

# **St John's Church, Blackheath**

## **Isaiah**

### **The Two Cities**

#### **Reading Plan: September to December 2019**

“Come now, let us settle the matter”, says the LORD.

“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword” (Isaiah 1:18-20, NIV)



## Introduction

Between the beginning of September and the beginning of December this year, our Sunday morning sermons will be looking at the book of Isaiah. This reading plan is designed to accompany the sermon series.

Parts of Isaiah are familiar to most Christians: for example, the prophecy of the birth of Immanuel (Ch.7 v.14); the prophecy beginning *“For to us a child is born”* (Ch.9 v.6); and the suffering servant prophecy (Ch.52 v.13ff). Many songs are drawn from Isaiah: for example, *“Everlasting God”* (*“Strength will rise as we wait upon the Lord”*), which is based on Ch.40 vv.29-31; the Battle Hymn of the Republic (*“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord”*) which is based on Ch.63 vv.1-6; and over a third of Handel’s Messiah, which is drawn from many different parts of the book. And many ideas that we associate with other parts of the Bible come originally from Isaiah (notably the idea of a new heaven and earth, which is in Ch.65 v.17).

Yet most Christians feel a bit daunted by the book as a whole: it is very long (much the longest book in the Bible other than the book of Psalms); its style is so different from the gospels, New Testament letters and other parts of the Bible with which we are familiar that it feels very foreign; there is a lot of repetition in it; and in places it is quite hard to follow without guidance.

That said, it is a wonderful book and it is well worth getting to grips with it. It is quoted more often in the New Testament than any book of the Old Testament other than the Psalms. It contains so much that points forward to Jesus that Isaiah has been called *“the fifth evangelist”* (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John being the others). It is central to our understanding of God’s nature, our relationships with him and his plans for salvation and judgment.

The reading plan takes you through the whole book at a pace that roughly matches the pace of the related sermon series. It would be good to ensure that you hear each of the sermons in the series. Hence, if you are not able to come to one of the morning services on a particular Sunday, it would be worth listening to the sermon at some time during the following week. All of our sermons are posted the Church website, normally within a few days of being given (see <http://www.stjohnsblackheath.org.uk>).

Because Isaiah is so unlike most other parts of the Bible, the Appendix to this plan (on pages 63ff) starts with a section entitled “Understanding Isaiah”. This describes the nature of the book and the way in which it is structured as well as giving other information that, it is hoped, will be of assistance. You may find it helpful at least to glance over this before starting the reading plan so that you know what is in it and can consult it as needed.

The Appendix also contains sections that describe the historical and geopolitical background to Isaiah. I hope that these will be sufficient to enable you to follow the main historical issues that are relevant to understanding the book. In addition, where necessary, the reading plan itself contains further historical information. Sometimes this is important either because a passage cannot be understood without the background information or because the historical fulfilment of one prophecy is intended to give us confidence that another prophecy will in due course be fulfilled.

That said, a word of warning is appropriate: it is easy to get bogged down in the historical background to Isaiah. When reading the book, it is important to remember that the prophecies have been preserved for us not because of their historical relevance but because of their abiding relevance through time. Some commentaries spend more time analysing the original historical context of a particular passage than its importance for today. That is a trap to be avoided!

This reading plan is not a commentary on Isaiah. It is not possible to do more than point to the main themes and teaching. On some occasions you may wonder what a particular part of the passage you are reading means and be frustrated that the plan does not address the issue. If so, please feel free to speak to me or email me and I will try to assist you.

All Biblical quotations in the plan are taken from the translation of the Bible that we use in St John’s (the 2011 edition of the NIV). If you use another translation, you may find some things that are said in the plan hard to follow. If so, you could get the NIV translation by downloading one of the free Bible apps that are available.

Like 1 Samuel, which we studied last year, Isaiah contains a number of things that may challenge your view of the world and of God. You may find some parts of it difficult to understand, uncomfortable or even worrying. If

so, don't ignore the issue and move on. Take a note of it and then discuss it with others. For example, you could raise the matter in your small group or you could talk to a member of the Preachers' & Leaders' Team. It is only by doing this that we allow God, through the Bible, to change us.

I warn that on some days you will need to read a rather longer chunk of the Bible than you are probably used to reading. I have tried to keep the length of the passages below (normally, well below) 35 verses but, in a few cases, this has proved impossible without losing the synchronisation with the sermon series or omitting parts of the book from the reading plan. I am sorry about this. I hope that it does not result in you falling behind. If it does, please persevere: the whole book deserves your attention.

