him. We don't need God on our side. We can manage without him. And so it comes then from the leaders. It comes down through society.

[12:26] So that in verse 8 of chapter 57, it says that the people are deserting me. That they are leaving me behind.

In verse 11, it says, did not remember me. God is being forgotten about. They are drifting away. And so it's drifting away that you come into chapter 58 and verse 1.

And God is saying to us, through Isaiah, cry loudly. Do not hold back. Lift up your voice like a trumpet. There is something that the people need to hear.

It was that time, as you see in verse 1 to 5, where the people think that they are doing fine. That they are giving God a place in their lives.

But they're getting on with things themselves. They're doing things their own way. And the trumpet call is there because action is needed.

[13:31] When a trumpet noise was heard in Isaiah's day, and a city trumpet was heard, it meant the enemy was around. And the battle stations were being called for.

There was an attack imminent. And so this cry aloud with a voice like a trumpet is to say, look, this is a serious situation.

This is a serious need. It's a time to go to battle. But what's the problem? What's the enemy? It's not the people and other nations around them.

It's their own hearts. Their own hearts are not right with God. In verse 2 there it says, Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness, and did not forsake the judgment of their God.

They're pushing God away. The token gesture that they're giving in their fasting is, look at us, Lord. We fasted, and you don't see it.

[14:37] Are you not going to give us something in return? We have humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it. So they're going on like this. But their hearts are far from God.

They're pushing God out. And when you look at our nation, and we're seeking to put God out of everything in life, out of our laws, out of our schools, out of our families, we are deserting him. And we'll only say we need him when it suits ourselves and in ways that suit ourselves. But we are fast abandoning God.

And yet people will say, we've made so much progress. We're making headway. We're moving in the right direction. But not if we are deserting God.

And there can be a time when things seem fine, when there seems to be peace and calm. But God is still calling out to us to look to him, to remember him.

[15:42] We know what it's like living here when a gale warning is given. We prepare. We take action. And for years, you could see that God was speaking to his people to take action.

And they were not listening because they felt things were fine. In the same way as when we have a calm, beautiful day here, it can mean danger for us as well.

You think of a calm morning in winter. There's the danger of ice. A calm morning at this time of year can mean the danger of fog. So just because there seems to be peace, it doesn't mean that there's not danger around.

And so often that is what God is reminding of us in his word. We don't become complacent. We don't try and push him away more and more or just give him a token gesture.

Do we want God with us? Well, we need him. We need him with us. And so the second thing we see here is a change of direction.

[16:53] And that is what we would call repentance. And that is what we need as a people. When we are abandoning God, we need to repent and to turn to him.

Because repentance is just that, a change of direction. So that instead of deserting God, we should be longing and deciding for God.

Like we sang in Psalm 42, that like the heart that is panting for the waters, that we would be like that to God, longing for him.

And so in verse 6 to verse 12, there's this focus on how to return to God. And when you look at what Isaiah says to his people about where they have gone wrong and what to do about it, it might surprise you just what he talks about.

Because he begins to talk to them about the way that in their dealing with others around them that they've lost their way.

[17:59] In verse 6, the Lord says, Is it not this the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house? And so he goes on. It's almost like this is the way back to me. It's about helping the poor.

Social justice. Now you'd think, well, surely he would focus on confession of sin. That that would be what would be important here. But the two are interlinked.

The two are intertwined here. You see, the way that they were dealing with others showed just how they were sinning. Because if they were truly hearing the Word of God, if they were truly right with God, then all of these other things would be falling into place.

On the outside, they would seem like their confession of sin was right. They were fasting, as we saw before in the first section, when they say, why are we fasted?

[19:12] And you see it not. They were going through the motions. We've humbled ourselves, and you have no knowledge of it. So it's almost like they see themselves as confessing their sins, but it's merely just going through the motions.

It's not changing their hearts. And repentance means their hearts will be changed as well. That they would have a burden for those around them.

But this would be a burden for them. A burden that they're not willing to take on. They're not willing to help the poor. They're not willing to let their prisoners or slaves go free.

