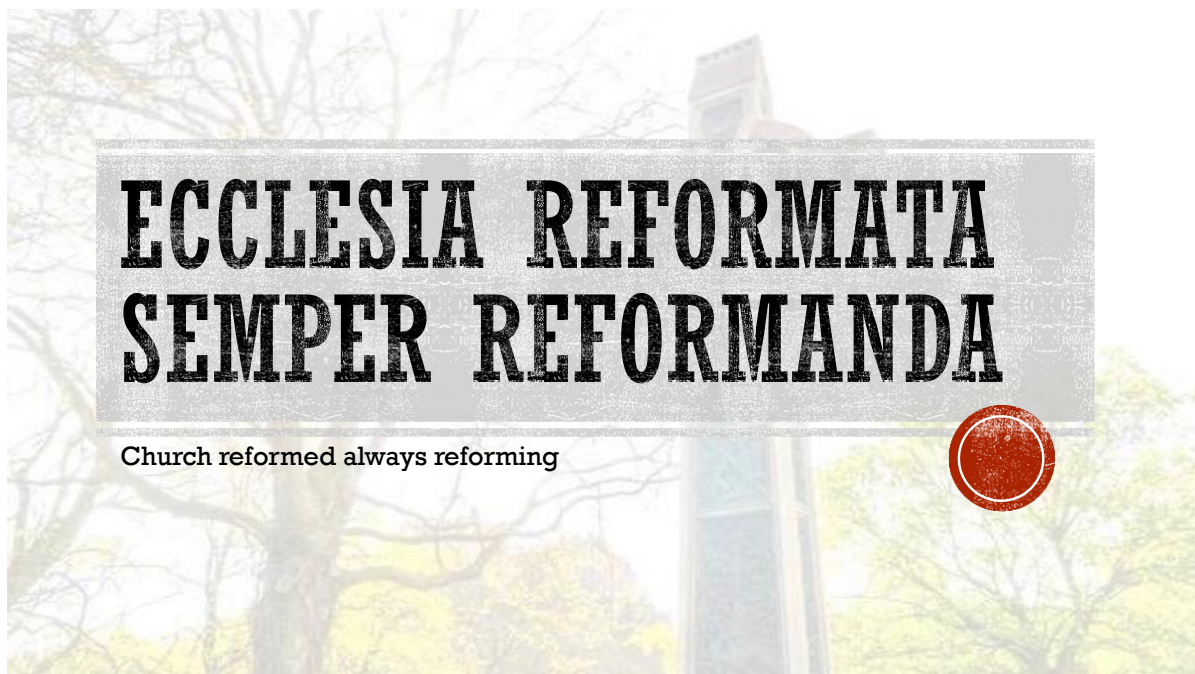


23 July 2023 on Sunday 9.00 am and 10.30 am

# **ECCLESIA REFORMATA, SEMPER REFORMANDA**

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell  
Presbyterian Church



**Isaiah 43:16-21**

**This is what the Lord says—**

**he who made a way through the sea,**

**a path through the mighty waters,**

**17 who drew out the chariots and horses,**

the army and reinforcements together,  
and they lay there, never to rise again,  
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:

18 “Forget the former things;  
do not dwell on the past.

19 See, I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?  
I am making a way in the wilderness  
and streams in the wasteland.

20 The wild animals honour me,  
the jackals and the owls,  
because I provide water in the wilderness  
and streams in the wasteland,

to give drink to my people, my chosen,

21 the people I formed for myself  
that they may proclaim my praise.

## **Psalm 126**

**When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,**

we were like those who dreamed.  
2 Our mouths were filled with laughter,  
our tongues with songs of joy.  
Then it was said among the nations,  
“The Lord has done great things for them.”  
3 The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.  
4 Restore our fortunes, Lord,  
like streams in the Negev.  
5 Those who sow with tears  
will reap with songs of joy.  
6 Those who go out weeping,  
carrying seed to sow,  
will return with songs of joy,  
carrying sheaves with them.

**John 12:1-8**

Jesus Anointed at Bethany

**12 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2 Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. 3 Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.**

**4 But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 5 "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." 6 He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.**

**7 "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. 8 You will always have**

**the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”**

## **SENTENCE FOR THE DAY**

**See, I am doing a new thing!**

**Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?**

**I am making a way in the wilderness.**

**and streams in the wasteland. Isaiah 43:19**

## **INTRODUCTION**

**Latest Presbytery Newsletter – introduction by our Moderator James Watt.**

One of the main responsibilities of Presbytery is to encourage and connect congregations in the wonder and working of God in their everyday reality. People living in Shalom, nurturing, caring and healing the world because of the Holy Spirit.

**Review Southern Presbytery**

**So how are we going...** this was the purpose of a major review of Presbytery in the past year. This report reflected many of the frustrations and dissatisfactions but helpfully voiced an underlying feeling that needed to be expressed, a sense of grief –“ that we may not be able to be what we once were “ because our membership and influence are in decline, that Christian thought and wisdom are no longer popular culture and the church is pushed to the edges. This is discouraging!

**Yet God is no stranger to this place,** it is the harsh world Jesus came to redeem and change. Prayerfully acknowledging this will allow us to move on and follow the Master. That is the **Hope** that this report will move us on. For it also recorded the positive provision of dedicated faithful people doing so.

It has been said that, **If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything.**

And good on James as he is standing up for Jesus and serving the church faithfully.

