

Arise and shine

Reading and teaching Isaiah

Dave Williams

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A. Introduction

The aim of this book is to introduce readers to one of the most significant and beautiful books of the Old Testament. It started life as a set of devotions for use during Lent. It may be that you would like to pick those up during Lent but that is not necessary, however I would encourage you to engage with Isaiah over a fixed consecutive period of time.

You will find the book helpful if you are wishing to dig deeper into the Old Testament whether for personal study or as preparation for teaching Isaiah to others. We begin with some overview sections, first of all an introduction to the prophecy offering historical context and dealing with questions about authorship and structure. There's a chapter looking at how to break down the book for teaching and preaching. I've also taken time to pick up on some of the big themes that Isaiah presents. How does Isaiah fit into Biblical Theology? What does the prophecy say about the Triune God? What does it tell us about The Atonement.

The main body of the book is the "forty days in Isaiah", the set of devotionals. Whilst in quite a few of these, we dig in with some verse by verse exposition, this is not intended as a commentary. This means that pacing and depth will vary from day by day. The aim of each devotion is to introduce you to a specific passage (of varying lengths) before taking you to just one or two phrases to meditate on in order to encourage personal spiritual growth and prayer.

Part 1 Introduction and Overview

B. An introduction to the book of Isaiah

Backdrop

The setting for the book of Isaiah is the reigns of four kings of Judah, Uzziah, Ahaz, Jotham and Hezekiah. The kingdom of Israel had split into two after Solomon's death. Israel in the north was the larger, with most of the tribes joining and also the more prosperous due to its situation on the major trade routes of the fertile crescent. Judah, the smaller kingdom was less prosperous but stayed with the descendants of David which gave it greater political stability and was also home to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Uzziah reigned from around about 783-742 BC.¹ It is likely, noting Isaiah 6, that the prophet's ministry really began to take off in the last days of his reign and under his successors. During that period of time, the northern kingdom came under attack from the Assyrians and would fall in 701BC. The southern kingdom would withstand the Assyrians but at great cost.

The two kings who bookend Isaiah's ministry, Uzziah and Hezekiah are recognised by Scripture as comparatively godly in relation to the other kings. They seek to follow David's example and also demonstrate wisdom so that the kingdom prospers. However, both are undone by their own hubris. Uzziah seeks to go into the temple to offer sacrifices, usurping the role of the priests. He ends his life as a leper having been struck down by God. That's the backdrop to Isaiah's vision in chapter 6 of the exalted Lord in the Temple. Uzziah had been proven unclean despite his denials whereas, greeted with the Lord's manifest presence, Isaiah immediately recognises his own uncleanness.

Hezekiah's undoing is recorded in Isaiah 36-38. He seeks extra time to live. He is given those extra years but at cost. In his pride, he shows off the wealth of Jerusalem to Babylonian visitors so that the city rises up their radar.

Authorship

Isaiah is a priest who serves in the temple (Isaiah 6:1). Whether or not the full prophecy was written by that same prophet has been questioned by modern scholarship. There are two reasons for the questioning. First, there is the change of focus to a detailed and positive description of life post exile in a restored land which seems to have an immediacy to it. Secondly, Isaiah even goes so far as to name key historical figures who lived long after his lifetime, specifically Cyrus the Great. So, it has been suggested that there were at least two, if not three prophets whose words were brought together in the one book.

I do not think that the detail we find in the book should put us off the assumption that there was a single author. We surely trust in God's ability to know and reveal the detail of what is to come. Some think that the naming of Cyrus stands out and doesn't quite fit with the genre and ask why people were not taken up with the name prior to the emperor's accession to the throne. It is possible that the specific name was edited in later because the prophecy clearly referred to him. However, again I see no reason why a name, potentially common to that part of the world shouldn't appear and why people might not spot the significance until later.

¹ [Uzziah | king of Judah | Britannica](#)

We do know that the prophets did work with scribes and editors. We know this because of the explicit reference to Baruch in Jeremiah. So it is possible that the book of Isaiah has undergone some editing, taking individual oral oracles and arranging them intentionally in an order to develop a particular argument

Structure

Although over neat divisions are perhaps risky, we can suggest a rough structure of the book as follows

1. Introduction to the Prophecy and its main themes (ch 1-6)
2. Coming judgement (ch 7-35)
3. Historical interlude – is Hezekiah the saviour? (ch 36-39)
4. Future hope centred on a suffering servant (ch 40-66).

Style

Much of the book follows Hebrew poetry in style. Indeed, it is likely that the prophets sung their oracles. Ezekiel was belittled as a singer of sad love songs. The poetic utterances are framed at times by introductory narrative which provides context.

The message of the book

Isaiah is known for four things

1. His vision of the high and exalted Lord
2. Prophecies of coming judgement
3. Prophetic messages that clearly see their fulfilment in Christ, including some that directly relate to Christmas and Easter
4. Prophecies that seem to look further forward still and point to the New Creation.

It is likely that even those prophecies that look further forward had an immediate fulfilment at that time but awaited their full and final fulfilment in Christ. Similarly, even those prophecies that relate most directly to Isaiah's day and the immediate aftermath can be applied through Christ to our situation now.

The themes listed above combine to offer a message of hope. Yes, judgement is coming for sin but that judgement will also serve to purify and refine. Salvation will come through the promised suffering servant who is Emmanuel, God with us. This means that we can look forward to ultimate fulfilment in a new creation where God is manifestly present to reign.

C. Breaking Isaiah down

The book of Isaiah is usually seen as dividing into two parts with the main break at Isaiah 40, chapters 36-39 can then be seen as a narrative interlude between the two parts. Those who argue for two authors usually believe that the majority of the second part was written either during or immediately post exile. The later chapters focus much more on hope and give more detail about what return and restoration look like. Some people have suggested that chapters 56-66 were written by a third author.

My view remains that the book is best understood as coming from one single, pre-exile prophet whom God enabled to see the future in detail and with precision. However, it may well have been structured and ordered into its final form by an editor. Within those major divisions, we may identify a number of further subsections as follows.

Called to a stubborn and rebellious people ch 1-6

The first six chapters introduce us to the prophet and his call to prophesy during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (1:1). His calling is in response to a vision of the Lord's greatness and holiness (6:1-7) and so Isaiah, experiencing forgiveness and cleansing is available and ready to be sent (6:6-8).

However, the mission is not an easy one. The recipients are difficult, stubborn, rebellious and unfaithful to God (1:2-9). God makes it clear that they will not be willing listeners, in fact he will harden their hearts and make them unable to perceive and understand (6:9-10). They will in effect become like their unseeing, unhearing, silent idols and so devoted to destruction with them (6:11-13). So, the message is a difficult one because it is about coming judgement (3:1-4:1). However, even in these dark passages we find light, throughout the book, there is the promise of a remnant (6:13) and restoration (4:2-6).

Immanuel (ch7-12)

The next section focuses in on Isaiah's interactions with Ahaz. At this stage Israel is attempting to form an alliance with Syria against Judah, although in reality, it is a takeover by Syria. This is a source of discouragement for Ahaz (7:1-2). God sends Isaiah to reassure the king that this will not happen and to offer a sign. Ahaz in a show of false piety refuses the sign but God still gives him the sign (7:3-14). The sign is of a coming ruler, born to a young woman (7:14). The prophecy will have immediate fulfilment and will be proof that a greater threat, Assyria is coming (ch 8). However, the description of this coming child as the mighty God and prince of peace whose rule is everlasting points to one greater, at that time still to come and was recognised by the Gospel writers as pointing to Jesus (7:6-7).

This means that even though Assyria is to be feared, she holds power on a temporary basis, from God and only for his purposes (ch10). She too will be judged. God will deal with all sin and evil and so his chosen one will usher in a reign of peace and righteousness (ch11-12)

Judgement on the nations (ch 13-23)

We are next treated to a whistlestop tour of the cities and nations around Israel, the powers and power brokers of Isaiah's day. These were the nations that Judah both feared and trusted, seeking to build alliances with them for mutual protection. However, they were to be neither feared nor trusted. These powers had become proud but God would judge and humble them. The shock comes

in chapter 22, when Jerusalem herself is named among the proud, pagan cities. Instead of being distinctive, a light to the nations, Jerusalem and Judah had become just like the Gentiles.

Complete judgement (ch 24 -35)

God will bring judgement on the whole earth, no-one is found innocent (ch 24). God's complete victory over evil includes the destruction of death itself (25:7-8). This is important because God's people hoped to cheat death by negotiating with it, or at least with those enemies they thought could bring death on them (28:14-15). Judah are warned against the folly and danger of making human alliances instead of trusting God (ch30-31).

Instead of fearing, or putting their trust in others, the people should trust in God alone. He is the one who will bring back his people from exile and even gather the nations to himself. We begin to see echoes of Exodus language as Isaiah looks back in history for potential comparisons. The return will be like the journey across the desert. God will lead the people as he did out of Egypt and so, the desert will not be able to contain itself and will join in the song of deliverance, blooming with beauty and fertility to greet the true king.

Interlude ch 36-39

In chapter 36 -38, the Assyrian King Sennacherib launches his assault on Judah during Hezekiah's reign, sacking the city of Lachish and besieging Jerusalem. He is however, forced to turn back due to threats closer to home and never completes his conquest. Isaiah makes it clear that this is because of God's sovereign will and Hezekiah's intercession. God even grants the king a reprieve on illness and death. Sadly, Hezekiah fails to remember God's hand in things and seeks an alliance with Babylon, opening up his city to their enjoys. God says that this will bring judgement on the people.

Comfort through God's servant ch 40-53

The curtain opens on the second half of Isaiah with the announcement of comfort. God declares forgiveness for sin and the end to Jerusalem's troubles. God is faithful unlike frail human and false idols (ch 40. He will lead the people back from exile, they will be kept safe through fire and flood just as with the first exodus (43:1-7).

Rescue will come through YHWH's chosen servant, one who will act with gentleness and mercy (42:1-3). Who is this servant? Well, Israel herself was meant to be God's servant (44:21), however, she failed in her mission (49:1-4). So other servants are offered, possibly the prophet himself as the one commissioned with God's Word and even Cyrus, the Gentile emperor who arranged for God's people to return to Jerusalem (45:1). Each of these do serve God's purposes, just as Assyria and Babylon had.

However, Isaiah points to a more significant servant. Isaiah 53 takes us to the one who suffers in our place, for our sin and is rewarded with glory and an eternal reign. Jesus is the suffering servant who "was pierced for our transgressions" and in his resurrection "brings many sons to glory."

Hope ch 54-66

Through Christ, true and lasting hope comes. In him, God can invite weary, hungry suffering people to find peace, rest and refreshment (55:1-5). The promises centre on a restored city and a restored temple (the New Testament point to these as the church with Christ at the centre). People from all backgrounds and without discrimination or barriers will be drawn to God's house of prayer (ch 56).

God's people are invited to awake, rise up and shine in the light of God's glory because deliverance has come (ch 60). This hope is comparable to the Jubilee Year when captives were freed and debts cancelled. God's Spirit is on Christ to bring healing and freedom (61:1-3). There will be a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth (65:17).

D. Biblical Theology and Isaiah

Biblical Theology helps us to see God's big story of redemption unfolding on the pages of Scripture. There are a couple of aspects to this. First of all, authors such as Graeme Goldsworthy and Christopher Wright have identified three themes running through Scripture.² We can talk about

1. God
2. People
3. Land

The story that the Bible tells us the story of God's people living in God's land, under God's reign and rule under his blessing. The other aspects tie into these themes as well as to each other. The story presents a picture of creation and de-creation, exile, exodus and return and death and resurrection. These images give us different insights into what God is doing. They seem cyclical, death and resurrection or exile and return are repeated through the Old Testament. However, there is linear progression, the cycle does not go on for ever. So, we also talk about the story being comedy rather than tragedy. There is a goal or ending in sight and the ending is a happy one.

Let's have a look at how those themes unfold in Isaiah.

God, People and land

The book of Isaiah is a prophecy to and concerning God's people. Whilst they are now divided into two nations, Israel or Ephraim in the north and Judah in the South and although they are rebellious, they are still meant to be God's people, his children worshipping and serving him (1:1-4). However, in reality, they are often seen to be far from him. They identify more with the Gentiles, those who are far off from God. This is forcibly brought home to us when we see Jerusalem listed among the pagan, gentile cities which are subject to judgement (ch22). The consequence is that instead of God speaking through his own people in their own language, he will speak through foreigners and strangers (28:11-12).

Isaiah therefore asks the question "What does it really mean to be the people of God?" The answer is to do with true worship and honour of God. Therefore, the label "God's people" cannot be applied to every descendant of Abraham and Jacob indiscriminately. God's true people are a remnant or stump of survivors who continue to honour him when those around turn their backs on him (6:13). To be part of God's people is to love and seek righteousness, it is to be filled with his Holy Spirit (11:2, 42:1). In fact, before we can consider including others, we must narrow down that definition further from the remnant to one person, the one who is God's righteous king (11:1) and also his suffering servant. This servant king stands in the place of the people bearing their sin, shame and judgement (ch 53).

They are in the land and so the prophecies consider the fate of this land. Hence if the Torah described how God's people were meant to live in the land under his rule and reign, prophets like Isaiah show what happen when they fail to do so. For example, in Deuteronomy 7, the people are told that when they go into the land, they are to devote the idols they find to destruction so that the land is not polluted by them. Instead, God's people have filled the land with idolatry and become like their idols. The polluted land needs purification and the fate of the people is tied up with the fate of the land (6:9-12). Notice that the whole earth is God's place, God's land so that the land of Israel at

² Wright, Christopher JH, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (IVP, Nottingham: 2004), 19.

representatively for it. This means at times there appears to be a blurring of distinctions. Is the description of a future paradise pointing us just to Israel after the return from exile (ch 11) or to a future new creation? Is the description of destruction upon the earth speaking of the land of Canaan or the whole planet (ch24).

Throughout all of this, it would be tempting to see God as weak, distant and failing. Not so, argues Isaiah. God is the high and exalted one, his temple little more than footstool. If his people will not worship him, that does not mean he is devoid of honour and glory, the angelical beings will praise him and declare him holy. God is the one who acts. He is the one who judges. The people should fear him not the immediate enemies around and about (6:1-7). Not only that but it is God who acts, to save, giving signs (ch 7) raising up a good and righteous king (11:1-2) , speaking comfort (40:1) sending and upholding his servant (40:2) and even raising up Gentile rulers to do his bidding in salvation and restoration as much as in judgement (44:25,45:1).

Death and Resurrection

We might suggest that creation, de-creation and recreation along with exile and return are aspects of death and resurrection. The theme of dying and death leading to rising and life is stitched into the fabric of the Old Testament and so, when Jesus shows the disciples on the Emmaus Road how the Scriptures point to him, it is probably not that he picks out a few proof texts. Rather, he will have been showing how the whole pattern of the story points to the one who will die and rise. Before Christ, people experienced mini deaths and mini resurrections pointing to the great death and resurrection to come. We may also then say that we experience mini death and resurrection moments that point us back to his death and resurrection as well as forward to the great resurrection day to come. I suspect that when Jesus started with Moses and worked his way through the Law and Prophets, he would have settled for quite some time in Isaiah, not just because it contains so many individual predictions but because it is a book about death and resurrection.

So the book is most obviously and overtly about exile. We can see how exile is a type of death from the way in which Genesis 3 ends with Adam and Eve exiled from Eden. Just as Adam and Eve were subject to death, separated from the Tree of Life, sent into exile, so too would the people be exiled. Those in the north would be removed to Assyria and those in the south to Babylon (6:11; 39:5-7). The land would be depopulated but this also speaks of de-creation. Cultivated parts of the land are taken over with brambles and the country becomes barren (ch5; 7:23-25). This is a reversal of the mandate to fill and subdue.

There is death and resurrection because Israel is under the just penalty of God's wrath, the people will die with their idols (6:7-12). However, resurrection is to follow. God's light will shine where there was darkness (9:2), the people are called to arise, to shine (60:1). This is possible because the servant comes as their representative, taking their place and dying, yet with that paradoxical hope of many days and offspring ahead (ch53). Exile will be followed by return, a mirroring of the Exodus journey through fire and water (ch 35; ch 43). God will draw the people back and even the nations to himself on Mount Zion (2:2-5;11:10-11) There is a paradise new creation with Edenic qualities to look forward to (ch 11).

Deep comedy

There are two main genres of Greek and Shakespearean plays. A tragedy is a story that may begin well and have lighter moments throughout but ultimately ends in disaster and death. A comedy in

contrast is not to do with stand up and jokes but indicates a happy ending with fortunes restored, a hero victorious and life better at the end than the beginning.

Isaiah belongs in the comedy category. There is much to lament and many warnings to heed but stitched through the book are little glimmers of hope. Israel will go through de-creation, death and exile. However, there is a turning point, the coming of the suffering servant (Isaiah 40 onwards) that brings comfort and hope. This is the basis for the promise of new life, of righteousness, of peace and prosperity. The final chapters of the book are dominated by this positive theme of light, life and hope. Isaiah is ultimately good news because it points to Christ. It speaks the Gospel.

E. The Trinity in Isaiah

If we want to discover what it means to believe in the Triune God, then the clear revelation of this truth that there is one God in three persons is found in the New Testament, especially but not exclusively in John's Gospel. However significant foundations for this revelation were already laid in the Old Testament and that is particularly true of Isaiah.

Isaiah places an emphasis on the one true God who is high and exalted, incomparable and without rival (6:1-7; 40:9-26). He is the God who will not share his throne or give his glory to another (42:8). We start with the oneness of God, Isaiah's view of worship is emphatically monotheist.