In any event, as with previous reading plans, I suggest that each day you:

- Pray that God would enable you to understand the part of Isaiah that you will be looking at and how it applies to you and would use it to change the way that you live your life;
- Read the passage set for the day and then the relevant notes;
- Prayerfully reflect on what the passage is saying, considering the questions set out in italics at the end of the notes for the day;
- Again, pray: thank God for the things that you have read about; ask that he would enable you to absorb what you have learned about him; say sorry for anything that the passage indicates that you should have done which you have not done (or vice versa); and seek the help of the Holy Spirit to do better in the future.

Finally, I need to record my debt to the late Alec Motyer. I never met him but I could not have written this reading plan without his commentary on the book of Isaiah. The commentary took over thirty years to produce but, when it appeared, it incorporated the results of a lifetime of prayerful study and reflection. It was well worth waiting for.

Richard Godden, 12<sup>th</sup> August 2019

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## Overview of the sermon series

Our sermons on Isaiah between September and December will be as follows:

| <b>Date</b>           | <b>Title</b>                        | <b>Passage</b>     |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Sept  | Choosing a City                     | Isaiah 1:1-2:5     |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> Sept  | Hiding from reality                 | Isaiah 2:6-22      |
| 15 <sup>th</sup> Sept | Encountering God (All age service)  | Isaiah 6:1-13      |
| 22 <sup>nd</sup> Sept | God's dream                         | Isaiah 11:1-16     |
| 29 <sup>th</sup> Sept | King of the Cities                  | Isaiah 25:1-26:6   |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> Oct   | The God who saves                   | Isaiah 35:1-10     |
| 13 <sup>th</sup> Oct  | Faithfulness in the face of danger  | Isaiah 37:1-20     |
| 20 <sup>th</sup> Oct  | All age service                     | -                  |
| 27 <sup>th</sup> Oct  | The God of all comfort              | Isaiah 40:1-31     |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> Nov   | The suffering servant               | Isaiah 52:13-53:12 |
| 10 <sup>th</sup> Nov  | Come and feast (Remembrance Sunday) | Isaiah 55:1-13     |
| 17 <sup>th</sup> Nov  | All age service                     | -                  |
| 24 <sup>th</sup> Nov  | The Glory of the Lord               | Isaiah 62:8-63:6   |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Dec   | A fresh start                       | Isaiah 65:17-66:24 |

Note: The titles of the readings for each week in this reading plan are not always the same as the titles of the sermons for the relevant week set out above. This is because the reading plan covers more ground than the sermons will be able to cover.

## Overview of the reading plan

|               |                    |                |                      |
|---------------|--------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| <b>Week 1</b> |                    | Thursday       | Isaiah 33:1-34:15    |
| Monday        | Isaiah 1:1-2:5     | Friday         | Isaiah 34:16-35:10   |
| Tuesday       | Isaiah 1:2-1:9     | <b>Week 7</b>  |                      |
| Wednesday     | Isaiah 1:10-1:20   | Monday         | Isaiah 35:1-35:10    |
| Thursday      | Isaiah 1:21-1:31   | Tuesday        | Isaiah 36:1-37:20    |
| Friday        | Isaiah 2:1-2:5     | Wednesday      | Isaiah 37:21-37:38   |
| <b>Week 2</b> |                    | Thursday       | Isaiah 38:1-38:22    |
| Monday        | Isaiah 2:6-2:22    | Friday         | Isaiah 39:1-39:8     |
| Tuesday       | Isaiah 3:1-4:1     | <b>Week 8</b>  | Pause for thought    |
| Wednesday     | Isaiah 4:2-4:6     | <b>Week 9</b>  |                      |
| Thursday      | Isaiah 5:1-5:30    | Monday         | Isaiah 40:1-40:31    |
| Friday        | Matthew 21:33-46   | Tuesday        | Isaiah 41:1-42:17    |
| <b>Week 3</b> |                    | Wednesday      | Isaiah 42:18-43:21   |
| Monday        | Isaiah 6:1-6:13    | Thursday       | Isaiah 43:22-44:23   |
| Tuesday       | Isaiah 7:1-8:8     | Friday         | Isaiah 44:24-45:25   |
| Wednesday     | Isaiah 8:9-9:7     | <b>Week 10</b> |                      |
| Thursday      | Isaiah 9:8-10:4    | Monday         | Isaiah 46:1-48:22    |
| Friday        | Isaiah 10:5-10:34  | Tuesday        | Isaiah 49:1-50:3     |
| <b>Week 4</b> |                    | Wednesday      | Isaiah 50:4-51:8     |
| Monday        | Isaiah 11:1-12:6   | Thursday       | Isaiah 51:9-52:12    |
| Tuesday       | Isaiah 13:1-14:27  | Friday         | Isaiah 52:13-53:12   |
| Wednesday     | Isaiah 14:28-16:14 | <b>Week 11</b> |                      |
| Thursday      | Isaiah 17:1-18:7   | Monday         | Isaiah 54:1-54:17    |
| Friday        | Isaiah 19:1-20:6   | Tuesday        | Isaiah 55:1-55:13    |
| <b>Week 5</b> |                    | Wednesday      | Isaiah 56:1-57:21    |
| Monday        | Isaiah 21:1-23:18  | Thursday       | Isaiah 58:1-59:15b   |
| Tuesday       | Isaiah 24:1-24:23  | Friday         | Isaiah 59:15c-59:21  |
| Wednesday     | Isaiah 25:1-26:21  | <b>Week 12</b> | Jesus the fulfilment |
| Thursday      | Isaiah 27:1-27:13  | <b>Week 13</b> |                      |
| Friday        | Isaiah 28:1-28:29  | Monday         | Isaiah 60:1-61:9     |
| <b>Week 6</b> |                    | Tuesday        | Isaiah 61:10-63:6    |
| Monday        | Isaiah 29:1-29:24  | Wednesday      | Isaiah 63:7-64:12    |
| Tuesday       | Isaiah 30:1-30:33  | Thursday       | Isaiah 65:1-65:25    |
| Wednesday     | Isaiah 31:1-32:20  | Friday         | Isaiah 66:1-66:24    |