In 1945, during World War II, a medical doctor Gordon A. Eadie wrote,

**We are trying to show ... not only what we are fighting against, but what we are fighting for.**

**So many of these boys have only a very hazy idea of the real issues of the war.**

**About all they see is “going back to the good old days.” This is a dangerous state. If they don’t stand for something, they will fall for anything. They need to realize that we are fighting two wars - the war of arms and the war of ideas ... the war of arms is one phase.<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> 1945 January, Mental Hygiene, Volume 29, Number 1, “The Over-All Mental-Health Needs of the Industrial Plant, with Special Reference to War Veterans” by Gordon A. Eadie, M.D. (Affiliation:

**So, if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything.**

Allow me to ask, what is it that you stand for?

What is it that New Zealanders stands for?

And what is it that the church in New Zealand stands for?

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Eastern Aircraft Division, General Motors Corporation, Linden, New Jersey), Start Page 101, Quote Page 103, Published by the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, Inc., New York. (Verified on microfilm)





If we get one hundred moderators, bishops, priests, ministers, and pastors together ... from across all the different strands of the Christian faith in New Zealand ... and asked, what is it that you believe, what do you stand for? What do you think they would they say? Would they find agreement?

So, I ask, do you think it is possible ... to find agreement ... on anything? Agreement on theology, ethics, worship, church government?

What about our values, beliefs, customs, and traditions? Or the things we are happy to change and the things we are not?

And, I have a disturbing question to ask.

What happens ... do you think when we lose agreement ... do we also lose our sense of God?

I believe we are living in a plural society, with no metanarrative, no moral or theological absolutes, where every culture and practice is seen as of having equal value, or ... in contradiction ... of greater or indeed lesser value in the eyes of the beholder.

So, where does God fit into all of this? Is God not cancelled? Is not God lost ... in the subterranean mish mash ... of varying beliefs, values, and traditions?

I believe that has happened to us ... here in New Zealand ... in a limited way in the church ... but principally within the nation.

And I believe that when we lose God, we don't just lose religion; we eventually lose everything worth living for.

But the wonderful news is ... the Lord is reaching out ... to us.

God has a purpose for us yet ... even in the face of our disagreements ... conflicting values ... and varying confronting cultural narratives.

In scripture ... Isaiah 42:6 ... the Lord says, **“I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles”**

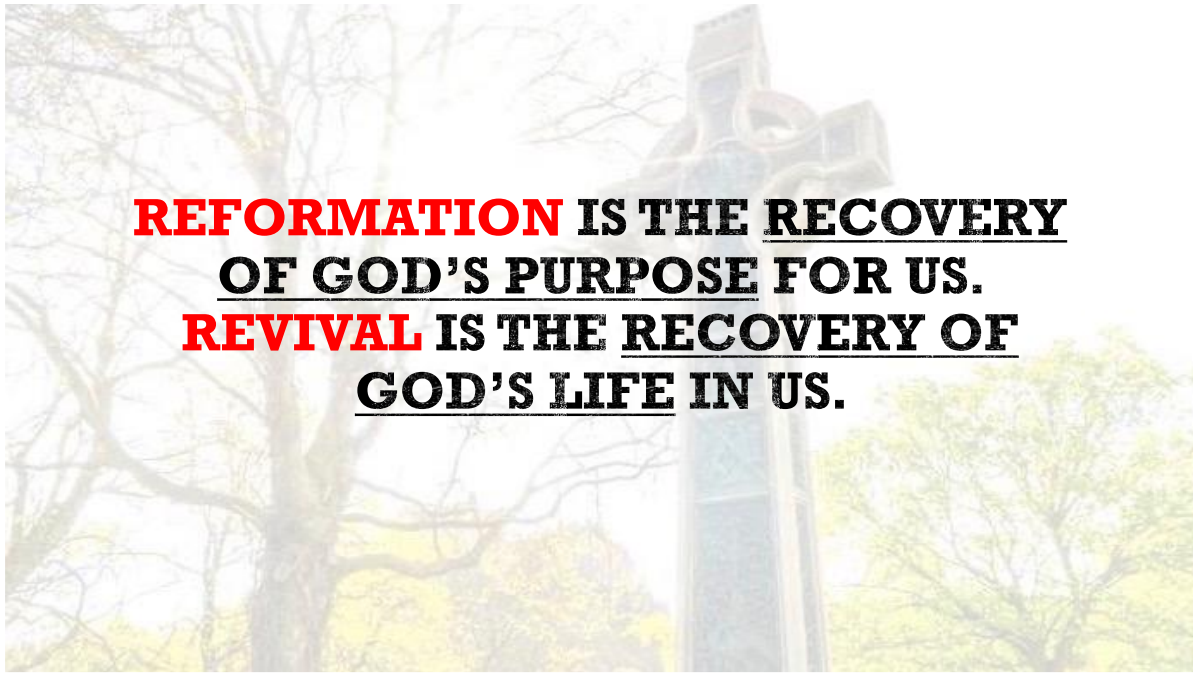
That was the goal in the Old Testament and it continues in the New Testament today ... with the new covenant.

And ... do you know ... where God begins? Right here with us, on two levels.

The prophet Isaiah shows us that God reforms people who have lost their purpose, and we should read Isaiah 42:18 – 43:21, which is the background to this morning's text.

The following section ... 43:22 – 44:23 ... shows how the Lord revives people who have lost their vitality.

So, from these passages in Isaiah, we can see that God brings about a change in our lives, with reformation and revival.