This God is the one who sends. If, John will point us to the Father who sends his Son in human flesh, Isaiah points us to Yahweh sending his servant (42:1). This servant is human, he comes to serve and to suffer so that he willingly bears God's wrath and receives the penalty for sin that we deserve (53). He is not just a servant though, he is a judge, a ruler, a king who is just and righteous (11:1), he is Immanuel, God with us (7:14):

More than that, there is at least the hint in the context where God declares that he will not share his glory with a rival and in the promise that the suffering servant will prosper for eternity that the servant somehow does get to share in God's glory. Whilst God sends a deliverer, we also see that he is himself the one coming as deliverer (4:1-5). The righteous and just king is more than an earthly ruler but is described as mighty God and everlasting father, the ruler of a boundless kingdom (9:6-7). All of this at least begins to point us to one who is at the same time God and man. There is a second person in the Godhead but without any breach in the oneness of that Godhead.

Then throughout Isaiah, there is constant reference to the Spirit of God. This is primarily linked to God's anointed or appointed king and servant. So, God's Spirit is a spirit of righteousness, justice, wisdom and understanding (11:2). The Spirit will be "poured out from on high" (32:15; 44:3), pointing to Pentecost. The Spirit will gather God's people (34:16). The Spirit is immeasurable and incomparable (40:13). The Spirit will rest upon the servant (42:1). God sends his spirit (48:16). The Spirit of God is on the speaker of Isaiah 61 (who we discover in the New Testament is Jesus, ushering in a year of Jubilee freedom and healing).

So, throughout Isaiah, we see the Triune, one God in three persons at work bringing judgement, preserving the remnant and ushering in renewal and restoration.

F. The atonement in Isaiah

At the heart of Isaiah's message is the promise that God will deal with the problem of evil, sin, rebellion and idolatry in a way that enables him to be reconciled to his people, to bring about new life and indeed a new creation.

Exile can be seen as a form of death, so that when Adam and Eve are punished with death, it is first expressed as exile from Eden whilst retribution for the death of Abel means that Cain is exiled from the land. Israel are therefore offered life and blessing in the land if they obey God or death and curse if they sin. This curse or death is characterised by exile to Assyria, Babylon and Persia. The nation dies. The return may therefore be seen as a form of resurrection and so, Isaiah 35 portrays this new life as blossom springing up to greet the returning exiles as they cross the desert.

Isaiah 40:1-2 tells us that the price or penalty for Jerusalem's sin is paid, twice over and this is why God is able to speak words of comfort to the city. Something has happened that has changed the situation on the ground. The question remains as to by who and by how this price is paid.

Isaiah 53 offers the fullest account of atonement in the Old Testament. Contemporary theologians debate the nature of atonement and whether or not Christ's death was primarily a demonstration of love, example to follow or surprising victory over evil. We can see all of those themes at work in Jesus' death but often theologians have excluded the crucial and central theme, the one we find here in this chapter.

In Isaiah 53, we are introduced to one who suffers horribly. He is mocked, beaten, wounded, crushed. However Isaiah wishes to emphasise the following:

- That he is innocent but suffers ("pierced" and "bruised") on behalf of us. We are healed, or forgiven through his wounds (v4-6).
- That it is God's purpose and will to crush him. The emphasis is not on God taking delight in violence but that the Father is active in bringing the effects of judgement on The Son. The son is broken (v10a).
- That the consequences are that many receive righteousness (are justified) through this one's obedient act and are adopted into the saviour's family (v10b-11).

In other words, Isaiah 53 points pretty explicitly to two related, crucial and often neglected doctrines. It points to Penal Substitutionary atonement.

- Penal: There is punishment, a penalty is paid.
- Substitutionary: Someone (Christ) steps in to receive that penalty on behalf of others (us).
- Atonement: We are reconciled to God (at-one-ment).

We also see the flow of the transaction the other way. If Christ takes on my guilt, shame, judgement and shame, then I receive his righteousness so that I am justified by faith.

G. Eschatology and Isaiah

Isaiah frequently employs imagery that looks back to Eden to envisage an ideal world where there is peace and harmony not just between humans but also between creatures. A classic and well known example of this would be 11:6-9 where famously, lions, wolves, leopards, lambs and calves can live side by side and small children are in no danger from serpents.

The imagery there might be taken as symbolic, to emphasis what it will mean for judgement to be over when God's people return to the lamb. Big beasts in prophecy tend to represent empires and powers. So, we might see the prophecy as pointing first to the way in which powerful men and empires will lose their power and no longer be a threat.

Similarly, when we come towards the end of Isaiah, we have the image of a renewed Jerusalem (ch62) that is safe and secure from attack, not shutting her gates at night. The city no longer needs the sun because God himself is present to reign. Isaiah goes on from there to describe a new creation, a new heavens and a new earth (ch 65-66).

Again, we might on one level see these prophecies as giving us a picture of what awaits repentant and restored Israel. Some Biblical scholars have suggested that world ending language such as the fall of stars and planets is meant to use cosmic language to emphasise how earth shattering events here and now will be. God's people will experience their world turned upside down. Perhaps then, the language of new creation at the end of Isaiah fulfils a similar function. If certain events seem to be world ending, then perhaps we are meant to see post exile Judea and Jerusalem as a new beginning, a fresh start. New Creation language would certainly evoke that sense of newness well.

Except for one thing. If Isaiah was using apocalyptic language here to describe the future world to come, then you would expect him also to use such language to describe the coming judgement, just as you find Daniel, or even John in Revelation doing. He doesn't. It is so very clear that when he talks about Israel's judgement that he is doing so. His language is restrained and very much localised.

Further clues that Isaiah has something more and greater in mind are provided when we realise that this new creation is tied into the coming of the anointed servant. If this anointed one is not just a prince of peace but everlasting, mighty God even then this points to no mere mortal. Then we discover that he is the one able to make atonement through his own death and later vindication, at least suggesting resurrection. God's chosen servant will do more than bring the exile's grandchildren home (ch 53).

So, it should be no surprise to see the New Testament drawing on the language of Isaiah, not just to tell us about the incarnation and crucifixion but to point us forward to a greater day to come. Isaiah prophesies both Christ's first coming and second coming. The language of new Jerusalem and new creation are picked up in the last few chapters of Revelation bringing the curtain down on God's big story of redemption.

Isaiah may start local with a focus on the immediate land, people and near future but his horizon expands until he speaks about the whole of creation and looks forward into eternity.

H. Preaching Isaiah

Isaiah is an incredible book, it is often described as “the Gospel in the Old Testament” and there are so many quotations and citations from it in the New Testament. We are familiar with those passages because they often are read at Christmas and Easter. Isaiah is the one who prophesies the virgin birth and promises that the Messiah will be more than an ordinary human being but rather Immanuel, the mighty and eternal God, with us. Isaiah shows us how this messiah will save us by bearing our punishment, “He was pierced for our transgressions”. We go to Isaiah when seeking to encourage mission (think “here am I, send me). It’s here that we find the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. Isaiah literally has everything, missiology, incarnation, atonement and eschatology. Yet, the prospect of preaching the book is a daunting one, primarily because of its sheer size. How can we take a congregation through such a large book without it overwhelming and exhausting preacher and congregation alike?

Well, one option is to try and preach through the whole book, straight through. You could break it down roughly along chapter lines, though you may want to slow down a little and focus in on the detail of a few short passages, whilst at times, it may sense to preach on several chapters together. For example, I’ve divided the book up into 40 devotions.

The reason that I went for 40 devotions or expositions was that we worked through Isaiah during Lent, in the run up to Easter. This enabled us to encourage the church family to work through the book in slow time over the build up period. Forty days enables you to cover the week days (Monday to Saturday) during Lent, with Sunday focused on listening to and thinking through a sermon. We then selected 4 examples from the book to preach on the Sundays. These were:

1. Isaiah 6 “We become like our idols”
2. Isaiah 11 “Something new”
3. Isaiah 40 “Comfort”
4. Isaiah 53 “Pierced for our transgressions”

It would have been possible to fit in a 5th sermon but our practice is to include an all age service each month. I probably would have looked at something like Isaiah 62 if we had that opportunity. Alongside the Sunday sermons and daily devotionals, we also looked at a different chapter of Isaiah in our midweek life groups. The aim was to encourage the church to be reading and learning from the book over an extended period. This might provide an alternative way of ensuring that the whole book is covered in a short period of time. If you choose to preach through the whole book, then you might want to take a few breaks along the way. An obvious break point would be before Isaiah 40.

Alternatively you could preach through quite large sections, giving an overview of what is happening in each part. If so, I would follow the contours of the book preaching as follows:

1. Called to a stubborn and rebellious people ch 1-6
2. Immanuel ch7-12
3. Judgement on the nations ch 13-23
4. Complete judgement ch 24 -35
5. Intercession ch 36-39
6. Comfort through God’s servant ch 40-53
7. Hope ch 54-66

Another approach to preaching through Isaiah would be to forego the traditional approach of working through the book chapter by chapter and instead pick up on some of the big themes. These might include:

1. Idolatry and unfaithfulness
2. Judgement, exile and death
3. Christ, the promised king
4. Christ as servant
5. Atonement and Redemption
6. The new Exodus
7. The Holy Spirit
8. New Creation

However you choose to approach it, I'd encourage you strongly to seize the opportunity to preach from Isaiah you and the congregation will find it rewarding.

Part 2: Forty Days in Isaiah

A devotional workbook

1. What do you want to see?

Many Christians use the 40 days in the lead up to Easter as an opportunity for prayer, fasting and reflection in order to grow their love for the Gospel. The season is known as Lent. I belong to a less liturgical strand of Christianity so I don't tend to follow church calendars. There is nothing in Scripture that requires us to observe Lent, Advent or any other such dates and seasons in the church calendar. However, marking time to pause and reflect can be helpful.

So, I'm planning to provide 40 reflections or meditations working through the book of Isaiah. These could be followed through during Lent or at any time of your choosing. Today we begin with the introductory words:

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah

The book details the vision, or perhaps a series of visions that God gave to Isaiah a priest serving in the Temple, 700 years before Jesus came. God showed him what he was going to do. This included the coming judgment and destruction of Israel and Judah but Isaiah also got to see future, better days, a return to the land from exile and better still a future, righteous king who would reign on David's throne. In fact, Isaiah even gets to see further still and catch a glimpse of a coming new creation where sin and suffering are banished for ever.

What is it that you would like to see? If God were to show you one thing then what is it that you need most of all. There may be specific things that you want him to show you in the coming weeks and there may also be things that he specifically has to say to you.

I am reminded of the inscription on the lectern in Oak Hill College chapel which quotes the Greeks who came to the Passover and said to Phillip

"Sir we would see Jesus"

Our greatest need is to see Jesus, to have a fresh vision of who he is, his beauty, his glory, his majesty, his faithfulness, his love:

In the morning when I rise
In the morning when I rise
In the morning when I rise
Give me Jesus

Give me Jesus
Oh give me Jesus
You can have all this world
Oh give me Jesus

When I am alone
Oh, when I am alone
And when I am alone
Give me Jesus

Give me Jesus
Give me Jesus

You can have all this world

Give me Jesus

Give me Jesus, give me Jesus

Give me Jesus, 'cause it's all I need, give me Jesus

2. Listen up!

God spoke to and through the prophet Isaiah about 700 years before Jesus came and so over 2700 years ago. Yet those words spoken millennia ago still resonate powerfully today. Ultimately, it is a message of hope as Isaiah points to Jesus but he had many tough things to say too. The question today as back then is whether or not we will listen.

Read Isaiah 1:1-20

God addresses his words through Isaiah not immediately and directly to the people of Israel but about them to the heavens and the earth **(v1)**. This is because he is about to bring a complaint or charge against the people. They have proved deaf to his voice and so, as in a courtroom, god in effect calls on creation as the double witness to what he has to say.

God's complaint is of stubborn rebellion. Even oxen and donkeys, sometimes represented as similarly stubborn and stiff necked know and obey their owner but Israel pays no attention to God. Israel is presented as evil, a rebel but also sick. This sickness has started with the head where rot spreads from. The leaders have turned from God but there is a heart sickness too. This speaks of selfish wills and a lack of love for God **(v3-5)**.

The sickness spreads to the land. The prophet speaks of desolation, perhaps partly describing some of the things he will see in his own day as the northern kingdom falls to Assyria but also looking ahead to see the future state of the whole land. Israel is affected in everyway by sin, just as we talk about Total Depravity to describe the way in which sin affects every aspect of our lives. It is only god's mercy that spares them from a worse judgement **(v6-10)**.

Israel's attempts to negotiate with God, to use worship and sacrifices to buy him off prove ineffective. God isn't interested in sacrifices, he is looking for something different, clean or pure hearts, wills that obey God, people who love him. So God offers a new invitation, to reason with him but this is a negotiation with a difference because it is one sided. They have nothing to offer and so, instead they must receive what God offers. They come with their sin stained lives and God offers to clean them up. Clothes bloodstained through murderous actions can be washed white like snow and wool. However, even in the face of grace, the people remain stubborn and unrepentant **(v11-20)**.

Ponder

Meditate on verse 2:

"The Lord has spoken."

1. What is God saying to us as his church right now? What is he saying to you?
2. If creation were to act as a witness, what would it say about us? What would it say about you?

Meditate on verse 18

"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."

Lord God, we are sorry that we have so often failed to listen to your voice. Help us to hear you when you speak. Thank you for your love, mercy and forgiveness. Thank you that you have washed away my sin.

3. Unfaithful

Warning, today's reading will contain strong language from the start. We are used to a kind of gentle, nice respectability to our Christianity but the prophets were prepared to deal directly with root problems and unashamedly use shocking language to get their point across.

Read Isaiah 1:21-31

Israel is compared to a prostitute. Sexual immorality is often used as a metaphor for spiritual unfaithfulness in the Old Testament, a reminder that God's people were meant to be his faithful bride. There has been a terrible exchange, silver for dross, righteousness for unrighteousness. If the nation have entered into the oldest profession then they are not very good at the business side, they've got a poor deal.

Theft and bribery run through society from top to bottom. When the elite participate in corruption this also results on oppression and abuse. There is a lack of justice and the vulnerable in society suffer most.

God will see that justice happens. The offence is first and foremost against him, so he will seek vengeance. Those who were meant to represent him have become his enemies. Judgement though is also about refining and restoration. If they have acquired dross, this will be burnt up so that silver and gold will be refined. God will restore true and faithful leaders and judges to positions of authority. The capital City Jerusalem will be renamed to emphasise the restoration of righteousness. Redemption is promised speaking of things that have been sold off to pay debts being bought back. However, those who continue to resist will face punishment.

Ponder

Meditate on these words from verse 26

"You shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city."

1. If God's people, the church are now the New Jerusalem, then what does it mean for us to be known as "the city of righteousness"?
2. What does it mean for us to be faithful?

Lord God we are sorry that we too often have been unfaithful to you. Even though you have been faithful to us and kept your promises, we have too often doubted them, too often looked elsewhere for satisfaction. Thank you for your redemption that buys us back, justifies us and restores us. Help us to faithfully cling to Christ.

4. Established

We tend to associate the early stages of Isaiah with gloom and judgement. However, right from the start, warnings of judgement are framed by promises of hope.

Read Isaiah 2:1-5

If the city of Jerusalem and the Temple there faces imminent destruction, this will not be a permanent state of affairs. God promises that a new Jerusalem will arise from the ashes. This new city, also known as Zion will be established in the latter/last/end days. God will raise up the mountain on which it sits to become the highest mountain. This points to its prominence as a focal point and also to safety and security there,

People will be drawn to God's holy mountain. It will be a place of praise, worship and prayer. The nations will be drawn there, the good news is not just for one ethnic group. It will be a place of learning as people go to be taught God's Word. There under God's rule, people will live in his presence and grow in righteousness as they learn to obey his law. The Law will go out from Zion to all the world, so that the whole creation will be under God's reign. The creation mandate to fill and subdue the earth will be fulfilled.

It will be a place of righteousness and justice. God will judge. This means that it will also be a place of peace because God will bring an end to conflict.

Ponder

Meditate on these words

"that he may teach us his ways"

"He will judge"

"neither shall they learn war anymore"

1. What is God teaching you right now?
2. What does God find as he searches and judges you?
3. What does lasting peace look like in your life, home, community, church?

Father God, we come to you in the name of Jesus thankful for the great hope that we have in him. Thank you that you promise a day when peace will reign and your name will be exalted. Help us to work for peace in our world now. We know that the greatest need people have is peace with you. Help us to point people to Jesus, the prince of peace.

5. "Come let us walk"

Take a moment to pause and mediate on these words

come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.

Isaiah 2:5

This is an invitation to the people of Israel and comes in the light of God's promise that he will re-establish Zion as the place where he reigns "with justice and peace. It is also an invitation that comes, because as the chapter goes on to say, the people have not been walking with God but have turned away from him and wandered.

The language of "walking" is used throughout the Old Testament to describe life style. You walk with or before God indicating a life that follows his ways, that intimately sticks close to him and that is in full view of him so that you are accountable to him. To walk "in his light" is to live under the guidance of his Word.

1. How is your walk with God?
2. Are you inviting others to join you in that walk?

Teach us your ways your Lord. Help us to live lives that are a pleasing fragrance to you. Help us to share the good news about your with others so that they may learn to walk with you.

6. Compromised

We now find out why it is that God must act to restore and renew his holy city through refining judgement and why God's people need to learn again what it means to walk in the light of God.

Read Isaiah 2:6-22

The people's rejection of Yahweh is seen in the way that they have looked for resources, wealth, influence, power outside of Israel. They have brought gold and silver into the land but with those precious commodities has come less welcome things. Their alliances and partnerships with other peoples have aligned them with their practices, snares and addictions whether that's Philistine fortune telling and sorcery or the idols of other nations **(v6-8)**.