## Week 1 (2<sup>nd</sup> September to 6<sup>th</sup> September)

### Isaiah 1:1-2:5 - Choosing a city

*Note: If you haven't yet read the introduction to this reading plan, would you do so now? It contains an explanation of how the plan should be used.*

#### **Monday: Isaiah 1:1-2:5**

This week comprises a gentle introduction to Isaiah: we have five days to look at 36 verses. Today we are taking an overview of the whole passage. We will look more closely at the various parts of it over coming days.

The book opens by telling us its essential nature: it comprises the “*vision*” of Isaiah concerning “*Judah and Jerusalem*” (Ch.1 v.1). The word “*vision*” does not imply that Isaiah saw the things that he records. It simply means that he was given special spiritual insight by God. The reference to “*Judah and Jerusalem*” is less a reference to them as places than a reference to their inhabitants. It should alert us to the fact that, at heart, this book is about the people of God. As we shall see, it has a lot to say about the world in general but its focus is God’s people, including identifying who they are.

Today’s passage comprises a summary of many of the main issues that are to form the subject of the rest of the book. As the reference to various kings of Judah (v.1) implies, the prophecies in it were originally given in specific historic contexts to specific people. You will find further information about this context in paragraph 2 of the Appendix (pages 67ff). However, it is notable that the prophecies in the passage lack any historic references. Their significance transcends their original contexts. That is why we find them in the introduction to the book of Isaiah.

The objective of the introduction is not to enable us to debate theological issues. It presents a challenge: we need to respond and “*walk in the light of the LORD*” (Ch.2 v.5). That is the challenge of the whole book.

*Look over the whole passage. What do you think are the three or four key points that it is making? What questions arise in your mind? Write these things down for future reference as you work through Isaiah.*



## Tuesday: Isaiah 1:2-1:9

The book of Isaiah opens with God summoning the whole of creation to hear his accusation against his chosen people (v.2). What is that accusation? It is that those people have rebelled against God (v.2). They have “*forsaken*”, “*spurned*” and “*turned their backs on*” him (v.4e-g).

God chose the Israelites to be his people (Deuteronomy 14:2b). He rescued them from Egypt and looked after them before settling them in his Promised Land (see the books of Exodus to Joshua generally). As it is put in v.2c, he “*reared children and brought them up*”. This makes it all the more awful that they have rejected him: it is, in a sense, contrary to nature (v.3).

It is also contrary to common sense. God warned his people that, if they rebelled against him, he would deal severely with them (Deuteronomy 4:25-27, in which, as in v.2 of today’s passage, the whole of creation is called to be a witness). He points out that he has done so (vv.5-7). So why don’t they take the point? Why do they keep rebelling? It is stupid (v.5ab).