**REFORMATION IS THE RECOVERY**  
**OF GOD'S PURPOSE FOR US.**  
**REVIVAL IS THE RECOVERY OF**  
**GOD'S LIFE IN US.**

Reformation is the recovery of God's purpose for us. Revival is the recovery of God's life in us.

Well, I am very happy to say ... that God actively engages us ... with our strident and confronting differences.

Our roots, you see, go deep into the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. What was God accomplishing back then, do you think?

I think of it like this. **The Lord hauled the ship that we call the church into dry dock, scraped**

away 1,500 years' worth of encrusted human traditions that were slowing it down, refitted that ship with a fresh gospel understanding, and relaunched a seaworthy vessel.

But reformation must never stop, '**Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda,**' that is, '**the church reformed, always reforming,**' which is the title of my sermon this morning.

Our constant tendency in the church, I believe, is a movement towards, theological, spiritual, ethical disputation ... eventually resulting in mediocrity ... disagreement, and confusion.

So, you might ask, what then is reformation?

Well, reformation is God renewing in our hearts ... with a passionate clarity ... his purpose for the church.

It is God ... reawakening ... in us ... a love for his truth and his standards.

It is God preparing us .... for the display of his glorious salvation ... as we reshape every aspect of our lives ... and our churches ... transforming society as we go.

So ... in Isaiah chapter 42 and 43 ... God's people are guided toward ... a personal and corporate change.

And I think every generation needs reformation ... don't you ... and not just revival which brings spiritual vitality. A. W. Tozer put it bluntly:

**A revival of the kind of Christianity which we have had in [America] the last 50 years would be the greatest tragedy of this century, a tragedy which would take the church a hundred years to get over.<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Jim Elliff, "Reformation or Revival?" *Heartcry! A Journal on Revival and Spiritual Awakening*, Fall 1997, p. 21.

What's the point of reviving the wrong kind of Christianity?

It's not just more power that we need, though we do need that.

Would you agree ... we also need ... a new kind of Christianity ... reformed ... according to God's great purpose for us?

Is our society adrift theologically, spiritually, and ethically? Perhaps?

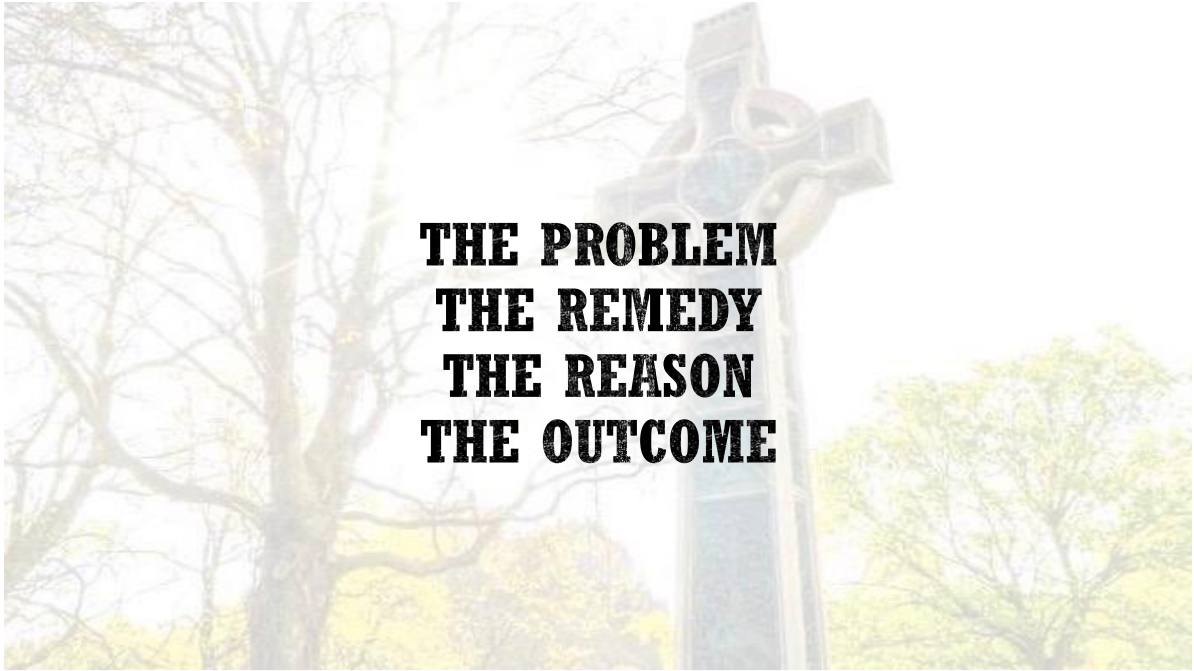
Perhaps ... it is because the church and society ... have gone in different directions.

Or perhaps it is because the church is adrift?

Well, I will let you reflect on that.

Now, Isaiah's reforming message has four points:





1. the problem God confronts – which is our guilty insensitivity (42:18–25)
2. the remedy that God provides – which is divine discipline or judgement (43:1–7, 26-28)
3. the reason for God's intervention – is that we might rediscover the exclusive reality of God (43:8–13) – namely, idolatry, multifaith, my experience is my truth, making god in my image ... are not biblical ... nor acceptable to the Lord.
4. and the outcome in our experience - personal and corporate life transformed by the presence of God (44:1–5)

Now, maybe God wants to pick an argument with us this morning:

**“Review the past for me” says Isaiah 43:26 “let us argue the matter together; state the case for your innocence.”**

## **FIRSTLY, THE PROBLEM**



**Hear, you deaf, and look, you blind, that you may see! Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send? Who is blind as my dedicated one, or blind as the servant of the LORD? (Isaiah 42:18, 19)**

Now, Isaiah has just been talking about leading the blind nations out of their darkness into the light of God (42:5-7).