They have become proud but it is a false pride because they are dependent upon others and because all the wealth and security offers no protection against God's judgement. When the day of judgement comes, they will be found cowering and hiding. Before there is a raising up in resurrection, there will be a bringing down in death. They will be humbled **(v9-17)**.

God's purpose in humbling them is so that their confidence in and dependence on idols will be broken. Idols will be destroyed or forsaken as the people realise how worthless and useless they are. Ultimately, this idolatrous worship involves trust in and fear of other humans and it is this, most of all that the people are called away from **(v18-22)**.

Ponder

Meditate on these words from verse 19

"the terror of the LORD"

"the splendour of his majesty"

1. What does it mean for you to fear God?
2. What does God's majesty and splendour mean to you?

Help us to fear you more than man Lord. Help us to put your trust in you and not in others or in the resources we get from them.

7. Chaotic folly

What does judgement look like? What would judgement on a church, a community, a nation?

Read Isaiah chapter 3:1-4:1

Judgement for Israel and Judah involves the stripping away of all of their resources and means of support including food supplies. It then leads to the removal of leaders and protectors. The wise, experienced and strong are replaced with the inexperienced who lack wisdom and character, they will be led by boys instead of men (v1-4).

Next, there will be a break down of order and structure in society. People will turn against one another leading to injustice. There will be a loss of respect and trust. People will abdicate responsibility (v5-7).

They have brought all this on themselves (v8). God's judgement means that those who are truly righteous have nothing to fear because people will experience the fruit of their own actions but this is terrible news for the wicked because their own evil actions will be returned upon them (v9-12).

If they are their own accusers and witnesses, it is God alone who judges. God finds the people guilty. Earlier they were judged for idolatry, now for injustice. Because of this, punishment is coming (v13-17-4:1).

Ponder

Meditate on verse 26:

"her gates shall lament and mourn;"

1. What do we mourn over most, is it our experience of loss/suffering/hardship or the spiritual causes of it?
2. When was the last time you lamented over the suffering and destruction that sin causes?

Lord God, it breaks our hearts to see the affect of sin in our communities. We look at the broken homes and damaged lives and we cry out to you. Most of all, we lament knowing that the root is cause of greater sadness than the fruit. The ugly consequences remind us that sin itself is ugly. We kneel in repentance before you and seek your mercy.

8. Purification

Reading through the early chapters of Isaiah, it becomes clear that the coming “Day of the Lord” when judgement and punishment will be visited on Israel is not just about punishment, not just about the destruction of wickedness but rather it is about purification and restoration. The aim is that through this refining experience that the true people of God will be kept safe and become more holy.

Read Isaiah 4:2-6

God’s people are often likened to a tree, vine or branch. The tree is meant to be rooted, the branches firmly connected into the trunk in order to receive life giving sap and so be fruitful. There will be survivors from the coming judgement, and they will be like a fruitful branch **(v2)**. Isaiah is beginning to develop a theme of “remnant”, those who remain as well as being fruitful will be holy, set apart for God’s service and distinctive **(v3)**. The imagery of cleansing/washing is also used to describe God’s act of judgement. The people are dirty and bloodstained. The blood here may come from either sexual immorality or murder, both sins there pointing to spiritual unfaithfulness **(v4)**. Verse 5 promises God’s presence by day and night, a cloud that covers and protects like a canopy, a pillar of fire that gives light and guides. These images along with the description of booths or tents in the next verse are drawn direct from the Exodus and point to a second such exodus, a return from exile. Just as God was with his people as they came out of Egypt, so too he will be with those who survive judgement and keep them through their desert experience (even if the wilderness/desert is the land itself) bringing them to a place of provision, protection and fruitfulness in his presence **(v5-6)**.

Ponder

Meditate on these words (v2)

In that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious,

1. In what ways do we see God at work refining us?
2. What does it mean for the church to be beautiful and glorious?

Purify my heart

Let me be as gold and precious silver

Purify my heart

Let me be as gold, pure gold

Refiner's fire,

My heart's one desire

Is to be holy

Set apart for You, Lord

I choose to be holy

Set apart for You, my Master

Ready to do Your will

Purify my heart

Cleanse me from within

And make me holy

Purify my heart
Cleanse me from my sin, deep within

Refiner's fire
My heart's one desire
Is to be holy
Set apart for You, Lord
I choose to be holy
Set apart for You, my Master
Ready to do Your will

Refiner's fire
My heart's one desire
Is to be holy
Set apart for You, Lord
I choose to be holy
Set apart for You, my Master
Ready to do Your will

Songwriters: Brian Robert Doerksen

Purify My Heart lyrics © Mercy Vineyard Publishing, Vineyard Songs

9. The vineyard

Isaiah continues with the horticultural theme of vines, branches and vineyards. God is the farmer who plants a vineyard (Israel) but what does he find when he comes to it?

Read Isaiah 5:1-7

This section takes the form of a song, a love song with echoes of Song of Songs, Isaiah sings of the Lord as his beloved who plants then vineyard and puts walls around it before erecting a watch tower to keep the treasured, valued plants safe so that he can enjoy the wine they will produce. However, when he comes to inspect, he's disappointed. Somehow the vineyard has been contaminated, rather than sweet, carefully selected and cultivated grapes, he finds sour wild ones (**v1-2**). The voice changes now, so it is the Lord, the vineyard owner who speaks and asks the people to judge. This functions like Nathan's parable to David after his sin against Uriah and Bathsheba. The people are asked to give a verdict on the parable but in so doing will condemn themselves. God's point is that he has done everything for them with great love and patience. They are without excuse and time is running out. God is vindicated as just and compassionate (**v3-4**). So, God declares what he will do as the vineyard owner. He will remove the walls that protect the vineyard, after all it is already contaminated with wild grapes from outside. Without protection, the land will become overgrown and then useless wasteland. The people had allowed Israel to become polluted with the idolatry of surrounding nations, so God will withdraw his protection and allow the surrounding nations to take over (**v5-7**).

Ponder

Meditate on verse 7

he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry

1. What will God find when he looks at us his church?
2. What implications does this have for our local church/the churches in our country?
3. What should our response be?
4. Purify my heart
Let me be as gold and precious silver
Purify my heart
Let me be as gold, pure gold
5. Refiner's fire,
My heart's one desire
Is to be holy
Set apart for You, Lord
I choose to be holy
Set apart for You, my Master
Ready to do Your will
6. Purify my heart
Cleanse me from within
And make me holy
Purify my heart
Cleanse me from my sin, deep within

7. Refiner's fire
My heart's one desire
Is to be holy
Set apart for You, Lord
I choose to be holy
Set apart for You, my Master
Ready to do Your will
8. Refiner's fire
My heart's one desire
Is to be holy
Set apart for You, Lord
I choose to be holy
Set apart for You, my Master
Ready to do Your will
9. Source: [Musixmatch](#)
10. Songwriters: Brian Robert Doerksen
11. Purify My Heart Lyrics © Mercy Vineyard Publishing, Vineyard Songs (canada)

10. Woe

During the sermon on the mount, Jesus pronounces blessings that come with the kingdom of God. These are contrasted with a series of “woes” that he pronounces on those who stubbornly reject him and his message. We often see these blessings and woes as reflecting the contrast between blessing and curse in Deuteronomy. However, especially given that the language of “woe” is slightly different to that of “curse” we may do well to observe a connection with Isaiah. We have seen that there is a blessing coming for those who survive judgement, the righteous who are refined through suffering and oppression. However there are also woes.

Read Isaiah 5:8-30

Isaiah pronounces woes

To those who amass property and wealth for themselves at the expense of society, Their greed was self-defeating. They would end up alone, partly as a result of pricing everyone out and partly because of the coming judgement **(v8-10)**.

To those who get drunk from early in the day to late at night. They pursue hedonism but true happiness is found in the Lord and they neglect his ways. The people end up ignorant and so will go into exile as a hungry and destitute people because of the way that the drunkards have squandered everything and chosen foolishness. Exile and death beckon and the proud are humbled**(v11-17)**.

To those who draw others into sin through their lies and deceit. They see it as a game and do not care about the harm they do to others **(v18-19)**.

To those who call “evil good” and “good evil.” This is what Jesus will refer to as the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. People become so twisted that they end up with their morality back to front. They are unable therefore to hear God at all **(v20)**.

To those who are “wise in their own sight” in other words who are self righteous, self-centred and lacking in self-awareness. **(v21)**.

To those who through alcohol addiction are corrupted and unable to see or act justly **(v22-23)**.

So, judgement is coming. God will bring nations from far off against the land. First the fearsome Assyrians will lay waste to Israel in the north. Judah will survive this onslaught but that should not be cause for complacency because soon they too will be taken into captivity into Babylon **(v24-30)**.

Ponder

Meditate on these words from verse 16:

But the LORD of hosts is exalted^u in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness.

1. How is God being exalted in your life?
2. How is God showing himself holy and righteous in your church and in your community?

Lord God, we know that we deserve to hear these woes said over our lives. We repent from our own idolatry, our foolishness and our injustice. Please help us to be those who show love and concern for others, who honour what is good and who bring glory to your name.

11. We become like our idols

What is it that we most need in this uncertain and chaotic world? What is it that will change our perspective on everything? Isaiah ch 6 gives us some pointers!

Read Isaiah 6

Uzziah had been a successful king but in his later years lost his way becoming puffed up with pride. He sought to take the place of the High Priest and offer sacrifices in the temple. As a result, he was struck down with leprosy. It is striking that it is when he dies that God chooses to act by giving Isaiah an incredible vision of his glory. The vision is set in the Temple and I take this to mean that Isaiah was physically present, serving there, hence that he was likely to have been a priest. God is so vast and great that the Temple could not contain him, it was only enough for part of his clothing. We are meant, I think to see the ark of the covenant not so much as representing God's throne as his footstool. God's throne is always in heaven **(v1)**.

Isaiah also sees angelic beings, Seraphim, they are winged for flight but they also have wings to cover their feet, a sign of modesty in Ancient Near Eastern culture and their eyes so that they are shielded from the overwhelming brightness of God's glory **(v2)**. They are worshipping God, the repetition of "holy" three times signifying completeness, perfection and they declare that not only the temple, not only the land is full of God's glory but the whole earth **(v3)**.

Such is the power in the voices even of the Seraphim that the temple shakes. Isaiah is overwhelmed and cries out in both fear and conviction confessing his sinfulness, particularly his failings in speech which is significant given his calling as a prophet. He is unworthy to see God (as seer) and unworthy to speak for him **(v4-5)**. One of the creatures brings a coal from the altar and touches Isaiah's lips. He tells him that he is purified. We see God's grace and forgiveness at work **(v6-7)**.

God asks the question "who is there that I can send? Who will speak for me?" Just as in the past God had searched out for a righteous representative, finding Noah before the flood, Abraham in Ur and then Lot in Sodom, so he searches again. There has been no-one righteous and blameless found but Isaiah has confessed his sin and received forgiveness and purification. He now responds and declares himself available **(v8)**.

But what is the message that God has for Isaiah to deliver? It's no easy message. The focus seems to be on judgement and punishment. The situation hopeless. Although the people are able to see and hear, they have eyes and ears, they are not actually listening and perceiving. They are unable to understand and to know **(v9)**. In fact, it is God who is at work making sure that they are not able to truly see, hear and know. They are to be afflicted with dull hearts, heavy ears and blind or closed eyes. The sense here is of someone going into a deep slumber. The nation is comatose. Why is God doing this? It is intentional, so that they will be unable to understand, grasp God's intention, turn away and repent from their sin and idolatry **(v10)**.

Isaiah asks "How long" this will go on for? God's response is that it will be until there is almost complete destruction. God will send judgement until the land is desolate, the cities destroyed and its inhabitants driven out **(v11)**. The exile is prophesied as God says that the people will be removed from the land **(v12)**. Imagine a tree being cut down and burnt. The charred remains are examined and then thrown back into the fire. That's what will happen to Judah. However, there is hope right at the end. A theme throughout the Old Testament is of a faithful remnant who will be preserved and saved. Here, God shows Isaiah that something will be left, from the stump of the tree, a new

tree will come. The stump offers the seed of new life. What, or rather who, is this seed? We are told that it is “the Holy Seed” (v13).

Idols for destruction

Why does God seemingly condemn the people to not be able to understand and grasp what he is saying to them? This doesn't seem to be fair. The same question comes up when Jesus surprises us in Matthew 13 by quoting these verses to explain why he speaks in parables. Rather than the parables enabling people to understand difficult spiritual concepts, it seems that Jesus' intent is to obscure the simple truth.

The answer is perhaps best found in Greg Beale's book “We become what we worship”.³ There he draws our attention to a parallel passage in Psalm 115:5-8.⁴ There we see that it is idols that despite appearing to have eyes, ears, mouths, noses are unable to use them for the senses of smell, touch, sight and sound. The conclusion is that those who make the idols become just like them, in a similar kind of way to how pet owners are often said to look increasingly like their cat or dog.

Of course, for Israel, the idols that they found in the land, that belonged to the Canaanites were meant to be utterly destroyed (see Deuteronomy 7). Instead, they adopted those false gods for themselves and worshipped them, becoming like the people of the land and like their gods. They took on the values and moral character of the false gods. So, in effect God is saying that he will now destroy the false gods in them. They have consumed taken those gods into them, so if the idols are to be destroyed, if the gods driven out from the land, then the people will go with them.

There can be nothing left for them to cling to, no false hope for them to trust in. You see, it's the things that we fear and the things that we put our hope in that become our idols. What is it that you have learnt to fear? What is it that you have learnt to trust in?

The Holy Seed

This brings us to the question of what is left at the end? What is the Holy Seed? Well God had been making this clear through the Bible. In Genesis 3, he talks about the seed of the woman and later, he promises Abraham that through his seed, or offspring hope and blessing will come to the whole world.

Jesus is “the holy seed”, God's holy one. That's the point, when everything else is stripped away and there's nothing left, when all the things we have put our confidence in have taken away, when it seems that all hope is gone, Jesus is there. In fact, the New Testament points to him as the one who all our sin and idolatry is laid upon so that it is condemned and destroyed in him instead of us, so that he experiences death and exile for us.

So, Romans 6:1-4 tells us that we have died with Christ so that we died to sin and idolatry and because of this we are raised to new life, grafted into the tree or vine (c.f. Romans 11).

Ponder

Meditate on these words

“Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of hosts.” (v3).

1. What do you think of when yo hear God described as Holy?

³ GK Beale, *We become what we worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Apolloa, Nottingham. 2004).

⁴ Beale, *We become what we worship*, 45.

2. The phrase “Lord of Hosts” can be translated “commander of armies.” What does it mean to say that God is able to command the armies of heaven? What assurances does this give you?

Now meditate on verse 13

The holy seed¹³ is its stump.

1. If Jesus is the seed and the stump, then what hope does this give to us?
2. Is there anything that you are clinging to? Any idol in your life that needs to be removed and destroyed?

Lord God, I confess my sin. I have allowed false gods to take root like weeds in my life. Uproot them and remove them far away from me I pray. Help me to put my trust solely and completely in Christ alone. Amen.

12. It shall not stand

Imagine that you have an uneasy relationship with a close family member. You have your differences, your squabbles and fights but at the end of the day you are family. Then one day you discover that they have been working with someone else, a rival, an enemy of yours to bring you down. Imagine the sense of betrayal you would feel and perhaps fear as this makes things much worse. This was the situation that Judah were in.

Read Isaiah 7-8

Israel, the northern kingdom form an unholy alliance with Syria in order to attack Judah. The people in Jerusalem are overwhelmed. It seems like the odds have been stacked against them **(7:1-2)**. However, God sends Isaiah to tell them that they do not have to fear this alliance. God will bring down Syria and Israel/Ephraim **(7:3-9)**.

God then offers Ahaz a sign to confirm this. However, Ahaz refuses insisting that he will not put God to the test. This seems extremely pious but in fact isn't because Ahaz is refusing what God himself is offering. So God insists that he will receive a sign but it might not be what he desires. The sign is that a young woman will have a child called Immanuel and this will act as a marker for the pace at which things are going to happen **(7:10-15)**.

Whilst the boy is still young, God will send a greater enemy who will lay waste to the northern alliance, their land will be deserted as the Assyrians will take them into exile. However, this isn't the good news it seems. The language of shaving suggests humiliation and shaming, Yes, there will be an abundance of milk but that is all, the land will become wild and desolate, a place of fear **(7:16-25)**.

It seems that the prophecy concerning "Immanuel" finds its immediate fulfilment in the next chapter, although he is given an additional/different name. Isaiah's wife has a son. The child's birth is the signal that God is about to bring down a deadlier enemy, Assyria **(8:1-4)**.

Whilst the people's attention has been on Syria and Israel/Ephraim, they should have been alert to greater dangers further north/northeast, the coming danger of the mighty Mesopotamian empires. Notice the contrast, the people have rejected God's gentle waters (Shiloah was one of the places where the Tabernacle had been), they would instead be overwhelmed with a raging torrent that would sweep away the northern kingdom and even overflow into Judah. The water will reach Immanuel's neck, according to the prophecy and in fact whilst the Assyrians inflicted great damage up until Jerusalem, they were unable to take the city on that occasion and had to pull back **(8:5-8)**. So, the people are to prepare for war but not in anticipation of victory **(8:9-10)**.

It would have been tempting for Isaiah and God's people to see a conspiracy at work against them through the alliances that were being formed and in one sense there was but God tells him not to think in those terms. Conspiracy suggests that they are the innocent victims. It also encourages fear but Isaiah is not to join the people in their fear and paranoia. There was a greater danger than Syria but there was a greater danger still. We are not to fear men but God. The real problem was not the alliances and manoeuvres to the north. The real problem, the real danger was that the people had failed to trust faithfully in God. He is the one in whom we should find refuge but because the people had rejected him, he becomes a stumbling block to them **(8:11-17)**. Isaiah and his family act as signs and witnesses to this **(8:18)**.