They're not willing to give bread to the hungry or a home to the homeless. They're not willing because that would upset their own lifestyles. And there's a challenge for ourselves there as well. What is our attitude in these things? We think that if we confess our sins that we are fine with God. But how does it work itself out practically in our lives as well?

[20:19] How do we live for God? Do we want God with us? So a change of direction was needed. A change of heart was needed.

And for ourselves as a people, as a nation, as a world, so much of the sin of our lives is how we deal with others. When you think of the wickedness around us, when you think of the fallen nature of this world, think of the greatest commandment that Jesus spoke about in the New Testament. In Matthew 22, Jesus was asked a question, Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? And he said to him, this was Jesus' response, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment. But he went on and said, and the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. They're linked together.

And you look at the Ten Commandments, You see the first four are more towards loving the Lord your God. But the rest are then about loving your neighbor as yourself.

[21:35] How you deal with others. And so we have to ask ourselves too, is that the way we are with those around us?

Do we love our neighbor as ourselves? Do we want God with us, but only on our terms? Only in our ways? And it's always a challenge when we think of ourselves as churches.

How we deal with the strangers who come through our doors. How would we deal with the poor and the hungry and the homeless if they were to come through our doors? Would we welcome them? Would we help them? Would we look down on them? If our hearts are right with God, all our focus and attention is on the Lord, to love Him, but to love our neighbor as ourselves.

So there are always these challenges for us. Do we want God with us? And do we want God with us, whatever the cost, whatever it means for us?

[22 : 41] Because when Jesus comes to judge the world, what does He say? Again in Matthew, we're reminded of what He will say. In Matthew 25, He says, Then the King will say to those on the right, Come, You who are blessed by my Father, inherited the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

For I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me in. And so it goes on. What you have done for the least of these, you have done to me.

But then there's the warning. In verse 41, He says, Then He will say to those on His left, Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

For I was hungry, and you gave me no food. I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink. And so it goes on. Do we want God with us?

Well, if we do have God with us, He shows us then the blessings that there are in having Him with us.

[23 : 58] When we humble ourselves before Him, He is able to bless. There's a verse in 2 Chronicles 7, 14, a verse I'm sure you've heard.

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. It's a wonderful verse. And that verse you almost see worked out in the verses before us here. In verse 8 and 9 in particular, we just want to take a few things from there.

It says, Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily. Light into darkness.

As we look to God, as we welcome God with us, as we long for God with us, He brings light into darkness. He brings healing, and He brings it speedily.

[24 : 59] The healing being spoken of here is almost like an open wound that would seem impossible to heal quickly, and yet God is able to do it.

He can turn that healing so quickly. He can bring it to churches, to lands, to lives, where it seems impossible to us. He says, Then your righteousness shall go before you.

The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. There is that sense of the protection of God. The rear guard was one who kept a lookout behind to see that no enemy would surprise them, and we can know God with us in this way.

And then in verse 9, He says that, Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer. You shall cry, and He will say, Here I am. What a blessing that God is there to hear our prayers.

So He calls on us to turn to Him. That is what the change of direction is all about here. It's about wanting God with us, longing for God with us, and living our lives, showing that God was with us in so many ways.

[26 : 18] There's a practical side to that. But we want to see in conclusion too, there's a commitment to worship. There's a commitment in delighting in the Lord as well.

And what gives you a sense of delight today? Some people find their delight in football scores. Some people find their delight in holiday times. Some people find their delight in the weather. We delight in so many things in life. But I say as He closes this chapter, He calls us to delight in the Lord and His day.

Call the Sabbath a delight, He says in the middle of verse 13. And this is the sense of coming back to God for worship.

You get a flavor of this just back in chapter 56 and 57. The Sabbath is mentioned there in verse 6 of chapter 56.

[27 : 33] Everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it and holds fast my covenant. So there's this idea where God is challenging His people to hold fast to the Sabbath, to hold fast to

the worship of God.