So, who would we expect the deaf and blind to be?

The idolatrous nations, right? Wrong.

“Who is blind but my servant?”

Extraordinarily, at the beginning of this chapter “the servant of the LORD” brings salvation to the nations (42:1–4).

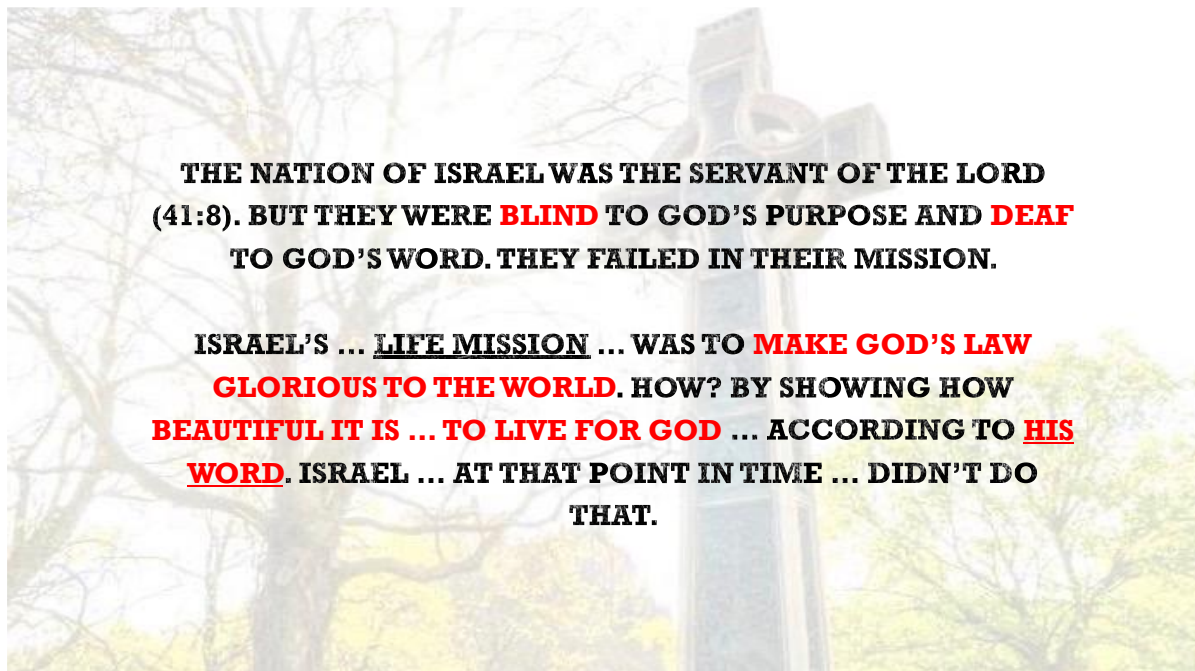
But now, the Lord’s servant himself is blind and deaf.

God’s messenger can’t hear the message himself.

In verses 1–4 the servant of the Lord brings perfection to the world; in verses 18–25 the servant fails.

So, how do we make sense of this?

There's a clue in **verse 24: "Who gave up Jacob to the looter, and Israel to the plunderers?"**



The nation of Israel was the servant of the Lord (41:8). But they were blind to God's purpose and deaf to God's Word. They failed in their mission.

You see ... Israel's ... life mission ... was to make God's law glorious to the world. How? By showing how beautiful it is to ... live for God ... according to his word. Israel ... at that point in time ... didn't do that.

But, fortunately in the new covenant, foreshadowed by Isaiah, Jesus did.

His whole life embodied God's law.

And people noticed. They flocked to Christ. And that is the church's mission too.

That, in its essence, is what happened with Mary ... in the Gospel reading this morning.

**Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the**

**house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.**

And ... when we're like Jesus, people will sense that something beautiful has come to them.

When our life together ... makes the way of God ... glorious in human life ... people will see it ... and they will want it. **Put simply, that is the purpose of God for us.**

In Isaiah's day ... God's people ignored God's purpose ... and they thereby invited God's discipline.

**Who gave up Jacob to the looter, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned, in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey? So, he poured on him the heat of his anger and the might of battle; it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand; it**

**burned him up, but he did not take it to heart.  
(42: 24-25)**

Now, speaking frankly, I don't think we are very good at listening to the Lord.

Scripture says, that even when the disciplines of God ... set us on fire ... we don't necessarily feel it enough ... to take it to heart.

We even might think ... God has changed ... and that God is no longer active in our lives ... or is not building the Kingdom ... and not growing the church.

But perhaps ... God ... is not the problem.