The people will be tempted to look in all kinds of places for help, even to mediums and spiritists but they are not to. As long as they keep looking elsewhere for help, they will find none **(8:19-22)**.

Immanuel

The Gospels take the prophecy concerning Immanuel and apply it to Jesus. We see here how a prophecy can have an immediate fulfilment but point forward to something greater still. Just as the arrival of Isaiah's son marked the point when God would act, so too, the coming of the greater Immanuel marked the point where God would act again.

There are two differences. The Hebrew word for the mother could describe a virgin or possibly a young woman. It seems that the immediate focus was on the latter or that the baby would be the result of her first time with a man. However, the New Testament, working with the Greek translation makes it explicitly clear that Mary was a virgin and that her conception was miraculous.

The name Immanuel means "God is with us" and this takes us to the second difference. For Isaiah's Immanuel, this meant that God was with his people, to judge them. They were not to see the enemy's attack as a conspiracy against them but to recognise God's hand in it. The greater Immanuel is literally "God with us" and in his case it was to bring salvation. WE look to the greater Immanuel.

Ponder

In response to threats and fears, Isaiah announces "it will not take place" or in some translations "it shall not stand." This is God's verdict and response to all who illegitimately seek to attack and harm God's people in order to oppose him. Use those words meditatively by thinking of some situations and offering them as a response. For example:

- When secular governments seek to bring in laws that disregard God's purposes... it shall not stand.
- When I'm mocked or falsely accused ... it shall not stand.
- When I turn away from Christ to idols and seek false hope ... it shall not stand.

Thank you Lord God for Immanuel, that in Christ you came to dwell amongst us. Thank you that because of his death and resurrection, evil intentions will not stand or succeed.

13. Light in the darkness

Chapter 8 finishes with a sobering prophecy, all that the people will see if they look away from God is gloom and darkness. Without God, all there is for us is hopelessness.

Read Isaiah 9

Whilst the present situation seemed pretty hopeless and Israel were about to face judgement, shame and destruction, Isaiah looks ahead to the future and sees hope. Though the people were now living in darkness a great light would shine offering hope. This would be the cause of great celebration, comparable to those moments in the past when God had delivered the people from danger and blessed them with victory and prosperity. Although the people would be oppressed, exiled and enslaved, liberation and the total defeat of enemies was coming (v1-5).

The source of this hope was a son, born as king. Notice that this points us beyond any children of the prophet, he will be an heir of David. Not only that, this is not any old descendant, there is something unique about him. Not only will he be the prince or commander who brings peace, not only will he be loving and wise, a “wonderful counsellor” but he will be known as “The Mighty God” and “The Everlasting Father.” God himself was coming to dwell with and reign over his people as their true king. Unlike the ungodly and corrupt kings that the people have experienced, this king will bring justice and righteousness. Unlike mortal rulers, his reign will be permanent and eternal (v6-7).

All of this is still to come in the future though. In the meantime, there first must be terrible judgement. Wickedness is destructive like fire and so God must act to oppose and destroy wickedness. God is faithful and unchanging and he applies to his justice as well as to his mercy (v8-21).

Ponder

Meditate on these words

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;”

1. In what ways was your life characterised by darkness before you met Christ?
2. What does it mean for you to have the light of Christ shining on you?
3. In what ways can your community be described as “walking in darkness”?
4. What does it mean for your church to bring light to your community?

Lord God, thank you that Christ brings light and life. Help us to be salt and light in our neighbourhood.

14. Those around

What does it mean to live in this world as part of the church. We know that we are sinful and that the church has its faults. At times it seems that the church is weak, half asleep, luke-warm. Do we really have anything to say to unbelievers? But then we can look at a world of wickedness and wonder why people seem to get away with it. Doesn't God care?

Today, we are going to look at a big stretch of Scripture. If you have got the time now, then read through the whole section. If you are reading quickly before heading out to work, you might want to focus on chapter 10 now and return to read the rest in your own time. We'll also be returning to chapter 11 tomorrow and highlighting the detail of some of the other chapters later.

Read Isaiah 10 -23

Throughout this section of the prophecy, God turns his attention to the surrounding nations including Assyria, Tyre, Cush, Egypt and Babylon. Some of these nations have been used by God as instruments of his judgement but this has led to false pride. This is what happens with Assyria. God's intention is that the nation will be used to discipline Israel (**10:1-4**) but the rulers of Assyria have a bloodlust to destroy all their neighbours and to build up their own wealth and power (**10:10-11**). However, once God has completed his work in disciplining Israel, he will bring judgement on Assyria (**10:12**).

Notice the difference with regards to Israel. God's people are being disciplined, not destroyed. They will not be subjugated by Assyria for ever (**10:20-24**). So, the people are not to fear Assyria, confusing the implement of discipline with the one doing the discipline. They are to fear God, knowing that his intention for them is good.

Discipline

In Hebrews 10, we are told not to despise the Lord's discipline and Isaiah 10-23 helps us to think more about this. We live in a fallen world and sometimes this means that Christians suffer at the hands of unbelievers. It is helpful for us to remember that whilst they may be doing this to cause us harm, God uses our suffering for good.

By pronouncing judgement on the surrounding nations, Isaiah does two things. First, he is highlighting that sinful pride is true of all people. God's people should realise that if God takes these flaws seriously in those who don't know him, then how much more serious is it when he finds them in us?

However, these prophecies also offer hope to God's people by giving them a different perspective on what is happening. Their discipline is temporary and God is not blind to the actions of the people around them. Nor is God powerless and helpless to stop them. He chooses to use them for his good ends.

Ponder

Meditate on this little phrase

"See the Lord almighty" (10:33).

It's an invitation to look again and see what God is really doing and focus on his purposes instead of those of the world.

1. What can you see that God is doing in your situation?

Help me not to despise your discipline Lord. Help me to trust you even when this means going through pain and suffering. Help me not to lose sight of who you are and what you are doing.

15. Something different

We're in the middle of a section of Isaiah that takes the wider sweep of world politics and announces judgement on the nations and their capital cities. Notice that Jerusalem is included in with the wicked nation, God's people had joined the world in its sinfulness. They had become like the Gentiles. There is a challenge to us here. Are we characterised by distinctiveness or have we become like the world? Are we salt and light.

So if the world is in a mess and under judgement and if those supposed to be God's people have failed to be distinctive, then what is the solution? Isaiah 11 offers an alternative, a new and different leader.

Read Isaiah 11

At the end of chapter 6, we were told that God's judgement of Israel and Judah would leave behind a stump but that this would provide the root for something new, it would become the holy seed. Now, we focus in a bit more on what, or rather who that root/shoot is. We are told that they are a descendent of Jesse, in other words from David's lineage. We are also told that this new vine/branch will be fruitful **(v1)**. A specific person is in mind. God's Spirit will be strongly present with him giving him wisdom and knowledge **(v2)**. This king will be like David in that he will delight in The Lord and reverence for him (echoing the Psalms). He will be just and make judgement not based on limited perception and first reaction. The standard for righteousness will not be human priorities but God's righteousness **(v3-5)**.

This king's reign will usher in a time of peace and prosperity not seen in human history in fact, the only potential comparison takes us back to the Garden of Eden when humans and animals, even those now considered predators lived safely side by side **(v6-9)**. Not only is this king the hope of Israel but also for the nations too. He will be a signal, banner or rallying call to them. The world will unite under his leadership. His resting place – the land where he settles- Israel will become glorious and honoured **(v10)**.

A frequent warning in Isaiah's prophecies is of exile and judgement but this coming king will bring the exile to an end. God will bring back the people from exile and reunite the divided kingdom **(v11-13)**. He will completely defeat all of their enemies **(v14-15)**. The imagery of a highway from Assyria makes it clear that God will prepare the way for the people to return and remove obstacles in their way. The return will be like a similar exodus. Just as God led the people up out of Egypt, so he will lead them down and back from this exile **(v16)**.

Jesus as the root of Jesse

The prophecy here points forward to the future. Although the people would return from exile, that return fell far short of the imagery here. The followers of Jesus recognised in him the true fulfilment of the prophecy. Jesus is the descendant of Jesse who reigns on David's throne. He has brought peace from warring peoples and defeated the enemies of sin, Satan and death. Jesus draws people from all backgrounds to himself and sends us out to make disciples from the nations.

Even still, there remains a future dynamic to the prophecy. We await the day when he will come again and his reign will be fully realised bringing us to an Eden like home where there is true and lasting peace and the curse of sin has been fully removed.

Ponder

Meditate on these words from verse 6:

with righteousness he shall judge

1. In what ways do we see a difference between Jesus and the rulers/judges of this world
2. If Jesus judges me with righteousness then what do I deserve?
3. The New Testament points to Christ giving us his righteousness so that we are judged not by our own lives but by his life and death. How does this make you feel?

Lord God, we thank you for sending Jesus as our saviour king. Thank you that in him and the Gospel your righteousness is revealed. We look forward to the day when “the lion will lie down with the lamb” and so we pray “come quickly Lord Jesus”.

16. Everyone

Perhaps as God's people heard Isaiah prophecy against different nations and cities, they were tempted to nod along in agreement. "I'm glad that he mentioned Babylon, I knew they had it coming." "Oh I'd never really thought about Tyre and Sidon before ... but he has got a point you know." Then there's that shocking moment when Jerusalem gets a mention. The realisation that they are included.

Are we in danger of reading Isaiah and thinking that it's all about those people in cities and countries hundreds of years ago and nothing to do with us. They were barbaric, cruel, unjust, idolatrous. We are different. Before we become complacent, the prophet widens his terms of reference.

Read Isaiah 24

God will act to empty the whole earth. It is possible to read this here as referring to the specific land of Israel and that will fall desolate but even within that context, the point is being made that no one has a free pass to escape God's judgement. In any case, there are clues later on that God's verdict is on all places and all people. What I think we see here is a vision of the specific fate of the land of Israel as representative of all creation (**v1**).

God's judgement does not make distinctions based on class, wealth, religiosity or role in society (**v2 - 3**). The land itself is described as suffering as well as the different peoples in it because of human failure to obey God and to keep covenant with him (**v4-6**). Even the things that they turn to for enjoyment or to help them forget pain and misery such as wine fail and only bring sadness (**v7-12**).

Verse 13 talks about the response to an olive tree being beaten, to loosen its fruit or the gleaning of fields at harvest. This perhaps points to two things. First that judgement will also be complete but also a hint that if Israel is often compared to the olive tree then her judgement is in some sense on behalf of all, there is a suggestion of substitutionary atonement here.

So, when people see that judgement is fulfilled then there is rejoicing and thanksgiving all around the world (**v14-15**). Yet we should not be too quick to rush to rejoicing because a cost has been paid, if there is a substitute who has experienced rejection and betrayal (**v16**). So, verses **17-23** return to the theme of world-wide and even cosmic judgement, all of which is designed to prove that the Lord reigns.

Through the Gospel lens

Isaiah helps us to see that there is a narrowing down of focus to show that God's purposes will be fulfilled for all peoples through one people but more specifically through one person. The whole world, not just Israel deserves judgement and justice but Jesus Christ has taken that judgement on himself. However, those who choose to remain outside of Christ and even mock him must still face a final day of reckoning. Sin and evil are judged and punished on one of two days, either on the day when Christ bore our sin on himself or on the day when he returns as judge and king.

Ponder

Meditate on v23

the LORD of hosts reigns

We often focus on what the Gospel does for us but ultimately it is not about us. The whole purpose of God's great redemptive story is so that we will see that he reigns and so that he gets all the glory.

Lord God, we know that we deserved to be punished for our sin. Thank you that Christ took our place. Help us to glorify your name.

17. Death of Death

Death remains our greatest fear and the last enemy. Death is the just consequence and punishment for sin. Exile from the land was going to be a death like experience for God's people. With that in mind, I want to suggest that what comes next is perhaps one of the most significant passages in the Old Testament.

Read Isaiah 25

Isaiah interrupts the prophetic judgement pronounced on Israel, Judah, the surrounding nations and the world with a song of praise. He declares Yahweh to be his God and says that he will lift up and praise his name. He praises God for what he has done, in line with his eternal plans (v1). God is to be praised because he is the one who defeats enemies, destroying their cities and palaces(v3).

God is to be praised because he is seen to prioritise the poor and oppressed, offering them shelter and protection. The point about foreigners here is not that they are the enemies of God's people who have sought to wipe the out. Isaiah is able to see both, looking backwards to past victories for Israel and forwards to future rescue and see that God delivers and vindicates (v4-5).

Isaiah looks again to a future day when Jerusalem and Mount Zion will be at the centre of God's plans for the world. There will be a celebratory feat and the nations will be invited. This points to a time of peace and prosperity for God's people (v6).

It is there and then that the final enemy will be faced and defeated. This enemy is said to cover the people, or overshadow them suggesting fear. The enemy is death and it will be swallowed up. With that tears, mourning, grief and shame will also be removed (v7-8).

The defeat of death in this immediate context refers to the end of threatened death from invasion and genocide. This is seen as Isaiah again describes the defeat of an enemy. Moab is specified here, perhaps with Isaiah looking back to a past victory over an exemplar rival. The implication of course is that if God were able to defeat enemies like Moab, Edom and Philistia in the past, he can do it once again to Assyria, Babylon and Persia.

Oh death where is your sting?

In 1 Corinthians 15:5-58, Paul draws on the language of death swallowed up in victory to show that Christ in his own death and resurrection has defeated death. The greater fulfilment of the prophecy is not just about an end to bloodshed from war and invasion. Rather, Christ died to take away the sting of death, we no longer have to fear the punishment because Christ took the penal nature of death on himself. We know that death is not the end, that there is resurrection to look forward to,

Ponder

Meditate on v1

O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you; I will praise your name,

1. Are you able to say "God is my God"?
2. What can you praise God for?

Meditate on verse 8

He will swallow up death

Thank you Lord that we do not need to fear death. Thank you for the gift of eternal life. Thank you that although we grieve the loss of loved ones that we do not mourn as those without hope.

18. In that day

Throughout the theme of gloom and judgement, Isaiah weaves a different thread that brings light and hope. He speaks of a future day when there will be vindication for God's people, when his enemies will be judged and defeated, when God will restore the land. Quite often, it seems that God has in mind more than a restoration of Israel but a renewal of the whole creation. The day to come is "The Day of the Lord" or "The Day of Salvation." If it's about both judgement and salvation, we might observe that eschatologically, the day happens on two days.

First, there was the day when God visited his judgement on Jesus Christ, the day when his new creation first begins to bear fruit. However, there is a further, future day to come when God will judge all those who are not in Christ, when he will return as king and when we will fully see the consummation of the new creation.

The next two chapters speak about that.

Read Isaiah 26-27

Isaiah says that the Day of the Lord will prompt a new song to be sung and then offers the words for the song. It's a song about how God is like a strong and secure city offer protection for all who are within its walls. God's nation, or his true people will find safety in him. They need fear no evil attack. They can trust him. He is also like a rock, a firm and secure foundation to stand on **(26:1-4)**.

The basis for this trust is what God does. He brings down the proud, compared to the destruction of a high and exalted city. He allows the poor and lowly to trample that city, in other words, he exalts the humble. He prepares the way ahead for those who are righteous **(26:5-8)**. Because of this, the righteous long and yearn for God **(26:9)**. We see here too the importance of God's justice and discipline. How are the wicked to learn goodness if they go unchallenged and actively prosper? They end up, as we saw back in chapter 6, ignorant of what God is doing **(26:10-11)**.

God's people will be able to look forward to peace and safety on that day because he will liberate them from false lords. This may apply both to the false gods they have worshipped and to the foreign rulers who have oppressed and exiled them. God has utterly defeated them **(26:12-15)**. God hears and acts in response to the cries of his people, cries of distress and repentance **(26:16-21)**.

Leviathan is one of the great enemies that will be turned back, defeated and destroyed. The sea monster metaphor is probably a reference to Phoenicia (Tyre and Sidon), a coastal, and ocean going power **(27:1)**.⁵

In contrast to the fate of the nations around and to Israel and Judah's desolation during their own judgement, God's people are now likened once again to a cultivated and protected vineyard. God cares for this place and it does not come under judgement any longer. He has no anger against his people instead his desire is that they will come back to him and seek peace with him **(27:2-6)**.

God's purpose in bringing discipline and judgement was that Israel's (Jacob) sin could be atoned for. This does mean that right now at this time, the people of Jerusalem face judgement, invasion, death and exile **(27:7-11)**. However, the day is coming when God will bring back the exiles **(27:12-13)**.

Ponder

Meditate on these words:

⁵ Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, 410.

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you (26:3).

Trust in the LORD for ever, for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock. (26:4)

1. How do you find peace?
2. How has your trust in God grown recently?

Thank you Lord that we do not need to fear the coming judgement day because the punishment was laid on Christ for our transgressions. Help us to find shelter in Christ, the rock of our salvation.

19. Cheating Death

When we get difficult or bad news, we often try to negotiate with the bad news, to find a way around it. This kind of denial is a common part of the grieving process. One of the greatest human temptations is to believe that somehow, given enough knowledge, resources and time we'll be able to negotiate with and even cheat death.

Read Isaiah 28-29

Two types of crown, signifying royal power, rule and glory are contrasted here. Ephraim or the northern kingdom of Israel is described as having a crown that appears proud and glorious but is the crown of the drunkard and will soon fade. In contrast, God has anointed his ruler to bring judgement and justice and the Lord himself will be their crown. In otherwise, their power and authority will come from God alone and so will be eternal and faultless **(28:1-6)**.