The result of all of this is that the people are guilty before God (v.4b) and they are “*given to corruption*” (v.4d; the underlying Hebrew word implying that they are spoiled or ruined). They were meant to be God’s holy people (Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 14:1-2a) but in fact they are a disgrace to God.

In these circumstances, the most surprising thing is that God has not completely destroyed the people. Instead, some people remain (v.8, where the expression “*Daughter Zion*” is a personification of the City of Jerusalem and the people who inhabit it). Isaiah recognises that this is entirely as a result of God exercising restraint (v.9; quoted in Romans 9:29).

The sin of the people is contrasted with the majesty and holiness of God, which is implicit in the terms used to refer to God: “*the LORD*” (vv.2/4e), “*the Holy One of Israel*” (v.4f) and “*the LORD Almighty*” (v.9a). These terms also stress the relationship between God and his people. Their significance is explained in paragraph 4 of the Appendix (page 71 below).

1. *What does this passage tell us about the character of God? Think of what it says he has done and reflect on the terms used to refer to him.*
2. *To what extent is the description of the people applicable today?*

## Wednesday: Isaiah 1:10-1:20

In yesterday's passage, we considered God's accusation against his people. Today we look at the way out of the resulting problem.

God summons his people to listen to him (v.10). In doing so, he stresses the seriousness of their situation by referring to them as the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Those people were notorious for their sin against God and, equally importantly, remembered for what God did in response: he destroyed them (Genesis 18:20-19:29). The implication is that a response is required from God's people if destruction is to be avoided.

The response of many people in such a situation would be to apply themselves to religious observance and, in the context of ancient Israel, this meant offering sacrifices and celebrating the appointed religious feasts. Such things had been commanded by God (see especially the book of Leviticus) and, at least in some cases, related to the cleansing from sin. So religious observance must be the solution, mustn't it?

God gives an emphatic "no" to this question (vv.11-15). Far from being the solution, sacrifices and festivals are part of the problem. Isaiah is not denying that God ordained these things. The issue is that the Israelites are engaging in them without their hearts being turned to God. They are simply engaging in outward religious observance. As a result, they are merely "*trampling [God's] courts*" (v.12) and their offerings are "*meaningless*" (v.13a). In fact, what they are doing is "*detestable*" to God in the same way that pagan religious worship is (v.13b; c.f. Deuteronomy 18:9).

The solution is for the people to "*make [themselves] clean*" (v.16). But how can this be done when sacrifices are rejected by God (v.11)? Isaiah does not tell us at this stage. Instead, he presents the people with a choice: they have an opportunity to turn back to him, which they may accept or reject. If they return to him, their sins (no matter how bad) will be blotted out but, if they continue to rebel against him, they will be destroyed (vv.18-20).

*In what ways do people today (including us) fall into the trap of confusing religious observance with devotion to God? Do you fall into it? Have you turned back to God and sought his cleansing from sin? If not, why not? Thank God for providing a way back to him.*

## Thursday: Isaiah 1:21-1:31

Today's passage comprises a carefully constructed poem (vv.21-26) and two additional prophecies that expand upon what is said in the poem. Once again, God lays out his accusations against his people and says that he is going to take action in consequence of their behaviour. However, whereas in vv.2-9 the focus is on God's judgment, in vv.21-31 the focus moves beyond this to God's restoration of his people.

God begins by contrasting what the Israelite people once were ("*the faithful city ... full of justice*") with what they have become ("*a prostitute ... [full of] murderers*"; v.21). The image of the people of God being married to God and becoming unfaithful to the point of prostitution is used on a number of occasions by the Old Testament prophets (e.g. Hosea 1-2). God calls people to an exclusive relationship with him and we must never forget it.

Isaiah has already indicated that most people have deserted God and his ways but, in today's passage, his anger is particularly directed at the leaders of Israel. They don't do what they should do (e.g. protect the poor) but instead use their offices for personal gain (v.23).

Isaiah reminds us of the majesty and power of God (v.24ab) and tells us that God regards those who reject him as his "*enemies*" (v.24cd). God refers to his "*wrath*" (v.24c) and says that he will "*avenge*" himself (v.24d). We will consider this in more detail in coming weeks. For the moment, simply note that God says both that he will impose retribution and that its purpose is purging and restoration. The result will be that the "*prostitute*" will be called "*the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City*" (vv.25-26).