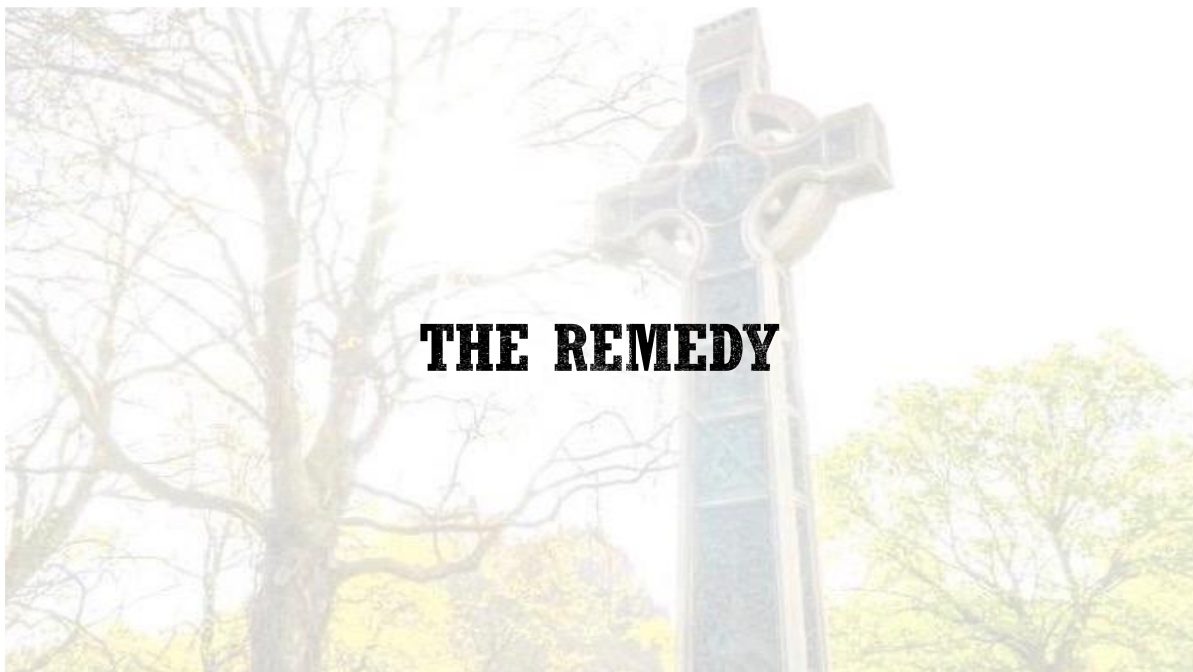
The problem may well be ... that our lives ... our corporate lives ... may bare little relation to God's purpose. And that is why, Isaiah says, Judah went into national exile.

And maybe ... that is why we ... in the church ...  
feel like exiles in New Zealand.

I ask you ... do we need reformation ... as  
individuals ... and as churches. I believe we do.

So, how does God do it?

## **SECONDLY, THE REMEDY**



**But now thus says the LORD, he who created  
you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:**



**“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. (Isaiah 43:1, 2)**

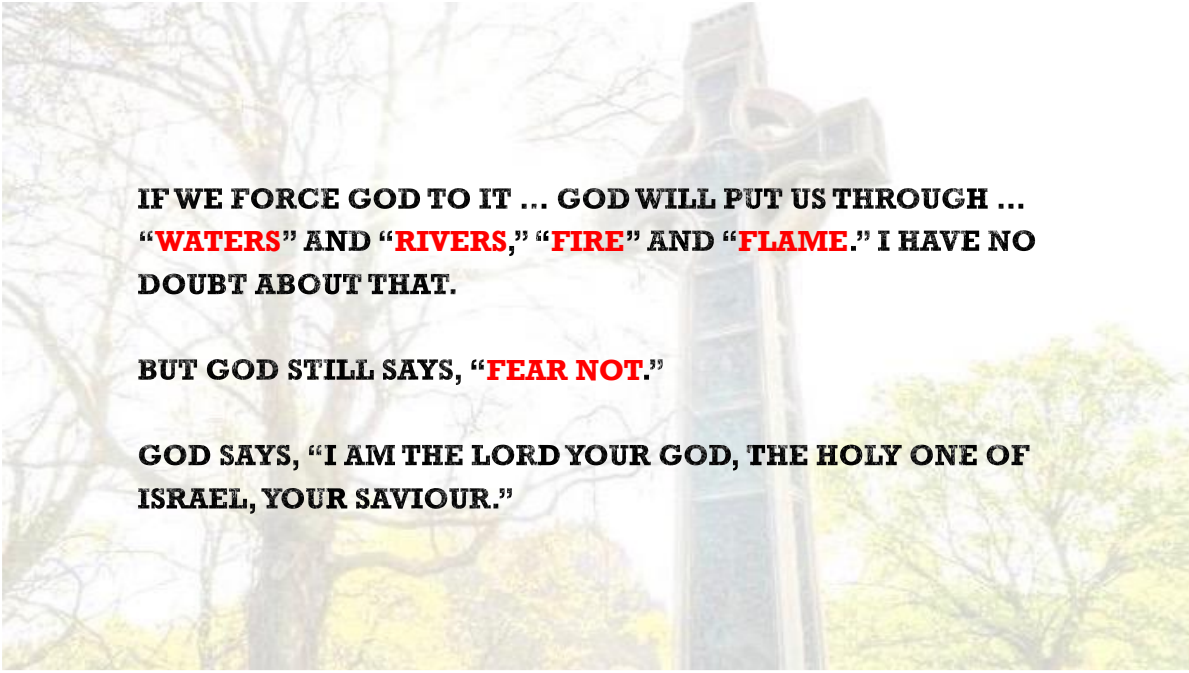
**“But now”** are welcome words ... are they not?

Do you see how abruptly Isaiah ... transitions from our problem ... to God’s remedy?

**“But now”** does not signal any change in us. But it declares the grace of God.

The reason for the **“but now”** is not even our repentance, but only God himself. It is Sola gratia, meaning by grace alone, which is one of the five cries of the Reformation.