If the kingdom is "under the influence" ruled by drunkards, either because the kings are specifically alcoholics or because the word sums up their reckless and greedy character, then not only the kings are addicts but the priests and prophets too. This is a kingdom that lacks godly leadership and lacks those who are able to speak soberly for the people to God and from God to the people. The prophets are like drunkards stumbling over their words and the people are themselves so intoxicated that they are incapable of responding to what God says, even when he offers rest. Therefore, part of their judgement is that God will speak through foreign tongues to them. If the prophets cannot communicate in their language clearly and the people cannot hear and understand clearly, then they might as well hear in Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian and Greek **(28:7-14)**.

A repeated theme through the prophetic books is the complacency of the people. . So, attention turns back from the northern kingdom to Judah and Jerusalem. They believe that they are able to and have cheated death. They think they have made a covenant with it but it's based on deceit, presumably a reference to the treaties and alliances they've made which they hope will protect them from invasion. However, they don't intend to keep their side of the bargain. However, they have not cheated death. God stands for truth and righteousness so that the lies and schemes will not stand. God is establishing his ways, his covenant based on a surer foundation or cornerstone **(28:15-22)**.

Whereas the people and their rulers are shifty and not to be trusted, God and his word can be. God keeps his word and fulfils his purpose. Just as ploughing and grinding are fixed processes that drag on for ever, so God's purposes are fixed. He will do what he says and this means that judgement will come but it also means that there will be an end point to this **(28:23-29)**.

Jerusalem is described as "Ariel" in chapter 29 and there are a number of possible meanings for this, including a simple corruption of the name Jerusalem and a reference to the "lion of Judah." In which case, the lion is cornered and wounded. Another strong suggestion is that it refers to the city as an altar but failing to be an altar of pure sacrifices it becomes the altar where God's judgement is poured out **(29:1)**.⁶ The point is this, that Jerusalem, this mighty city home to David's palace and stronghold has become something different. It is no longer the place where atonement with God is possible, it is no longer a place of safety, if David camped there, now God encamps against her. If the city had been proud and exalted, now it would be brought low and humbled **(29:1-4)**.

⁶ See Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, 1-39*, 566-567.

The people of Jerusalem may be focused on the danger of enemy armies. They may see them as the potential source of death and so may be seeking to negotiate with them. However, God once again reminds them that as overwhelming and dangerous as the enemy seems to be, they are simply the warm up act. Judah should not fear Syrians, Assyrians or Babylonians, they should fear the Lord **(29:5-10)**.

Once again God returns to the theme of Judah's ignorant stubbornness. The prophecies from Isaiah are like a closed book to them because they do not truly engage their hearts in order to meet with the living God. They pay lip service to him, his word and their worship. So God will act again. God will keep on revealing the truth about himself, he will use blessing, warnings and finally acts of judgement **(29:11-12)**.

The people are guilty of upside down, or back to front thinking. They like to believe they are in control and can dictate terms, as though clay can answer a potter back. They seek to put God in the dock. So, God will turn the world upside down, forests will become fields and fields forests. The powerful will be brought low and the humble exalted **(29:13-21)**.

The section finishes with a promise that God will restore the fortunes of his people. There will be forgiveness. God will turn hearts around **(29:22-24)**.

Ponder

Meditate on

“We have made a covenant with death **(28:15)**

1. How might we be tempted to “make a deal with death”?
2. In what ways does our society think it can cheat death?
3. Why is it dangerous to negotiate with death?

Lord God, thank you that we don't have to attempt to cheat or negotiate with death. Thank you that Christ has died in our place and so defeated death.

20. You can go your own way

Our temptation is consistently to wander away from God and to look elsewhere for help. This is particularly true when we sense danger, like nervous sheep we seek to get away from the threat but this often means running away from the shepherd who can protect us and further into different danger.

Read Isaiah 30-31

Judah's response to threats from northern powers was to seek protection elsewhere. This included attempts to form alliances but it also meant that there were those who were tempted to flee to safety. For some, that old desire to go back to Egypt resurfaced. Egypt would be further way and offered a level of military protection that Judah could not. However, God says that this is a false solution. They are adding to their sin instead of turning from it. They will not find safety there and because Egypt itself is idolatrous and sinful, they will be going further into danger. Exile in Egypt will be no better than exile in Assyria or Babylon **(30:1-7)**.

The reason that the people are turning in the wrong direction, is their stubbornness, it's because they reject God and try to silence his prophets. They turn their back on true hope, salvation and rest. By fleeing, they are refusing the very offer that will save them **(30:8-15)**.

Even still, God persists with a stubborn and rebellious people. He continues to plead with them. He continues to offer grace and mercy. He continues to promise a day when their suffering will end and they will be restored to the position that he desires for them **(30:16-33)**.

God declares woe on those who turn to Egypt because they are disregarding a persistent warning, that they should not trust in horses and chariots. By looking to Egypt, they are relying on human strength to help them **(31:1-5)**.

Instead, the people should turn back to God. He is the only one who can help them. He is the one who will defeat Assyria. Ultimately Sennacherib's army would fail to take Jerusalem but not because of Judah's strength, nor because of Egypt's power to the south. Rather Sennacherib would turn back because of trouble at home. God arranged history and politics to protect his people **(31:6-9)**.

Ponder

Meditate on these words:

"Turn to him" (31:6)

At the very point when we are tempted to run and to look to other things, people and places for safety, that's when we most need to turn back to the Lord and cling to Christ.

Oh, to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be
Let Thy goodness like a fetter
Bind my wandering heart to Thee

Prone to wander, Lord I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love
Here's my heart, oh take and seal it
Seal it for Thy courts above⁷

⁷ Come Thou Fount, Robert Robinson

21. The promised king and the promised Spirit

How would God's people know that the promises were coming true and that they no longer needed to fear judgement. Isaiah makes it clear that there were two crucial people who would come to confirm that hope had arrived. There was the promised king and the promised Holy Spirit.

Read Isaiah 32

God promises that a king will come who will reign with righteousness, in other words, he will be godly and just. How the king is will flow through society, the princes, or rulers under the king will also be righteous. Godly and good leaders under a good king will provide safety, shelter and protection for those in need **(v1-2)**.

The consequence of this good reign will be an undoing of the curse that the people have been under. If that curse meant that they would have unhearing ears and uncomprehending eyes then there's a promise that those whose hearts are open to God, the remnant will be able to see, hear and understand. They will not be prevented. This will mean healing of the things that restrict from blindness to stammers **(v3-4)**. There will be political changes too, where fools held power, this will no longer be the case. They will be recognised for who they are and no longer able to deceive. Honour will be given to those who deserve it **(v5)**. This is because whilst fools and scoundrels are often not treated too seriously, seen as silly, it is clear that when they come into power, there is trouble, Foolishness in the Bible is a moral rather than an intellectual failing. So, the fools and scoundrels have conspired to go against God, bringing about oppression and suffering **(v6-8)**.

However, there is no room for complacency. The women of Jerusalem are warned though although it will seem that the Assyrian threat is over and though there is the promised king to come, trouble and danger still lies ahead. Desolation is coming and so they are to mourn **(v9-15)**.

The moment of hope and rejoicing is dependent on a specific and crucial intervention. They await the day when the Spirit of God will be poured out. When this happens then peace and prosperity will return **(v15-20)**.

The Spirit outpoured

It is important that when we apply the Old Testament through Christ. He is the righteous king and so we might also say that we as his people are the righteous princes which brings a responsibility to live well and for those in positions of responsibility and authority to lead well, providing protecting and nurturing. However, given the apostles insistence that the Day of Pentecost was the day God had spoken of through the prophets, we also need to apply the Old Testament through Pentecost. Scripture is clear that God's work of new creation is a work of the Holy Spirit. His coming and indwelling of his people was crucial to God's plan and purpose. If we live after Pentecost and are filled with the Spirit, then we can see how the promises of Isaiah are applied to us.

Ponder

Meditate on

Behold, a king will reign in righteousness (v1)

And

until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high (v15)

1. If Christ is the king of righteousness then what implications are there for how we live under his reign?
2. What specific difference does the Holy Spirit make to your life and to your church?

Thank you Lord God that you sent your son to die and rise for us. Thank you that you have poured out your spirit on us. Help us to submit obediently and willingly to Christ as Lord and King. May we live in the fullness of your Holy Spirit, knowing his power and presence in our lives.

22. Destroyer

Isaiah as prophet speaks for God to the people but the prophets would also often speak to God for the people, this is especially true when their role aligned with that of priest as Isaiah's did. Much of the poetic literature takes the form of poetry or song and so you'll see close parallels with many of the Psalms, especially those that turn to lament. We too have a dual responsibility of speaking to others, bringing God's word to them and of speaking to God for others in intercession.

Read Isaiah 33

Assyria is the destroyer who considers herself invincible but her success is only possible because God is using her to fulfil his plans (v1). Having addressed Assyria directly, Isaiah now speaks to God, in recognition and response to God's certain commitment that he will deal with the enemy, Isaiah pleads with God for strength, sustenance and grace so that God's people may persevere through the trial (v2).

The people can trust God to act because of his character and nature. He is the one who is truly invincible. He is the real undestroyed destroyer. He defeats enemies and he is exalted and glorious. Not only that but he is strong and dependable, the source of stability and safety for all who turn to him (v3-6).

Isaiah pauses to lament, looking at the situation as it is and as it will be throughout the time of judgment. He sees a desolate land but also sees the cause of it, unfaithfulness and a broken covenant (v7-9). God's response to this is to declare that he will arise, he will act. His purpose in doing so is to protect his own name, his own honour (v10).

The words of Isaiah and the words of Yahweh continue to interchange, it is as though they are singing a duet together, sometimes turned to each other, sometimes addressing the people together. In verses 11-14 they describe God's perfect and holy justice that brings judgement and causes fear. This raises the question "Who is able to stand before such a holy God and stay in his presence without being destroyed themselves? The answer comes back that there is only one. It's the one who themselves is righteous godly in their own life, just in their treatment of others. This person is themselves worthy to be exalted and they are revealed as the righteous king we have already met. It's Jesus (v15-16). The people are invited to look again with new eyes and see what is happening, to see this king reigning, to see the proud and greedy judged, to see stubborn opponents of God removed and to see the new Jerusalem a city of peace and security (v17-20). This new and restored Jerusalem is the place where God's king rules. Where God is present with his people (v21-22).

Ponder

Meditate on

"Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? (v15)

1. Why is God described as a consuming fire?
2. Who alone is able to dwell with this God?
3. How then can we get close to God?

Lord, we are humbled by your holiness and we acknowledge that our sin makes us worthy of judgement and destruction. Thank you that you choose not to destroy us. Thank you that in Christ we are seated with you and able to boldly enter your presence.

23. Judgement Day

How do we react to what Scripture has to say about judgement, not just the historic judgement of Israel or even the discipline we go through but also what Scripture has to say about God's judgement on sin and evil, what it has to say about eternal judgement and hell.

Read Isaiah 34

It's judgement day when God delivers his verdict and he invites the peoples of the earth to come near to hear it. The creation itself stands as witness **(v1)**. Destruction is coming on all peoples but cosmic language is used to describe their fate to. The stars will fall. This language may do two things. First, it may figuratively refer to rulers, powers and empires in cosmic terms as the "hosts of heaven." Secondly it describes judgement in world shattering/turned upside down/ending terms **(v2-4)**. God himself, personally brings judgement **(v5-7)**.

Judgement will come to the surrounding nations and rivals of Israel, Edom for example is singled out. God brings vengeance for what these people have done to his people. Notice, they will receive the same fate Israel suffered, their land will be leaderless, desolate, uninhabitable, returning to the wild **(v8-17)**. This is something that God commits to, through his word and so is a eternal and unchangeable commitment.

God's just judgement

There is an immediate fulfilment to these prophecies coming on the surrounding nations. However, the words here also point to a greater judgement to come. We can see the descriptions in Isaiah as typical of the day when God will judge the whole creation. Many of us struggle with the idea of eternal judgement and Hell. It may be helpful to remember that God's judgement is also about vindication. Just as judgement on Eden demonstrated his love for Israel and vindicated his people, so too, his final judgement is about the vindication of his beloved Son that they have rejected. It is also important to remember that whilst we might struggle to understand God's ways, we know that his judgement will be in line with his good, loving and just character.

Ponder

Meditate on these words

the mouth of the LORD has commanded, (v16)

1. Why might God's faithfulness to his word be bad news for some?
2. Why is it good news for you?

Lord God, we do not understand your ways but we trust you, the loving and eternal judge of all to do right.

24. When the Desert blooms

We are now coming to the end of the first part of the book. Isaiah 35 is like the big song at the end of the first half. There will be a kind of interlude, an interruption to tell some of the story of what is going on in Isaiah's day through the next few chapters before the curtain raises on part 2. If judgement for Israel meant exile and distance for God's people away from the place of God's blessing, then there is a promised return. Exile will be like their time in Egypt and the return will be like a new Exodus.

This means that to get home, the people will; have to go through the desert experience again. What will life be like in the Wilderness? How will they keep faith in God? Often it can seem that our way home to Christ and to heaven takes us through desert or wilderness like experiences. How do we keep faith and keep following?

Read Isaiah 35

The new Exodus out into the desert is portrayed as a reversal of the people's fortunes. If God had brought death and desolation into their land, now they will take new life and fruitfulness with them out to the desert. The wilderness will bloom with flowers and blossom to welcome them, or more importantly to see and to welcome the Lord as he leads them out in all his glory and majesty **(v1-2)**.

As God's people wait patiently for this coming day when he will deliver them, they are not to wait idly and passively, rather they are to prepare for that time. They are to take courage and to trust God's promise of salvation **(v3-4)**.

The new exodus will mean that judgement of Isaiah 6:9-12 will be reversed, blind eyes will be open, clogged ears unblocked. God will even heal the lame so they can walk again **(v5-6a)**. The transformation of the desert will mean an end to drought there with new springs, rivers and cooling pools of water to drink from and to irrigate dry ground **(v6b-7)**,

One theme in Isaiah, picked up here is that a highway will be prepared. The imagery will be picked up later of the way being prepared for the kings; pilgrimage and he leads his people home. The levelling of mountains and raising of valleys that Isaiah describes later points to a God who will have all obstacles removed from his way. He will not be opposed or defeated. Other dangers such as fierce animals like lions will also be removed **(v8-9)**.

Finally, the people will arrive back at Zion and it will be like one of those great festivals when the people went up to Jerusalem singing the psalms of ascent. They are described as a ransomed, or redeemed people. God has bought them back -which of course at this stage raises the question of what cost he has had to pay to do this. The promise, when they arrive is of everlasting joy, of triumph, delight and happiness, a celebration and a party **(v10)**.

The Now and Not Yet

This passage speaks to us as we live in what has sometimes been described as the now and not yet. As we observed at the start of today's meditation, there will be times when we experience what particularly feels like a desert experience. However, there is a sense in which eschatologically, we are currently in the desert place. God has rescued us from sin and death but we are still travelling, still looking forward to that glorious day when we will arrive home. However, this life as desert does not have to be all dry and barren. We bring the life of Christ with us wherever we go and so we should expect refreshment, joy, rest and fruitful service here and now.

Ponder

Meditate on these words

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

1. Drink them in. How do you feel as you read them?
2. What are you most looking forward to about being at home with the Lord?

Oh Lord, our Lord, we thank you that we have this wonderful hope, that we look forward to the day when we will arrive home with joy and singing. Thank you that through your Spirit, you are with us now bringing new life and fruitfulness. Help us to receive refreshment from you. Help us to follow wherever you lead.

25. Deliverer

Could things have turned out different for Judah? Well, a major turning point seems to hinge on the life of one king, Hezekiah. He was in the main, godly, seeking the Lord, wise and successful. However, the events in chapters 36-39 sum up his life, what he got right and where pride and complacency became his sad downfall. The result was that Judah did have to go through judgement and exile.

Read Isaiah 36-39

There are now x chapters of straight narrative focusing in on specific events in the life of king Hezekiah. First, we are told about what happens when Sennacherib's Assyrian forces invade Judah. They reach Jerusalem and lay siege to the city. **(36:1-3)**.

Sennacherib's army surrounds the city of Jerusalem, cutting off supplies and then to try and reduce moral, his commanding officer taunts the inhabitants, seeking to sow fear and division. They can't depend on Egypt for rescue, the Pharaoh is an unreliable ally. They can't rely on their god, he's weak and hasn't their king actually sought to diminish his worship. This latter assumption is based on a misapprehension, Hezekiah's removal of high places to false gods is confused with an assault on YHWH. In fact, he claims that YHWH has commissioned him to carry out this attack. To resist Assyria is to resist the LORD **(36:4-10)**.

So, Assyria offers terms for Jerusalem's surrender, calling on the people to turn against Hezekiah. They offer peace and prosperity and promise that they can enjoy a similar life in Assyria to what they know at home **(36:11-21)**. Yet Jerusalem does not fall. There is external evidence of this failure available in the British Museum. The Assyrians liked to tell the story of their victories on giant wall carvings. The one in the British Museum shows the successful siege of Lachis, a more minor stronghold. If the siege of Jerusalem had been successful, then that would be the story they would have retold in their carvings. **Chapter 37** shows that there are political mechanisms and work, Sennacherib is unable to bring his full army down upon Jerusalem and has to turn back to face other threats. However, Isaiah makes it clear that the primary cause of his failure is that Hezekiah turns to God in prayer and that God acts in judgement against Assyria.