Because as you go into chapter 58, the people have been using the Sabbath for their own pleasure. And not, you see that in verse 13, if you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight.

If you rejoice in God once again, then He assures us that we will have delight in the Lord, that He will be with us in so many ways.

Now the Sabbath for the people here was the Saturday. The Sabbath will be for us the Lord's day, the day we come to worship God together.

And we see as a nation, we see it in our own island, that we've drifted away from giving that place to God on the Lord's day. And He's calling us to go back and delight in the Sabbath, delight in the Lord's day.

[28 : 46] But what does that really mean for us? It's a day that refreshes the soul, refreshes the body, encourages us in our fellowship, in our being together.

But we have to think of what it's not as well. Well, delighting in the Sabbath or in the Lord's day is not the things that we don't do.

It's not getting back to the days when we tell people, you can't do that. You can't do this. It's not about going back to that kind of Lord's day.

But it's going back to show that there is delight in the Lord's day, that there is delight in worshiping the Lord, that there is delight in the church and the gathering of God's people, that there is delight in our hearts as we rejoice in our Savior Jesus, and that that is what we would show to those around us.

The church is a symbol of life, of hope, of help. But to many it's seen as a symbol of just control, of dictating, of saying, don't do this.

[30 : 12] But if we want to know God with us, we are to reclaim the delight of the Sabbath of the Lord's day, to rejoice in the worship of God, to rejoice in being gathered together as His people, to rejoice in the praising of His name, to delight in the Lord, and to ask Him to be with us, to be in our midst, to bless in our lives, not just on the Lord's day, but every day, that we would say, Lord, be with us, because we cannot do without you.

There was a story of the parents of a little boy who overheard him as he went to bed one Sunday night and prayed. They had been to church as a family, and they heard the little boy kneeling down to pray, and this was his prayer.

Dear God, we had a good time at church today, but I wish you had been there. A little boy was aware that God was not there.

How sad. Would we go home this evening, and that would be our prayer. We had a good time, but I wish that you had been there.

Surely, we want God with us. How can we expect God to be with us and give us his blessing and his protection if you demand that he leaves us alone was the cry of Billy Graham's daughter.

[32 : 06] Do we want God with us? Do we long for God with us? Do we delight in God with us?

Let us hear the trumpet call, the warning that we hear in this word. That we would return to him and honour him with all our love for God and love our neighbour as ourself.

And that we would delight in the Sabbath and the Lord's day in worshipping his name, in longing for him to be with us, and delighting in that.

Let us pray. Our Father in heaven, we do pray that we would not leave here this evening unaware that you have been with us, but that we would long for and delight in your presence, not just as we gather in your name, but as we go from here, as we go into the week ahead, that in all that we would do, we would ask for you to be with us, that we would recognise in all the things that we feel that we cannot live without in this life.

That our greatest need is God with us and the hope that we have in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. So Lord, may you bless us with your presence and with your peace and go before us even now as we ask it all with forgiveness of our sins.

[33 : 35] In Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to conclude by singing in Psalm 18, in the Sing Psalms, page 20 of the Psalm book, Psalm 18.

And we'll sing from verse 21 down to verse 28. For I have kept the ways of God, from Him I have not turned away, I have not strayed from His decrees, His statutes ever with me stay.

Then verse 27 there, You save the humble and the meek, but bring the proud down from their height. You, Lord, will keep my lamp aflame, God turns my darkness into light.
We'll sing from verse 21 to 28 to God's praise. For I have kept the ways of God, from Him I have not turned away, I have not strayed from His decrees, His statutes ever with me stay.
Before the Lord I kept myself from blame and all transgression free, Since in His sight my hands were clean, The Lord my God rewardeth me.
[35 : 43] With faithful people you keep faith, And to the place that you are good, With pure men you yourself are pure, But with the truth that you are shrewd, You save the humble and the meek, The grave have run down from their height.
You, Lord, will keep my hope aflame, God turns my darkness into light.
We'll close with a benediction. Now may grace, mercy, and peace from God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rest upon And abide with you all now and forevermore.
Amen.