**For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. (43:3)**



**IF WE FORCE GOD TO IT ... GOD WILL PUT US THROUGH ...  
“WATERS” AND “RIVERS,” “FIRE” AND “FLAME.” I HAVE NO  
DOUBT ABOUT THAT.**

**BUT GOD STILL SAYS, “FEAR NOT.”**

**GOD SAYS, “I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD, THE HOLY ONE OF  
ISRAEL, YOUR SAVIOUR.”**

If we force God to it ... God will put us through ...  
“waters” and “rivers,” “fire” and “flame.” I have no  
doubt about that.

But God still says, “Fear not.”

God says, “I am the LORD your God, the Holy One  
of Israel, your Saviour.”

**Do we belong to God? Yes. But even more  
deeply, God belongs to us.**

So, look at the commitments of **Isaiah 43**: “**I created you, I formed you, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine, I will be with you.**”

In other words, “What matters most about us ... is not what we deserve ... but whose we are.”

The disciplines of God are real ... churches may close ... denominational entities may collapse ... perhaps whole denominations may disappear in part or in whole.

But they are not the Lord’s last word to his people; salvation is.

Whatever life throws at us ... including the tough love of God ... God will be with us.

So, I believe ... our destiny ... is to be a living advertisement ... of how good God is ... to people who deserve the opposite. It is grace not law.

And when this prophetic vision gets into our hearts ... other things fall away ... and we get traction for reformation.

## **THIRDLY, THE REASON**



**“You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD,  
“and my servant whom I have chosen, that  
you may know and believe me and understand  
that I am he. Before me no god was formed,  
nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the**

**LORD, and besides me there is no saviour.”  
(Isaiah 43:10, 11)**

Now ... here is a key point ... write it down ... and commit it to memory, **The purpose of God is the glory of God, to the exclusion of all rival glories.**

And the New Testament develops this theme through the understanding of the Messiah, the incarnation of God.

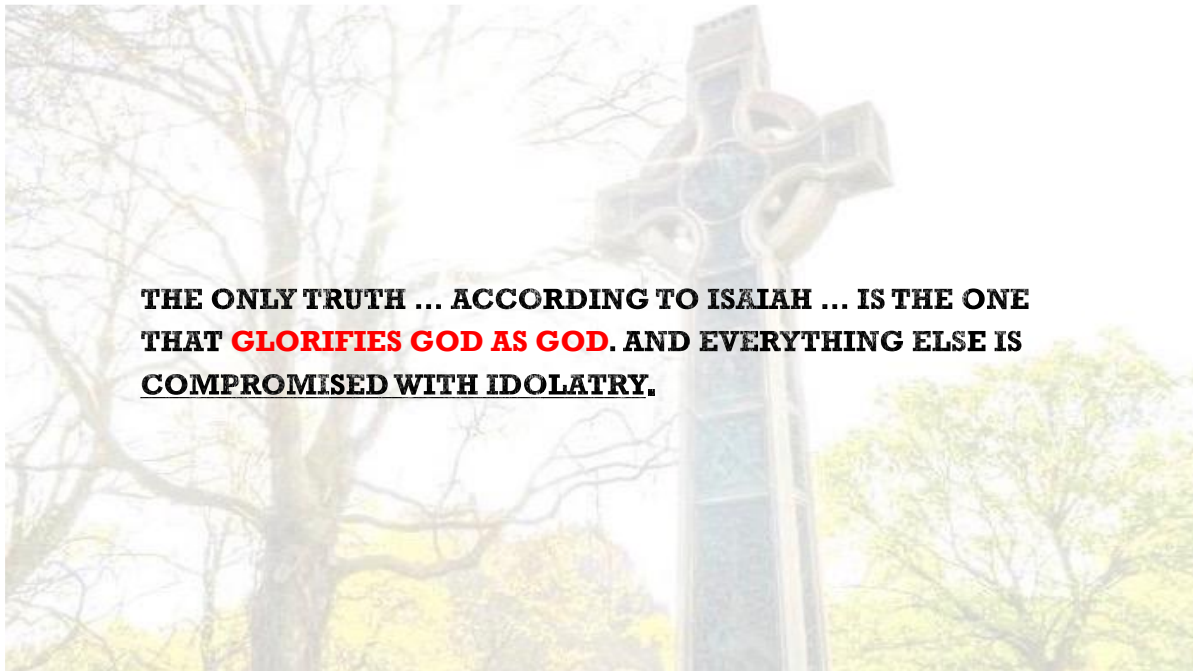
There is no room in the gospel for the idea that Jesus is only one of many spiritual paths.

Jesus isn't even the best way. He is the only way.

Do you see? The ultimate reason why God loves us ... is for us to be witnesses ... for us to be living proof ... that God alone is the all-sufficient Savior of the world.

Other religions and worldviews, of course, have merit. There is much good ... and indeed commonality ... with the Judeo-Christian tradition.

But their deepest intention ... is not to glorify God ... on God's terms ... revealed to us in Scripture ... and supremely revealed in Jesus Christ.



**The only truth ... according to Isaiah ... is the one that glorifies God as God. And everything else is compromised with idolatry.**

And it is not too strong a point to say ... the Lord intends ... to put all rivals out of business ... because they are idols ... are life-depleting ... joy-killing ... disappointments.

God says in verse 11, **“Besides me there is no saviour.”**

Now, I have observed that with every idol, if you don't toe the line, it will demand its pound of flesh. And an idol can be spiritual, a belief system, or something other ...

If you're serving the idol of career, for example, and you don't sacrifice to that idol, as it demands, your career is likely to be over.