Hezekiah then falls sick and it looks like his life is in danger. He again turns to God and is healed **(ch38)**. Instead of using the time given to him well, though, he becomes proud. He shows off the glory of Jerusalem to visiting envoys from Babylon, no doubt also seeking to build a political alliance with them to bolster his defences against Assyria, forgetting that it was God who protected him. God rebukes him through Isaiah and says that judgement will come from Babylon. Sadly instead of being convicted by this, Hezekiah shrugs it off, forgetting his responsibility to the kingdom, he thinks short term and is relieved that he will not personally be affected by judgement **(ch 39)**.

Prayer, circumstances and wisdom

There's much to learn from these passages. First, we are reminded of the power of prayer. When faced with trying circumstances we should be quick to turn back to God for help and mercy. We see how God is at work through the normal and ordinary circumstances of life. Finally, there's a warning. What will we do with the grace of answered prayers. It's sometimes assumed that if someone experiences an answer to prayer such as a healing, they'll be more likely to come to faith and persist with it but this isn't always the case. So, what we do with the answers matters. Do they prompt greater faith and obedience or do we pocket those answers to prayer whilst continuing to pursue our own course?

Ponder

Meditate on these words:

“I will deliver you” (38:6)

1. Ultimately, God’s salvation and deliverance is about our salvation from sin and judgement, but can you think of other examples where God has delivered you?
2. How do you respond to God’s grace and deliverance?
3. Are you making wise use of the days that God has given you?

Lord God, thank you that you are my deliverer. Please help me not to take your grace for granted. Help me to number my days correctly and to use them wisely for your glory.

26. Comforter

Can we really depend upon God and trust him. Is it really true that we do not have to be worried and anxious about our circumstances? Isaiah 40 looks forward beyond the judgement coming upon Judah to a day when sin will be forgiven and the fortunes of God's people restored bringing peace and comfort.

Read Isaiah 40-41

Comfort is announced. The reason for this comfort is that Jerusalem's time of judgement and suffering is coming to an end. She has paid the penalty for her sin. The word "double" here carries the sense of completeness (**40:1-2**). God is on the move, he will return to his city and so, the call goes out to prepare for his coming. Just as you prepare for a king's arrival by repairing the roads, so the whole of creation prepares for God's arrival with a cosmic highway, if we fill in potholes and resurface roads when human dignitaries are coming, well then, the very mountains and valleys should be levelled out for God (**40:3-5**).

The people can depend upon God to keep this promise because he is not like them. Humans are like the grass and flowers, short lived, easily blown about and scattered (**40:6-8**). Jerusalem and Mount Zion will also be exalted and become a symbol or testimony, a spokesman for God's deliverance and care for his people, comparing the Lord to a shepherd who cares for his flock. Again, this emphasises the certainty of God's promise (**40:9-11**).

Isaiah then asks a series of questions, challenging his hearers, is it possible to measure, evaluate, analyse, compare or define God? The response to each question has to be a resounding no. God cannot be measured or contained. He is incomparable and in fact any attempted comparison with false gods only serves to demonstrate his uniqueness (**40:12-26**).

Such rhetoric is designed to silence the complaints and unbelief of God's people. Given God's unique greatness and goodness, given the evidence of history, they have no reason to doubt or question him. Yes, God does see them and know them. He is not unaware of their circumstances. Yes., God will keep his promises. He will lift up and restore the faint and the fallen (**40:27-31**).

Just as people seek to encourage one another and embolden friends to courage, so Israel can be encouraged, not because they have human friends and allies on their side but because God is their friend. He is the one who will save them (**41:1-20**). This of course means that their trust must be completely in him. It is ridiculous and futile to put your trust in idols. The false gods are invited to respond to God by bringing evidence of their own saving works but they have nothing to offer because they are not real gods at all (**41:21-24**). It was God alone who warned of coming judgement and who brought that judgement. So, he is the one that the people need to trust for salvation (**41:25-29**).

Ponder

Mediate on these words from Isaiah 40:1

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

1. What is the nature of God's comfort for us?
2. The Holy Spirit is sometimes named "The comforter" why do you think that is?
3. How can we be sure that God's comfort is real and reliable?

Thank you Lord God that you have sent the comforter, the Holy Spirit. Thank you that we can trust your word and depend upon your character in the whole of life.

27. Servant

At times, the way Christians speak about issues, and sadly the experience some have had of pastoral care suggest at best a carelessness to the most fragile and hurting amongst us. It's not meant to be like that.

Read Isaiah 42

God points to one coming and encourages the people to "behold", see or watch out for him. We've already been told that one will come and the focus has been on him as a righteous ruler and king, now we are told that the one coming is a servant specifically, YHWH's servant. He is the one who will act to do God's will and fulfil his purposes. As we've seen before, this chosen one will have God's Spirit and will bring justice (v1). We are then told a series of things about him. He won't draw noisy attention to himself, he will not hinder, injure or oppress the vulnerable and fragile, He will not give up on his mission or tire of his calling until he has completed the task of bringing justice (v2-4).

God now addresses the servant through Isaiah. He speaks as the creator God, a reminder of the faithfulness and dependability of his word. He is the one who calls and who gives life, he is the one who has called and commissioned the servant. He will keep the servant "in righteousness" or in a right relationship with himself. He will guide and lead them. He will give the servant "as a covenant" to his people, in other words as the sign and seal of his new agreement to them (v5-6). Through the servant he will heal the blind and release captives, this language points to a coming year of Jubilee (v7).

The Lord reminds us that he is unique and without rival. He won't share his glory, he won't allow worship to go to rival deities. Yet, there seems to be a suggestion here that he is willing to share his glory with the servant. This raises questions about who this person is (v8). So, the coming of the servant will mark a new era, God is doing something different, he is promising a new covenant (v9).

The right response to the coming of the servant is praise and thanksgiving to God. So, Isaiah calls people from all parts of the earth, from fertile coastlands to desert cities to sing (v10-12). This is because God is on the move, he has chosen to act, if it seemed he was silent before, he now cries out with a loud voice, compared here to the cries of a mother in labour. This reflects both a sense of the volume and that God is motivated by anguish like grief at evil. And God will act bringing judgement on his enemies, mirroring the plagues upon Egypt (v13-15). This provides a precursor to the new Exodus as God leads his people out of darkness and blindness into a new place, into light (v16). It is crucial though that Israel put their trust in God and not in idols (v17).

If God is about to lead out blind captives, then this describes the state of his people Israel. They have been blind and deaf to God, like their idols (remember chapter 6). The result is that they have been "plundered and looted", in fact, they themselves have become the plunder as they've been led away into captivity - something already happening to Israel and something that will happen to Judah in the future but Isaiah writes prophetically about with a present tense feel to emphasise its imminence. Their own rebellion has brought judgement upon them and that is why they need God's mercy and salvation (v18-25).

Who is the servant?

There has been much discussion amongst scholars over the identity of "the servant", elsewhere Cyrus, a future Persian emperor will be described as the Lord's servant but the wider prophecies seem to point beyond a pagan king. Is Isaiah himself God's servant? Well yes, he is there to serve God, but again as we push into the prophecies, we see that the servant is one who takes sin on

himself but also as we allude to here, there is a sense that he is given a share in God's everlasting glory too. Israel may also be seen in some senses as the servant and indeed the idea is that the nation were meant to be a witness to the world around them, God's ambassador. Perhaps too, their judgement and banishment has a representative feel to it. However, the New Testament makes it absolutely clear that these prophecies point specifically to Jesus. He is the one promised upon whom God's spirit will rest.

Ponder

Meditate on this promise concerning Jesus

"A bruised reed he will not break"

1. In what ways are you and me like the bruised reed?
2. What examples can you give of Jesus' tender care for you?

Thank you Lord Jesus for your humility, that you came not to be served but to serve. Thank you that you treat us with kindness and compassion. We are sorry that at times we have allowed others to try to grasp a share in your glory. Help us to worship and trust in you alone.

28. Rescuer

A dominant theme throughout Isaiah is the Exodus, just as Israel had been slaves in Egypt, so too, they would be exiles in Assyria, Babylon and Persia. Just as God had brought them up out of Egypt, so too, he would come to their aid, deliver them and lead them home.

Read Isaiah 43-45

In **chapter 43**, God repeatedly tells the people not to fear. They do not need to fear their captors and oppressors because God will redeem them. They do not need to fear the different challenges and obstacles along the way because God would lead them through fire and flood, just as he had led them through the desert, Red Sea and Jordan.

The Lord is the unique and only redeemer, without rival (**ch44**). This is true generally because he is God but also specifically because he is Israel's God and so he is the one who formed or created them, just as he is the one who gives life to the embryo in the womb. Again, this is reason not to fear and if the things we fear are the things that become our idols, then again we see the futility of idolatry. Notice in this chapter (**v28**), the specific prediction of Cyrus and his future role on God's behalf and say so in Israel's redemption.

Chapter 45 sees God calling and commissioning Cyrus as his appointed servant. He will use this Gentile., pagan emperor who does not know him to deliver the people. In fact, if we take the conservative view that there was one prophet responsible for the oracles in the book, then God is able to call Cyrus by name, many years before these events come to pass. Cyrus may well be the agent through whom God acts, but he is only God's instrument. It is God alone who saves.

Ponder

Mediate on:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you (43:1)

1. What are the things you are tempted to fear?
2. In what ways might those things become like idols to you?
3. What does it look like for you to be free from fear?
4. What does it mean to be redeemed?

There is a redeemer
Jesus, God's own Son
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah
Holy One

Jesus my redeemer
Name above all names
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah
Oh, for sinners slain

Thank you, oh my father
For giving us Your Son
And leaving Your Spirit
'Til the work on Earth is done

When I stand in Glory
I will see His face
And there I'll serve my King forever
In that Holy Place

Thank you, oh my father
For giving us Your Son
And leaving Your Spirit
'Til the work on Earth is done

There is a redeemer
Jesus, God's own Son
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah
Holy One

Thank you, oh my father
For giving us Your Son
And leaving Your Spirit
'Til the work on Earth is done⁸

⁸ Keith and Melody Green.

29. Idolatry is foolish

The things we fear and the things we trust are the things that become our idols. Because idolatry holds that captive power over us, the Bible treats it as not just something morally wrong but as something foolish, something to ridicule. The aim is that as we learn to laugh at our idols and at our foolish idolatry, they lose their power over us.

Read Isaiah 46-47

Isaiah names some of the gods that Israel and Judah have become beholden to. He points out that these idols have to be carried around, the people will even carry them off into captivity with them **(46:1-2)**. In contrast, God is the one who has carried his people. That's the difference between a false god and the true God **(46:3-4)**.

Again, God invites the people to attempt comparison between him and the gods, he is the uncreated one but these idols are made by the very hands of those who then worship them. Their idols are fixed in place, unable to hear, unable to act, unable to help **(46:5-7)**.

So, once again, God reminds them of his unique qualities, that he is without rival, incomparable, eternal, infinite and invincible. So, God is dependable, his word can be trusted. He is the one we should both fear and trust **(46:8-11)**. His specific promise is that he will bring salvation to "Israel my glory". Notice there that if he will not share his glory with anyone else and Israel is his glory, then he will not share his people, their worship and love with another god **(46:12-13)**.

So, if the false gods are not to be feared or trusted, then so too, Babylon. The people are not to fear their coming captors and so not to compromise in order to appease. Remember, that going back to Genesis 11, Babel/Babylon is set up as the rival to God and his people, the gateway to the gods which is in fact just a place of hubris and confusion. Therefore, God now pronounces judgement on that city **(47:1)**.

The people of Babylon are likened to a daughter, a princess who, in shocking language, is stripped, humiliated and shamed **(47:2-4)**. If Babylon had become proud and believed that the nations around looked to her and depended on her, then she was like a mistress with suitors. However, Babylon would lose her appeal and the New Testament would refer to her as nothing more than a common prostitute. Babylon had been given permission by God to act against Judah for his purposes but in pride and vanity, like Assyria gone beyond that. Now she will experience judgement. If those who walked in darkness got to see light, so those who thought they had light would find themselves in darkness **(47:5-7)**.

Babylon's idolatry is made explicit in **verses 8-11**, she made her own enjoyment her chief goal, she saw herself as unique, without rival and she believed herself to be indestructible. All of those claims belong only to YHWH and now Babylon will discover that they were false. God challenges Babylon, can her own gods and superstitions save her? Of course not and so judgement is surely coming **(v12-15)**.

Ponder

Meditate on 46:9

for I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,

1. What idols have you been allowing to share the love, fear, trust, worship that belong to God alone?
2. What will it mean for those idols to be ripped from the altar of your heart?

Lord God, keep us from idols.

30. Refined

A refiner's fire removes all of the dross and waste material so that only the precious materials are left. Israel and Judah experienced God's refining work through their suffering and captivity so that all of their false worship and shallow claims were removed leaving behind only true worship. That's what God does with us too, he purifies us so that our worship is pure and true.

Read Isaiah 48

The descendants of Jacob, particularly the tribe of Judah, are using the covenant names. They identify as Israel, they claim to worship Yahweh, they associate with Jerusalem as the place where they worship and find security. However, their claims are hollow, they are not true **(v1-2)**.

Because they do not speak the truth, God chooses to act and to bring about the judgement he warned them about. The warnings go all the way back to Moses' day **(v3)**. This is because they people have been stubborn and unrepentant. God compares their stubbornness to metals, resistant to bending and shaping, so that they are proud, or stiff necked, as though their necks were made of iron **(v4)**. By announcing in advance, things that will come to pass hundreds of years later, God prevents the people from seeing these events as being evidence of their idols at work, so that they will fear him and not idols **(v5)**.

Now, God uses Isaiah to declare new things. If the former things were warnings concerning judgement, the new things are to do with coming salvation. He has waited and has kept them from seeing and hearing these things, again so that they will know that this good news comes from him, it's not stuff their gods have promised, it's not stuff they already knew **(v6-9)**.

God acts in compassion and mercy, at this particular time (during the days of Hezekiah), holding back his final judgement. This is for his own name's sake, not for the benefit of others but so the world around and his people will see something of his patient character and learn to glorify him **(v10)**. However, God is still at work, refining his people, not in the same way silver is refined, with a literal furnace but the furnace is the suffering and trials they experience **(v11-12)**.

God calls the people to assemble, to hear him speak. They can trust his faithful word. At a time when they might be tempted both to look to Babylon for help and at the same time fear them, they are to do neither. Babylon only acts as God's agent, as YHWH permits and they too will be subject to the lord's judgement **(v13-16)**.

It is regretful that the people have failed to listen to God's warnings and promises. If they had heeded him, they would have experienced peace and prosperity, instead they must suffer war, judgement and exile **(v17-19)**.

Verses 20-22 act as a closing bracket to chapters 40-48, bringing us back to the opening promises that God would deliver the people from Babylon. A day will come when they are to flee Babylon and return to Jerusalem, repeating the original exodus.

Ponder

Meditate on v10.

Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver;
I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.

1. How is God refining you?

2. What is it that God's refining is removing from your life and worship?
3. What does pure and true worship look like?

Lord God, please forgive us for those times when we only pay lip service to you. Help us not to be those who take the name "Christian" but lack Christlikeness. Refine us, purify us and make us more like you.

31. Not forgotten

We may be tempted at times to think that God has forgotten us. There are two pieces of strong evidence here that he has not. First, that God did not forget or turn his back on his people. Secondly, that God did not forget or forsake Jesus.

Read Isaiah 49 -50

Israel sings as God's servant, called by God, named by him, equipped and commissioned to speak for Yahweh. Israel laboured in vain, unable to save (49:1-4). So, God responds. He has appointed a new servant who will succeed. This servant will not only bring the people of Israel back to God but will be a light to the Gentiles. Rejected by the nation, this servant will be exalted so that kings will bow and prostrate themselves to worship him (49:5-7).

This servant is a covenant, or the basis of God's agreement with the people. This points to him as the one who will bring about atonement. Again we are reminded that through him, the exiles will be gathered and brought safely home (49:8-13). However, Israel will continue to act stubbornly, thinking the worst of God, believing he has forgotten them. God's response is to insist that it would be as ridiculous to suggest he has forgotten his people as to suggest that a mother could forget about her child (49:14-18). Once more the promise of restoration is repeated (49:19-26).

God responds further to Israel's complaint that she is forgotten. He uses two images, first of the divorce certificate and then of the creditor. Although God could have issued a divorce due to Israel's adultery, he did not, although he in fact has no creditors note that he does act to redeem (50:1-3).

The servant speaks now. God has given the servant a voice, a message and a mission, to bring the people back. They have responded by seeking to shame and disgrace him but he has remained faithful to God and God has remained faithful to him, so that he is not disgraced. He is vindicated and no-one can bring a true accusation against him (50:4-9). So, the servant asks his own question. Who is there that will be faithful to him (50:10-11).

Ponder

Meditate on 50:10

Who among you fears the LORD
and obeys the voice of his servant?
Let him who walks in darkness
and has no light
trust in the name of the LORD
and rely on his God.

The truth is that we cannot save ourselves and we cannot save others. Instead, God has sent not just a servant but his son into the world to save sinners. We must put our trust in him.

Thank you God that you have not give up on us, nor punished us as we deserve. Thank you for Jesus our saviour. Help us to fear you with reverence and obey Jesus. Help us to trust and rely on you."

32. Wake up and look up

Do you know the story of sleeping beauty? A princess has been held captive by a sorceress who has used magic to end her into a deep sleep. Only her prince can wake her with a kiss. Sometimes it can seem that God's people have been enchanted into slumber. It certainly seemed that way in Isaiah's day.

Read Isaiah 51:1- 52:12

The repeated refrain in this section is that God's people are to wake up and get up. This means that they are to look up and discover truth and true hope by looking around them to see the reality that they need to know. They are to "look to the rock." Abraham and Sarah are compared to a rock from which God's people have been cut out of. They are meant to see that they share the familial likeness of their ancestors, they are meant to be a chip of the old block. They are to see how Abraham believed in God, trusting his promises. We of course look to Christ, the rock. We are in him (51:1-3).