In other words, God is pointing to two "*cities*" (both of which, of course, represent the people living there): the then current city of Jerusalem, living in rebellion against God, and the city that God will create, living in communion with him. The inhabitants of the latter will be those who are "*penitent*", whom he will deliver "*with justice*" (v.27); those who do not repent will "*perish*" (v.28, which vv.29-31 expand upon). We have a choice.

*Do you accept that God has a right to your exclusive allegiance? Why or why not? Think about the character of God and acts of God. Have you given that allegiance, being penitent for past failures to do so?*

## Friday: Isaiah 2:1-2:5

In Ch.1, Isaiah's focus has been on God's chosen people, the Israelites. God has presented his case against them (Ch.1 vv.2-9/21-23); he has stated that their religious observance is meaningless and demanded a change of heart (vv.10-20); he has said that he will destroy those who continue to rebel (vv.20/24-25/28-31); but he has also offered a way back for those who are penitent saying that he will deliver them "*with righteousness*" (vv.18-19/25-27), although he has not said how this will be done.

In today's passage, the focus turns to a new issue: the future of those who are not Israelites. Abraham had been told that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 18:18) and thereafter various things had been said and done that indicated that God's blessing was not confined to his chosen people, the Israelites (e.g. see the story of Ruth). However, it was not until Isaiah prophesied that God revealed the full extent of his global purposes.

Isaiah tells us what is going to happen "*in the last days*" (v.2). This is an expression frequently used in the Old Testament to refer to the undated future that will comprise the culmination of world history. The expression "*the day of the LORD*" often has a similar meaning.

Mount Zion was the hill in Jerusalem on which the temple was built. This was the place where God symbolically dwelt on earth. Isaiah says that this place will be "*exalted*" and "*all nations will stream to it*" (v.2). In other words, the people of all nations will come to worship the LORD, the Holy One of Israel (to use the name and title of God often used by Isaiah). They will learn from God and, implicitly, obey God (v.3); "*the word of the LORD*" will go out from Jerusalem (v.3g); God will be the overlord of all nations and the result will be global peace (v.4).

All of this may sound like a dream and it raises as many questions as it answers but the key point to note is that Isaiah is telling us that the penitent redeemed people of Israel (those referred to in Ch.1 v.27) will share their salvation with people of all nations. God's purpose in salvation is universal.

*Think about the vision of the future. What are its key features? Do you look forward to the realisation of this vision? Why or why not?*

## Week 2 (9<sup>th</sup> September to 13<sup>th</sup> September)

### Isaiah 2:6-5:30 – The LORD’s vineyard

#### Monday: Isaiah 2:6-2:22

Last week’s passage introduced us to the main issues that the book will address. Chs.2-5 continue the introduction by expanding on these issues.

Today’s passage opens with a poem about God’s people (vv.6-9). It indicates the contrast between the nations referred to in the preceding few verses (vv.2-4) and Israel: the nations will be drawn to the ways of Zion (vv.2e/3a) but the people of Zion, the Israelites, conform to the ways of the nations (v.6c-e; the words translated “*embrace pagan customs*” literally mean “*clasp hands with foreigners*”); the nations will seek spiritual benefit (v.3) but the Israelites heap up material wealth (v.7ab); the consequence of coming to God will be peace for the nations (v.4) but the consequence of following the practices of the nations is war (v.7cd; horses being needed in Israel for war not agriculture); the nations will want to learn from God (v.3de) but the Israelites are following other gods (v.6bc-e/8); the nations will be helped by God (v.4) but the Israelites will be opposed by God (v.9).

Having stated this, Isaiah goes on to elaborate on the judgment that the God has in store (vv.10-21; see also Amos 5:18) and people’s reaction (which is stated three times: vv.10/19/21). He does not say when what he envisages will happen but merely refers to the fact that “*The LORD Almighty has a day*” when he will act (v.12). Just as vv.2-4 looked forward to a day of redemption for the nations, vv.6-21 look forward to a day of final judgment for all those who oppose God, including the people of Israel. That day of judgment will have several aspects: people will be humbled (vv.12/17); idols will be shown to be worthless (vv.18/20); God will be exalted (vv.17c/19/21). The conclusion that we should draw is obvious: v.22.

1. *The New Testament repeatedly warns us against idolatry (e.g. Galatians 5:20, 1 Peter 4:3, 1 John 5:21). What may comprise idol worship today? Consider Colossians 3:5. Are you guilty of this?*
2. *Does your life resemble v.3 or vv.6-8? In what ways are you tempted to rely on people rather than God (v.22)? What are you going to do about this?*

## Tuesday: Isaiah 3:1-4:1

Isaiah continues his denunciation of the behaviour of the Israelite people and his warning about its consequences.