If your idol is political extremism, and you don't sacrifice to that idol as it demands, your hoped-for world is shattered.

If your idol is a perfect body, and you don't sacrifice to that idol as it demands, your self-image can be challenged.

**My professor from Fuller Theological Seminary recalled he was devastated when his longed for brand new car (Jaguar Mark 2) ... was dented by another driver ... he later reflected that he had invested too much personal value and worth in the car ... that it had become an idol.**

OK, I believe ... we need to each reflect ... on whether there are idols ... substituting or competing ... with the Lord!





OK, WHEN WE HAVE DEFIED OR SUBSTITUTED THE ONE TRUE  
GOD WITH AN IDOL, WHAT DOES GOD DO?

ISAIAH SAYS, **GOD SAVES US.** WHY?

SIMPLY, IT IS TO **MAKE US WITNESSES** THAT GOD IS NOT JUST  
GOOD; BUT **GOD IS THE ONLY GOODNESS ANYONE WILL  
EVER NEED.**

OK, when we have defied or substituted the one  
true God with an idol, what does God do?

Isaiah says, God saves us. Why?

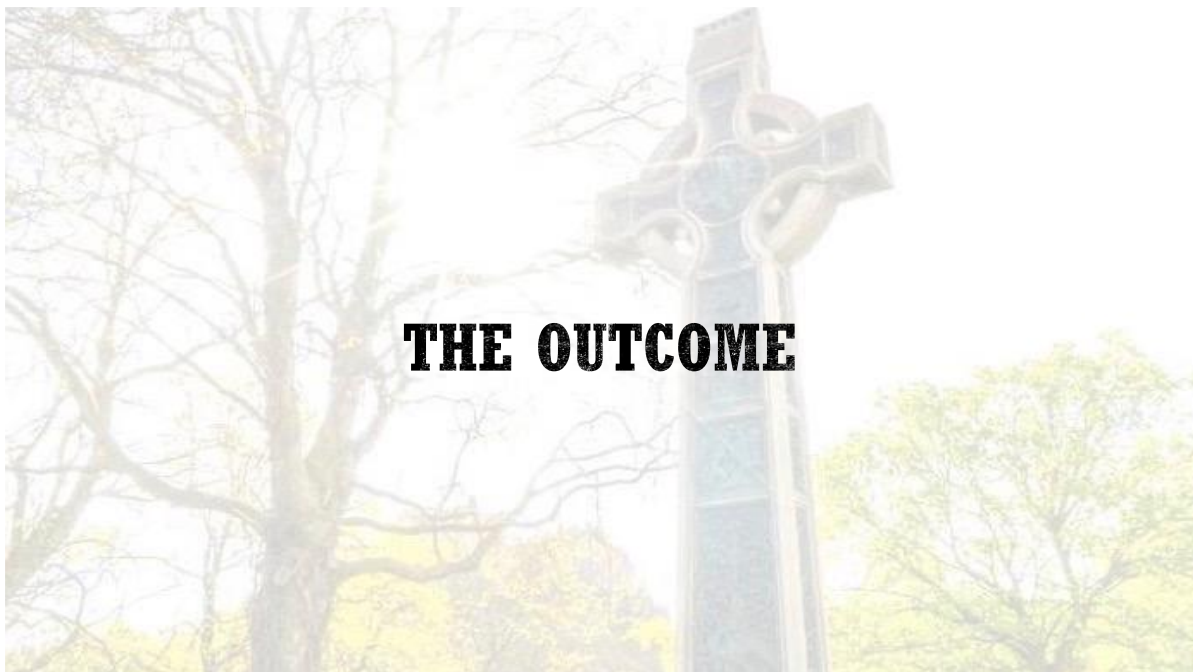
Simply, it is to make us witnesses that God is not  
just good; but God is the only goodness anyone  
will ever need.

Throughout this section God claims, “**I am he. I, I  
am the LORD. I am God.**”

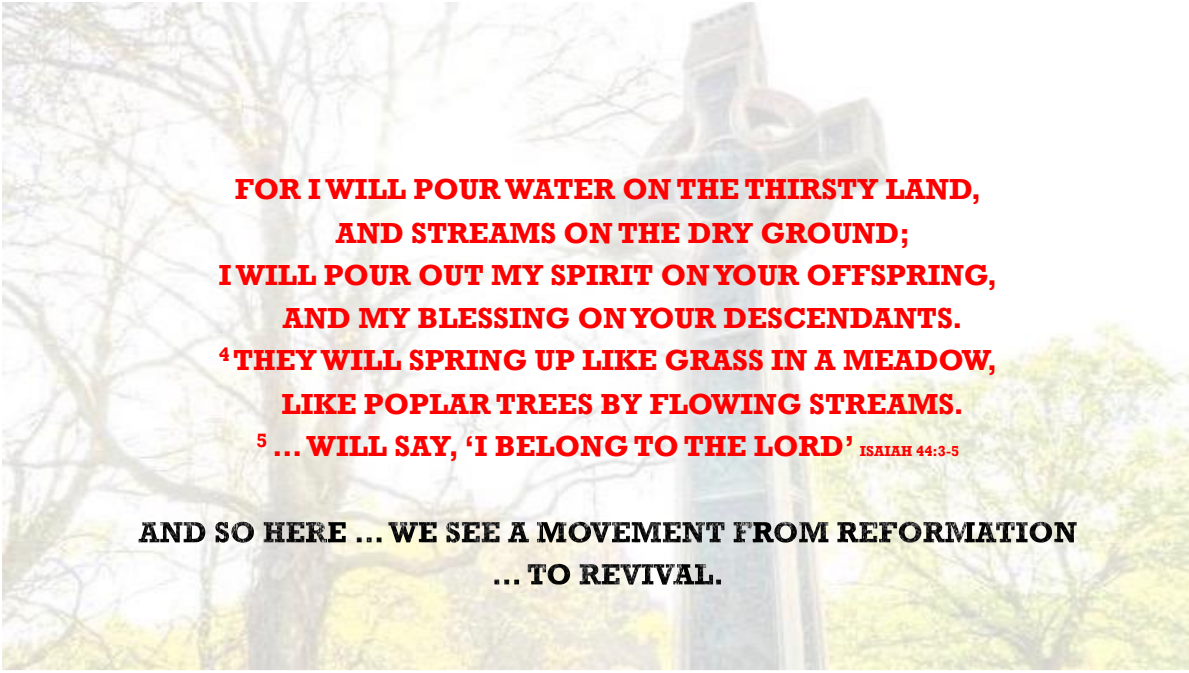
I heard someone say, “**In our world it’s cool to search for God, but uncool to find God.**”