They are to look up to God, raising their eyes to heaven to see how different and holy he is, to discover righteousness in his law and to see his salvation (51:4 -8). They are to discover true strength by looking back over their history and remembering how God saved them. Mythological language, the killing of a monster, Rahab is used to represent the defeat of Egypt and Exodus (51:9-16). They must also take time for introspection, to look in to themselves and see their true, sorry state, like drunkards, they need to acknowledge their condition if they are to experience rescue (51:17-23).

They are to look to the one "who brings good news". Just as there would be joy at the sight of the bare foot runner hasting to herald victory and deliverance, so they are to take joy and comfort at their coming deliverance. The promise is one of rescue from enemies and protection from future invasion and subjugation (52:1-12).

Ponder

Meditate, line by line on the description of the one who brings good news (52:7).

How beautiful upon the mountains

are the feet of him who brings good news,

who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,

who publishes salvation,

who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

1. Who brought the good news to you?
2. Consider Jesus as the one who not only brings good news but is good news

Dear Saviour, we thank you for those who brought the message of good news to us. Help us to pass on this joyful message to others. Even more so, we thank you that Jesus is the one who has brought good news to us.

33. Pierced for our transgressions

What is it that draws you to Jesus?

Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12

God promises that his servant will lead wisely and will be exalted, raised up so that people will look to him. However, how this will happen is deeply shocking. People will not be attracted to him because of beauty, glory and majesty, instead, something awful, brutal and ugly will happen to him that will disfigure him. Yet, it is by this very act, this very incident that he will have an amazing impact on the nations, silencing their rulers and causing them to look and turn to him (52:13-15).

This surprising twist is perhaps difficult to comprehend and so Isaiah asks the question “Who has listened to what we are saying? Who has believed it?” The Cross of course turns out to be an offence, a stumbling block and foolishness to many. In fact, the message throughout Isaiah has been that people have been unable to perceive and understand what God is saying and doing. However, the servant himself sees, hears, understands and obeys (53:1).

So, the servant is one who grows up, “like a root in dry ground”, or in a surprising, obscure and unexpected place. It almost seems as though he turns up out of nowhere. There’s nothing to point us to him as worthy of attention. He does not display outer strength, majesty or beauty (53:2). In fact, the opposite happens, he is rejected, people despise and look down on him, they mock him, reject him, hate him. The brutal events that leave him disfigured mean that people can’t even look directly at him and turn away in disgust, revulsion, shame, embarrassment, fear (53:3).

We associate the servant with shame, suffering and sorrow. However, Isaiah is clear that it is our shame and sorrow that he is carrying, not his own. However, we continued to assume that he suffered because he was guilty, because God was angry at him. Yet, we are reminded again that when he was wounded and crushed, it was for our sin (53:4-5). We, in contrast are like disobedient, foolish sheep wandering away from the shepherd (God) and safe pasture. This is why we needed him to come and deal with the problem of our sin (53:6).

If we have acted like disobedient wandering sheep, he by contrast is the obedient lamb going willingly to be sacrificed without protest (53:7). He is treated as a criminal, executed in the prime of life so that his death seems like a tragic waste of life. The reference to “wicked and rich could be because the rich were often considered to be corrupt, especially in prophetic literature, though there seems to be a hint here to the borrowed tomb which belonged to a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea (53:8-9).

Even more shocking throughout this, is the announcement that despite his innocence and our guilt, it was God’s plan and good purpose to crush him. This is because the servant is offering his life as a sacrifice for sin. He is bringing about atonement (53:10a).

However, death and judgement do not have the last word. He is cut off in his prime but somehow he gets to see future days and many children because his anguish or suffering means that many people are declared right with God (53:10b-11). The end of the chapter confirms that his sacrifice is effective, pleasing to God and so God rewards him (53:12).

Jesus, the suffering servant

It seems obvious to us that the servant in Isaiah has to be Jesus but we know that because the New Testament writers tell us so. People who don’t accept the New Testament as God’s Word however are more likely to question this and suggest alternatives including the prophet himself or the nation

of Israel. Yet, it should be clear from the text that the language here cannot point to finite and fallen human beings. Israel suffered because of her own sin and so was not in a position to pay the penalty for others. Indeed, given that Isaiah speaks to Jewish listeners first, it would require quite a level of logical gymnastics to suggest that he is telling the people that someone else has taken their place who just happens to be themselves.

So, Jesus is the one who is obedient and faithful where we are disobedient, the one who gives up his majesty and experiences brutal suffering that is horrific and disfiguring. He is cut off in his prime, executed with criminals at a young age and laid in a borrowed tomb. We are told that he does all this on behalf of us. He takes our guilt and shame on himself so that we might be declared righteous. God vindicates him, raising him from the grave and so he reigns for ever and “sees many offspring” as millions throughout the generations come to faith in him.

Ponder

Meditate on these words:

“He was pierced for our transgressions.” (53:5).

1. Name the specific sins you are prone to that Christ died for.
2. How does it make you feel to know that Christ died for your sin?

Lord Jesus, thank you that you took my place on the Cross. It was because of my sin that you died.

34. When the barren sings

The impact of Christ's death and resurrection on our behalf is meant to be life transforming and community transforming.

Read Isaiah 54-56

Isaiah pictures an infertile woman, seemingly deserted with it seeming impossible for her to have children. However, the barren one is blessed and now able to sing, she will have children and so will need to increase the size of her dwelling to accommodate them, The picture of course is of God's people restored to blessing and fruitfulness **(54:1-3)**. God himself is the husband and he renews his covenant with her. Her shame is removed and she no longer needs to fear **(54:4-8)**. Just as God promised Noah that there would not be a repeat of the flood, so too God's people know that there won't be a second punishment. The price is paid in full **(54:9-10)**. God's people can look forward to restored fortunes because God himself will teach them to follow his ways The Lord will protect them from their enemies **(54:11-17)**.

The promise of renewed blessing includes an invitation to come to God for provision. He will meet their needs freely even though they are unable to pay him back **(55:1-5)**. If there is an invitation to receive from God, then there is also a call to seek him, to follow him, to pay him due attention **(55:6-11)**. There is promise of joy and peace **(55:12-13)**.

God's people are to live in response to his salvation by seeking to live righteous and obedient lives. The call and promise is inclusive to all peoples, it embraces those who would have been excluded from worshipping God and participating in the Temple sacrificial system, even eunuchs and foreigners. The righteousness they are called to is a new kind of righteousness **(56:1-8)**.

The hope and life offered by God's chosen servant, the righteous shepherd is contrasted sharply and severely with the way that the false shepherds, the supposed spiritual leaders of Israel had failed to lead and instead through corruption oppressed God's people **(56:9-12)**.

Ponder

Meditate on these words from Isaiah 56:8

"The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts

1. Who are the outcasts in our society and your community?
2. Would you consider yourself an outcast?

Thank you Lord God that you gather the outcasts. Thank you that this means that I belong to you. Give me a love for those considered outcasts today and a desire to see them gathered to you.

35. God's chosen fast

Sometimes people make the mistake of thinking that the Old Testament is all about law and judgement whilst the New Testament is about grace, love and mercy. We rightly respond by showing that the Old is full of references to God's love and compassion whilst Jesus and the apostles all talk about what it means to obey God and the reality of judgement for sin. Similarly we may be tempted to think of Isaiah dividing up neatly between warnings of judgement in chapter 1-39 and promises of hope and restoration in chapters 40-66. However, there are many, repeated promises of hope in the first half of the prophecy and here towards the end, the readers are again challenged about sin, idolatry and hypocrisy.

Read Isaiah 57-59

Idolators may be tempted to look and see the struggle of the righteous and become complacent, thinking they have won but they have not, they are under God's judgement, whilst when the righteous die, they are rescued from suffering and enter peace with God (**ch 57**).

Meanwhile, it seems that the people put on an outer appearance of religious zeal, they turn up to worship and offer sacrifices, they even fast. However, they have a mechanistic understanding of these rituals, expecting to be able to get God to answer their prayers through their religious actions and so are surprised and complain when this does not happen. God says this is because they have missed what true fasting is about. Real fasting means that their hearts have been changed so that because they have met with God, their lives and actions change. Not only is there an abstinence from things including food and temptations but there is a positive and proactive concern to feed the hungry and house the homeless (**ch 58**).

It may seem at times that righteousness and justice seem far off as the wicked get their way. However, Isaiah encourages a fresh look. God cannot be thwarted and he will bring about true and lasting justice. As well as bringing forgiveness to the repentant, God will judge the unrepentant wicked (**ch59**).

Going Deeper

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus seems to demand even more of people than the Old Testament. He goes deeper, surface, external responses and lip service won't cut it. It's not just what we do or even what we say but rather our thoughts, motives and heart response that matter. That's what I think we are seeing at this stage in Isaiah too, a call for a deeper heart response. It's no surprise that this challenge to true repentance and true fasting comes at this stage after the promises of comfort, atonement and God's Spirit because without Christ, the Gospel and the Holy Spirit, such a heart change is impossible but with Christ and the Gospel all things are possible.

Ponder

Meditate on

“Is not this the fast that I choose:”

Take time to read back over the verses that follow.

1. What will this “fast” look like in your community?
2. How does the Holy Spirit need to work in your heart to make this possible?

Lord God work in my heart to give me a hunger and thirst for you and a compassion for the needy.

36. A new dawn

A big theme in Isaiah is “light in the darkness.” The situation described earlier in the book is of darkness falling on the land causing people to become lost, stumbling about. It’s the darkness of night because night and sleep are associated with sadness, despair and death. So, here in the later chapters, we are offered a new dawn, light has come. If this offered hope for the people of Israel, then it is also hope for you and me, whatever we are facing but it also includes a call to wake up and face this new day that God has given us.

Read Isaiah 60

If the people and the land have been in darkness, now, light is shining. This light promises new life, guidance and direction, healing and a new start. The light comes from God himself as he reveals his glory. In response, the people are to arise. It’s time to get up from sleep and they too are to shine. They are to reflect the goodness and glory of God in their lives. As they shine, this will draw people from other nations and lands to see what God is doing and to look to them for hope (v1-3).

If they are to shine, to be radiant, then this is something that they will need to work up from within themselves but will come in natural response to what God is doing. In echoes of Solomon’s day when the country prospered and the Queen of Sheba brought gifts, the land will prosper again. Farms will thrive with livestock, camel caravans will bring trade and income through the land, treasuries will be refilled with gold and the Temple will be rebuilt (v4-7). Even more wonderful than restored prosperity will be the joy of seeing the descendants of the exiles return (v8-9).

This reversal of fortunes will mean that instead of God’s people being used to build the cities and wealth of other nations where they had been dispersed to, they will be served by people from other nations. Again, there are echoes of the help that Solomon received from Lebanon when building the Temple. Open gated cities point to peace and security (v10-18).

The language of the last few verses is taken up by John in the final few chapters of Revelation, speaking of the new Jerusalem, the bride of Christ, the church. There as here, we are told that God’s presence will be one day so close to his people that he will be all the light they need, there will not be need for the sun because they will find in him the source of all light, life and goodness (v19-22).

How is this all fulfilled?

The New Testament is clear that these prophecies point to Christ. They are fulfilled in him. The people were not meant to look to a better, grander, physical temple. The rebuilt house would be destroyed in AD70 but Jesus is the one from whom streams of water flow out (c.f. Ezekiel 47). He was the place where God and man were reconciled and atonement offered. It is his church that is the new city without need for gates. That promise of complete peace and security points us forward beyond the now and not yet to when Christ returns.

Ponder

Meditate on verse 1

“Arise, shine, for your light has come.”

1. What does it mean to see God as light?
2. How has he come to us?
3. Are you awake?
4. How can you shine?

Come Holy Spirit, awaken your church, revive and restore us so that we may shine for you.

37. The Lord's favour

We now arrive at one of those big hitter chapters in Isaiah, one of the best-known parts of Scripture and the bit that Jesus takes and makes his manifesto at the outset of his ministry. Having seen how Isaiah has built up to focus on the Servant as the one who ushers in God's reign, stands in the place of God's people in bearing punishment and brings about restoration and renewal and now seeing how the servant's voice is now heard, we can see how obvious it would be for Jesus to start here.

Read Isaiah 61

The servant speaks, these are his words. He announces that he is the anointed one, this is a Messianic claim. He has been anointed with God's Spirit. This speaks of God's intimate and empowering presence with him and God has given him a specific task to do **(v1a)**. The anointing is a commissioning and enabling to do something, to proclaim good news for the poor, vulnerable and disposed. In fact, it's the proclamation of a specific event, The Year of The Lord's Favour. This is a explicit reference to the year of Jubilee, which would normally take place every 50 years and was a kind of "sabbath of sabbaths" when slaves were freed, debts cancelled and property returned. This was to be a Jubilee on a grand scale, a jubilee of jubilees marking the end of exile and slavery, the cancelling of Israel's debt of sin and the return of their inheritance, the land to them. So as well as being about favour, it's also about judgement or vengeance, wrongs are righted **(v1a -2a)**.

This means that the proclamation has an effect. It brings comfort to the distressed and grieving, their ritual mourning clothes and symbols such as ash on the head are replaced with beautiful wedding garments and their own anointing, the oil of gladness. They become like "oaks of righteousness" instead of the broken, burnt stump that they had become **(v2b-3)**. They then are able to return and rebuild the cities of the land including Jerusalem. This prophecy is intended to have an initial fulfilment so that on one level, the prophet speaks as the one who is anointed and commissioned, there will be a physical return to the land which will be like a Jubilee year under Ezra, Nehemiah and Zerubbabel. However, there is a greater fulfilment to come in Jesus **(v4)**.

As in the last few chapters, we see that return from exile will mean a complete reversal of fortunes. Instead of being strangers in another land, serving their captors, strangers will come to their land to serve them and tend to their crops and flocks **(v5)**. The idea is that if responsibility for day to day work is taken on by others then God's people are freed up to be called priests, the responsibility for intercession, worship and proclamation is no longer the preserve of one tribe **(v6)**. Shame and dishonour and replaced with blessing and honour **(v7)**.

God explains why this will happen. Notice that there is some blurring of lines here. Is it the same person speaking who is both "The Servant" and "The Lord"? God will do this because he loves justice and hates wrong doing. He acts because he is faithful, a covenant making and keeping God **(v8-9)**.

The right response to this is delight and praise. We can speak of God's actions as being one of reclothing us. God's people are his bride and where this bride has been in mourning, she is now clothed in her wedding garment. Those garments represent justification or righteousness. We are now seen to be right with God **(v11-12)**.

Ponder

Meditate on these words from v10.

for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;

he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,

1. How do you see yourself?
2. How does God see you?

Lord God, we praise you. You have been so good to us. You have redeemed us, bought us back, set us free from sin and death and you have clothes us with salvation and righteousness. Thank you Lord.

38. The New Jerusalem

Remember how back in chapter 22, judgement on Jerusalem was announced? Well, we've been told in chapter 40 that the prophet is to speak comfort to the city and now as we come to the close of the book, God himself sings over the city. Keen eyes will observe that the end of Isaiah is very closely mimicked by the end of Revelation. There we will see a new heavens and earth as we do in Isaiah 65 and just as the end of the Bible turns our focus onto a new Jerusalem, so too here in Isaiah 62, that's where our gaze is directed.

Read Isaiah 62

A song is to be sung over the city and the singer will not be silenced. They sing of Jerusalem's salvation and restoration. If the city was abandoned and desolate during the exile, it is now restored to its former glory and the eyes of the world are on it. Jerusalem is now the crowning glory of all God's works (**v1-4**).

The city (as in Revelation), is portrayed as a beautiful bride. Notice that this is used in two ways. First, to show the affection of the inhabitants (her sons) for the city. Secondly, to describe God's relationship to her. He is the bridegroom who admires, loves and takes joyful delight in his beautiful bride (**v5**). God will protect the city and keep her safe. He does this by appointing lookouts, watch men on the walls to keep guard so that no invader can come in to seize or plunder the city (**v6-9**).

Once again, there is a call to prepare the city and its inhabitants for their chosen king. Salvation is coming and God has declared this wonder to the nations. God makes his people, in his chosen city holy, setting them apart to serve him, a purified and beautiful bride. The name "not forsaken" might be considered an understated way of declaring that the city is loved, nurtured and protected (**v10-12**).

The Bride

When John picks up this imagery and language at the end of Revelation, he makes clear that the bride's identity is the Church. Paul in Ephesians 5:22-32 uses marriage imagery to show Christ's sacrificial, redemptive and purifying love for the church. This love of Christ for church and church for Christ offers an example of what Christian marriage should be like.

We may consider on a practical level too how God keeps his promise to protect his new Jerusalem by setting watchmen, the elders and leaders in The Church with responsibility for teaching the church and keeping a look out for wolves.

Ponder

Mediate on

"The Lord delights in you" (v4)

1. What does it mean to hear these words said about Christ's church throughout history and around the world today?
2. What does it mean to hear those words said about your local church?
3. What does it mean to hear those words said about you?

Jesus you are at the centre of it all. You are the one who delights in us and we delight in you

39. Vindication

The “Day of the Lord” is both a day of “favour”, a jubilee of jubilees and a day of vengeance. God pronounces judgement on sin and evil. For believers in Jesus, there is the good news that their sin was judged on the Cross but for those who reject Jesus, there is still the judgement day to come.

Read Isaiah 63-64

A warrior leader is seen returning from the fray, from Edom, one of Israel’s rivals. Who are they? We are meant to recognise them as the anointed one, the servant, saviour, king. Their clothes are bloodstained and this will cause us to think of Christ’s death on the Cross but the imagery here is more of the bloodshed in battle. Even as God acts in mercy to save his people, he also acts to bring vengeance against the enemies of him and his people **(63:1-6)**.

This contrasts with his steadfast love to rebellious Israel. They were stubborn and rejected him, leading to discipline. Note the striking language “He became their enemy.” However, he did not give up on them. There is a repeated historical pattern of rescue and salvation that goes back to Moses day **(63:7-14)**.

These eternal truths are designed to provoke the people at the point when they are under discipline to turn and repent. There is a point when despite their ancestral heritage, they cannot claim to be true Israel, they are a people that Abraham would not know and would disown. This truth about Israel also offers hope to Gentiles who put their hope in Christ. We can even more recognise that we are not known by Abraham and yet God shows us mercy **(63:15-19)**.

So, now in **Isaiah 64**, the prophet speaks, sings, prays on behalf of the people at the very point when they are under judgement, as they face exile. He pleads with God to act as he did in the past, to show compassion and power, to come and deliver his people. He acknowledges God’s awesome power **(64:1-4)** and contrast his holiness with their uncleanness **(64:5-7)**.

He recognises God’s sovereignty. He is like a potter who can form the clay as he desires. Again, even as he recognises God’s right to do as he wills, he pleads with God to show mercy **(64:8-12)**.

Ponder

Meditate on the opening words of Isaiah 65

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down

1. Give thanks for the truth that God has already done this through Christ’s first coming, death and resurrection, as well as through the Holy Spirit.
2. Consider the implications of this verse pointing to the final day when Jesus returns.
3. How might we pray this prayer for our context now? What would it look like for God to “rend the heavens and come down” into your situation?

We pray “come Lord Jesus.” It’s a prayer that you would intervene in the affairs of our world today, in what is happening in our church, in what is going on in my life. But we also pray “Come quickly Lord Jesus” as we look forward to your coming again in power and glory to make everything new.

40 The New Heavens and New Earth

What is your experience of living in “the now and the not yet” between Jesus first coming and second coming? Are you looking forward to his return, excited about eternity? Do you ever become despondent and ask “How long?” Does it ever feel as though God is distant and silent?

Read Isaiah 65 -66

Yahweh’s response to the plea for mercy from the people is that he has not lacked mercy, not hidden away from them. Rather, he has consistently been there, pleading with them, calling them to repentance, offering mercy. However, they were the ones who refused. They rejected his law as symbolised by eating unclean food whilst at the same time claiming that they were holy. They were guilty of legalistic and ethnic pride. That’s why they experienced judgement and why there would be both judgement and mercy, vengeance and salvation to come **(65:1-16)**.

It is because God is just, merciful and holy that he is about to do a new thing. He will create a new Jerusalem and a new creation. On the one hand, we might see this new creation language which also echoes back to Eden as imagery to give a sense of how distinct, new and glorious the experience of God’s people will be when brought back to the land. However, we are pushed beyond this to see not just a description of world changing circumstances for Israel but throughout the book it has been clear that God has a bigger plan which goes beyond the fulfilment seen in return from exile. God’s plan is to deal with all sin and evil in order to usher in the renewal of all creation under Christ’s reign **(65:17-25)**.

A new heavens and a new earth, with a new Jerusalem point to a new temple but who can build such a house for the Lord? Well a new humanity is required, men and women that reflect God’s character and are obedient to him. We see Jesus as both the new man and the new temple **(66:1-6)**.

Jerusalem is likened to the a mother, going through pregnancy and into labour, giving birth to a son. Her suffering and trials are comparable to birth pangs. Out of Jerusalem’s humiliation and discipline, new hope, new life will come through the person of Jesus and the Gospel **(66:7-14)**.

Isaiah finishes with a restatement of God’s future and eternal purposes. There’s the promise again of anew creation and that God’s people will be with him for ever. At the same time, there’s the warning of final, permanent judgement and eternal punishment **(66:15-24)**.

Ponder

Meditate on these words

“For behold, the LORD will come in fire,
and his chariots like the whirlwind,
to render his anger in fury,
and his rebuke with flames of fire. (66:15)

And

For as the new heavens and the new earth
that I make
shall remain before me, says the LORD,
so shall your offspring and your name remain.

1. Compare and contrast the difference for those under the warning and those under the promise.

2. How does this affect your attitude towards friends and neighbours?
3. How will your actions change as a result

Thank you Lord God for the great and certain hope we have of eternal resurrection life in you. We look forward to the fulfilment of the promise, a new heaven and a new earth. Help us not to be complacent or selfish. We long that our friends and family might benefit from your grace and enjoy these promises too. Help us to warn them of the dangers of judgement and tell them the good news about Jesus and salvation.

Part 3 Applying Isaiah

I. Avoiding wrong turnings

How do we apply the book of Isaiah to our lives and context today? Well, first of all, it's important that we don't attempt to pick it up and synthesise a set of principles straight from 700BC to 21st century life. Instead, whenever we pick up an Old Testament book, we apply it first to Christ and then through Christ to life today. This protects us from a number of risky wrong turns that have plagued the modern church. In particular, it protects us from:

- **Legalism:** An attempt to find a set of rules and habits which if strictly obeyed, will in a mechanical manner will guarantee God's blessing.
- **License:** A reading of the Old Testament which treats it as all about a Law which is hostile to grace and so redundant following the death and resurrection of Jesus.

There are a few ways in which those errors have appeared in recent times. In particular, the Prosperity Gospel takes the promises of restoration and renewal and applies them directly to individual believers today as physical promises, meanwhile Theonomism and Christian Nationalism do the same but with specific countries being encouraged to seek the benefits.

So, we apply through Christ by first of all seeing how those prophecies pointed to him. This is helped and made obvious because the Jesus and the New Testament authors frequently signal how Isaiah points to him. Jesus is the obedient servant who willingly suffers for the sins of the people. He is the one who brings good news of freedom to the captives. Jesus is the child of the virgin, Immanuel, God with us. It is he who causes light to shine, in fact he is the light of the world and so, he is the one who is the mighty God and the prince of peace.

Not only that though but Jesus as the obedient Son and suffering servant can be seen as fulfilling Isaiah because he would have applied the teaching of the book to himself. Jesus, unlike the disobedient people of Isaiah's day, heard and understood, saw and perceived. Jesus represents the faithful remnant. He is the stump of Jesse. Jesus stands with Isaiah, willingly saying "Here am I, send me." Jesus refuses the temptations offered him to idolatry, worshipping God alone. Jesus shows love and compassion for the vulnerable and needy, "a bruised reed he will not crush."

We apply Isaiah to Christ and we apply it through him. This means that when we apply the book to ourselves, we realise that we are in Christ. We benefit from its promises because we are co-heirs with him, because he has taken the judgements of the book on himself and because in that he has obeyed it, he imputes that obedience to us, so that God looks at us as though we had always kept his law and heeded his prophets, perfectly.

It also means that if Christ is pointed to as Immanuel, the Mighty God with us, that idolatry and deafness/blindness to God is about whether we accept Christ and worship him alone or reject him. We do not want to be blind, deaf and dumb like our idols, we want to be like Christ and that requires him to open our eyes and ears.

If Theonomism and Prosperity Gospel heresy encourage us to attempt to apply the promises of restoration immediately and individually or to a nation (sometimes referred to as overreached eschatology), the temptation for many Christians is the opposite, to see those promises as merely metaphorical and spiritual. Yet, if Scripture makes it clear that there are promises concerning Christ still to come, that a day will arrive when he will return to fully and visibly establish his eternal reign, then we can look forward to seeing those promises of physical renewal and restoration of creation fulfilled completely, not just for one bit of land but for the whole creation.

J. The idols must go

The things that we fear and the things that we put our trust in are the things that become our idols. They become our idols because we give power and authority to them. We think that they have control and influence over our lives. We are scared that if we do not do what they want and require then they have the power to harm us. We hope that if we appease them, keep them happy that we can get them on our side, they won't hurt us but instead will look after us. Maybe instead they'll even hurt our enemies. That in a nutshell is how idolatry works.

I've argued that Greg Beale's interpretation of Isaiah 6 is right, that the people are unable to perceive and understand because they have become like their idols. They are just like those carved images with the appearances of noses, mouths, ears and eyes but the inability to truly smell, hear and see. That's God's judgement on them for becoming like their idols in other ways by absorbing the evil values of Canaanite, Moabite and Egyptian gods and goddesses.

We become like our idols when we allow the values and priorities of the world around us to shape our thoughts, emotions and actions. We are meant to allow Christ and his word to dwell richly in us, we are meant to be filled with the Holy Spirit, communion is meant to symbolise our feeding on Christ. Instead, we imbibe the things of this world. We allow our thoughts, our imaginations, our ambitions, our words to be shaped by the images we look at on screen and in magazines by the song lyrics we listen to and sing along with and by the advice of the friends we choose to surround ourselves with. We begin to look like our idols. We dress like our heroes, we adopt the fashion of the age with the specific body image statements it makes and the messages that come with that about whose image we are or are not made in.

If God's people had become like their idols, then the point of God's message through Isaiah was that those idols had to be destroyed and removed from the land so that the place of God's covenant blessing could be purified.

The application for us today then, with a little bit of help from Romans 8 is that the idols that we have come to cling to have to be stripped away from our lives until we are depending on Christ alone. So, it is helpful for us to think about what those specific idols might be. What I would expect to find is that in one sense, we will have different individual idols but at the same time our idols are the same because they all reflect the beliefs of society and culture around us.

Here are some things that I've seen become idols over recent years.

1. Brexit in the UK and equivalent forms of national populism around the world. This means that for some in the UK that the equivalent idol has been the EU. In the United States it would be Trumpian MAGA (Make American Great Again) and dare I say it, Scottish Independence, Irish Nationalism and Unionism can both also take on this role.
2. Class identity. Pride in being working class or aspiration to rise through the classes and find not just economic prosperity but cultural respectability too.
3. Body image. Being the right weight, shape, appearance. This can include the desire to be thin or shapely and the desire for muscular strength too.
4. Sexuality and sex. Seeking comfort, intimacy, value, pleasure.
5. Success in education and employment. This can be about material security, status and popularity.
6. For a few years COVID and our responses to it became in different ways idols, whether a complete fear of COVID and belief that everything must stop or a defiance against measures seeing freedom as under attack.

7. Specific individuals that become opinion formers from columnists and politicians through sports and pop stars to social media influencers. People we look up to, dream of meeting and winning the attention of and who we listen to and seek to imitate.

These are the different types of idols but what they have in common is that they are ways of seeking value through attention and acceptance, of looking for security and safety or seeking comfort and satisfaction.

Where are you looking to for value? How are you seeking to satisfy your needs? What gives you security. If you are finding those things in anything or anyone other than Christ, then know these two things.

- All of these idols will ultimately fail, they won't satisfy you, won't keep you safe, won't give you true value.
- All of these idols must go. Only Christ can truly reign in our lives. There is no place for rivals for his rule and his affection.

K. Better the devil you know?

As I write, there is an intense and frightening war very close by. In 2022, Vladimir Putin order his troops to invade Ukraine. As well as the immediate horror of bloodshed, the wider consequences have been disruption to food and fuel supplies to much of Europe and beyond as well as the threat of other countries being sucked into the conflict and with the potential for nuclear weapons at some point to be used.

With regular frequency, you'll see a newspaper article about how Vladimir Putin is seriously and terminally ill. Usually this will come accompanied by some speculation regarding his mental health and the possibility that he is acting irrationally in Ukraine, raising the spectre of him going further in his supposed madness and ushering in a nuclear Armageddon. You will then see further commentary to the effect that there are people in Moscow becoming concerned about Vlad, worried that he is out of control, frustrated at his failure in Ukraine and alarmed at the damage that his ill advised campaign has done to Russia. The rumours circulating, which have in fact persisted from very early in the war are that at any point soon, these men will launch a cue to remove Putin. This is something that many are hoping for with the belief that it will bring the war to an end and with an end to the war, an end to the wider disruption and damage it has caused including the energy crisis.

However, before we get our hopes up, it is worth considering a few things. It strikes me that if Putin is both as weak and as dangerous as supposed that people around him could have moved against him sooner, yet they have not. They have allowed him to stay in office and they have happily gone along with his orders. This at least hints at the possibility that there are enough people with enough power around the president who are happy for him to continue in office and happy with the policies he is executing.

It is possible that some of them are happy to encourage Putin in his Ukrainian misadventure, assuming that a heavy, debilitating loss there will work for them in the long run, that it will weaken both Vladimir and his potential anointed successors, enabling them to move against him or be well placed to succeed him when the right time comes. However, it is equally possible that many around him share his worldview, his strategy and even his tactics.

Even if some do not agree with his specific tactics, this does not mean that they don't share the same vision of seeing Russia restored to previous glories, the fall of the USSR avenged and the west humbled. Some may believe that the invasion of Ukraine was strategically correct but has been poorly executed. They may believe that Russia should go harder into the country, they may be more willing to use tactical nuclear weapons there to fulfil their aims. Who knows? It could even be Putin's own memories of happier relationships with Britain and the US in the past that hold him back from worse atrocities. They may believe that the invasion was the wrong move or that there is no other option at least for the time being to withdraw and reach a settlement. However, if they share the same strategic aims, this means that a withdrawal does not guarantee an end to cold war type tactics that could continue to cause suffering in Ukraine and the wider region for years to come.

We simply cannot assume that things will be better when Putin goes. Things might get worse. That's where the old saying "better the devil you know" starts to come into play.

One of the themes in the book of Isaiah is that God's people have a tendency to fear immediate threats and hope that those oppressing them will fail and fall. At that stage in history, the people of Judah saw Sennacherib and the Assyrians as the main threat. They would have done anything to help hasten his demise. Yet, the prophet Isaiah persistently warns that there were greater threats

and worse things to fear than the Assyrian armies. Sennacherib and his empire would in time fall, all of earth's empires decline and fail eventually, some gradually over many years, some without warning, seemingly overnight.

However, the people needed to know that there was a greater threat and not just the looming shadow of stronger powers still such as the Babylonians and the Persians. No, their greater danger came from God's judgement. This also meant that they could not put their hope in earthly alliances or the demise of immediate threats. Their hope needed to be in God and his coming king.

Putin's regime will one day fall. The man himself will die and have to give an account before God. Eventually others will gain power within Russia or other regional and world powers will supplant their threat. However, this should not be where our hope is. Nor should our fear be of Putin, his regime or even the threat of nuclear attack.

We are taught to fear God, to recognise that our sin deserves eternal judgement. We are called to put our hope in him and in the mercy and forgiveness available to us in Jesus Christ.

L. There is a hope

Throughout Isaiah, among all the warnings of judgement and desolation are scattered promises of salvation and restoration for God's people. In the early parts of the book, the theme of judgement is the one that dominates but there is light in the darkness with the calling of a messenger, glimpses of God's glory and the sign of Immanuel. When we get to the second part of the book, it is the light that dominates as the focus is placed fully on the obedient servant who suffers for his people and ushers in God's jubilee. Isaiah finishes with a vision of a new creation, populated by God's people with a new Jerusalem central and God in the midst of his people.

The end of Revelation revisits this vision. The new Jerusalem is of course, the Church, the bride of Christ. This means that to some extent, fulfilment is already happening. The future is breaking in. The new Jerusalem is here, the bride is being made ready for the wedding feast. However, the bridegroom is still to arrive, the feast is yet to come. We live in "the now and the not yet." There is still hope to look forward to, what John Piper calls "Future Grace."

Applying Isaiah must take account of these truths. We live in "the now and the not yet." There is a greater future hope to look forward to. If we are to place ourselves in the storyline of the book, then we find ourselves in the latter chapters but not at the end. We live knowing that the words of comfort in Isaiah 40 have been fulfilled and our sin has been paid for. However, we are not yet at that point where the new creation is fully realised. The lion does not yet lie down with the lamb.

We might see ourselves as identifying with those returning exiles. We are in Isaiah 43, there are still the dangers of fire and water ahead but we do not need to fear them. This means that we are also in Isaiah 35, the future is breaking in, the desert begins to bloom in response to the Gospel.

This means two things. First, that we pray "your kingdom come" and we work towards that. We live as God's people now, showing the world what it means for God to be present with us. This will include a commitment to social justice and to wise stewardship of creation. Most importantly, we must be messengers of good news who call others to arise and shine. We point people to Jesus as the one who was "pierced for their transgressions." We proclaim freedom. We call people to prepare the way for the Lord's imminent return.

Secondly, it means that we keep looking forward in hope. We do not need to fear the last danger of death. We will go through that water and arrive safe on the other side with Jesus. Even more, we long for Christ's return and cry out "Come quickly, Lord Jesus."

M. Summing up the message of Isaiah

The message of Isaiah can be summed up as follows. First, that we are rebel sinners. We have been unfaithful to God and chosen idolatry over worship and trust in him. Isaiah warns us that we will become like our idols, impotent, hardened, powerless, ignorant.

Secondly, the consequence of sin and idolatry is God's righteous judgement. The penalty for sin is death and we are all subject to this. Death is portrayed in Isaiah as exile. For Israel and Judah, this meant exile from the land into captivity. That exile represents the exile we all face through spiritual death, exile from God's loving presence and captivity to sin, Satan and fear.

Thirdly, Isaiah points us to Christ as the one who has come to bring good news. All though we deserve judgement, he is the one who has received that punishment in our place. He has taken the penalty for our sin and his righteousness is imputed to us.

Fourthly, Isaiah announces hope. Because Christ has received the judgement and penalty for our sin, there is forgiveness. This means that we can enjoy new life in him now. We also look forward to ultimate fulfilment when Christ will return to banish evil and suffering for ever. We look forward to eternity in his presence, living in his new and renewed, perfect creation.