Are you willing to be uncool enough ... to find and embrace ... your only Saviour?

## **FOURTHLY, AND FINALLY, THE OUTCOME**



And here, we need to skip over to **Isaiah 44:3-5**



**FOR I WILL POUR WATER ON THE THIRSTY LAND,  
AND STREAMS ON THE DRY GROUND;  
I WILL POUR OUT MY SPIRIT ON YOUR OFFSPRING,  
AND MY BLESSING ON YOUR DESCENDANTS.  
<sup>4</sup>THEY WILL SPRING UP LIKE GRASS IN A MEADOW,  
LIKE POPLAR TREES BY FLOWING STREAMS.  
<sup>5</sup> ... WILL SAY, 'I BELONG TO THE LORD' ISAIAH 44:3-5**

**AND SO HERE ... WE SEE A MOVEMENT FROM REFORMATION  
... TO REVIVAL.**

**For I will pour water on the thirsty land,  
and streams on the dry ground;  
I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring,  
and my blessing on your descendants.  
<sup>4</sup> They will spring up like grass in a meadow,  
like poplar trees by flowing streams.  
<sup>5</sup> ... will say, 'I belong to the LORD'**

**And so here ... we see a movement from  
Reformation ... to Revival.**

**And ... the intervention of God ... is ongoing ...  
today.**

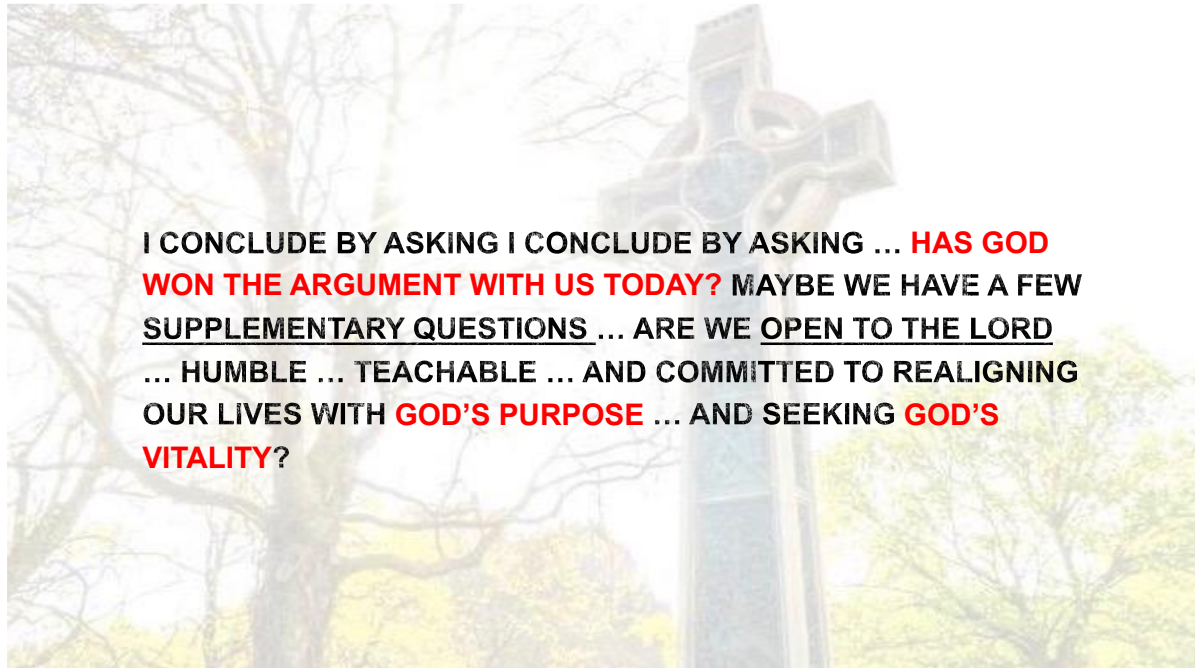
You see, the Lord came down ... into the experience of the Jewish exiles many years ago ... and the same Lord ... will come down into our lives today.



God proves all over again ... he is real ... and not because of what we deserve ... but because of who God is.

I conclude by asking ... has God won the argument with us today? Maybe we have a few supplementary questions ... are we open to the Lord ... humble ... teachable ... and committed to

realigning our lives with God's purpose ... and seeking God's vitality?



If so '**Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda**  
**the church reformed, always reforming'**

**AMEN**