In Ch.2, his focus was on the rejection of God. This is his big concern and it is, of course, the most basic problem of humanity from which all other sins flow (v.8). In Ch.3, he mentions other sins: oppression (v.12), greedy unjust leadership (v.14-15), haughtiness (v.16), reliance on wealth and outward show (vv.18-23), use of religious charms (v.20) and general wickedness (v.11). The people *“have brought disaster on themselves”* (v.9).

Isaiah again emphasises the majesty and power of God by using the composite title *“The Lord, the LORD Almighty”* (see paragraph 4 of the Appendix) and he imagines God solemnly taking his place in court as the judge of the world (vv.13-15). In Ch.2, the description of God’s sentence is lacking in specificity. In Ch.3, it is much more specific. God will take from Jerusalem and Judah *“both supply and support”* (v.1). This is an idiom meaning *“every means of support”*. God will remove his protecting hand and the result will be devastating chaos (vv.1-7) and deprivation of the things which people have valued and on which they have relied. Nonetheless, once again, we get a hint that judgment is not the final word for Israel: there are some who are *“righteous”* and will be saved (v.10).

The use of the phrase *“in that day”* in v.7 may imply that this prophecy is about God’s day of final judgment. However, the specificity of Ch.3 suggests that it is a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 586 BC, when there was complete societal collapse (see Lamentations, which reflects the position following its destruction, and paragraph 2.5 of the Appendix). The fulfilment of the prophecy in Chapter 3 thus provides grounds for confidence concerning the fulfilment of the prophecy in Ch.4 vv.2-6, which we will consider tomorrow.

1. *Does the idea of God’s judgment worry you? Why or why not? Do you agree that God should be angry about wrongdoing? Try to work out precisely what concerns you and discuss this with others in the Church.*
2. *Think of the specific sins mentioned in this passage. Are you guilty of any of them? If so, what are you going to do about it?*

### **Wednesday: Isaiah 4:2-4:6**

Isaiah has focussed on the sins of the Israelite people and their coming judgment but he has twice mentioned that there will be some who survive that judgment (Ch.1 v.9 and Ch.3 v.10). He has also told us that people of other nations will eventually come to worship God (Ch.2 vv.2-4). He now brings these things together: *“in that day”*, those Israelites who survive the judgment (Ch.4 vv.2-3) will be joined by those who assemble from the nations to worship God (v.5) so as to form a new community living under the protection of God (vv.5-6), which is analogous to the protection he gave his people at the time of the Exodus (v.5; see Exodus 13:21-22).

These people will *“be called holy”* (v.3; in other words, they will be set apart by and for God) and they will in some way be cleansed and purified from their sins (v.4; note that the expression *“the women of Jerusalem”* picks up the same expression in Ch.3 v.16). They will be spiritually changed.

The people of the new community are those who *“are recorded among the living in Jerusalem”* (v.3). This does not mean, *“those who happen to be on the census records”*. Literally, the words are *“who are written down for life in Jerusalem”*. This is a reference to God’s *“book of life”*, which is first referred to by Moses (Exodus 32:31-33) and thereafter on many occasions in the Bible (e.g. Philippians 4:3 and Revelation 20:15). God chooses who is within the new redeemed community, God cleanses them (v.4) and God protects them (v.5). Salvation is all God’s work.

But what is the reference to *“the Branch”* (v.2) about? Some believe that it refers to crops (which the underlying Hebrew word may do; c.f. Psalm 65:10). However, the expression is *“the Branch of the LORD”* and other passages suggest that this is a Messianic title (e.g. Jeremiah 23:5). Isaiah is introducing a theme that is one of the most important of his whole book: the salvation of which he is speaking will be effected through God’s anointed saviour, *“the Messiah”* (see paragraph 5 of the Appendix). At this stage, we are told nothing about *“the Branch”*, not even that we are dealing with a *“he”* rather than an *“it”*. We will learn much more in coming weeks.

1. *What are the practical implications of God’s goal being a multi-national community of his people? C.f. Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11.*
2. *How does “judgment” and “fire” fit with salvation? C.f. Luke 3:16-17.*

## Thursday: Isaiah 5:1-5:30

If we had been the editor of the book of Isaiah, we might have ended the introduction at the high point of Chapter 4 but Isaiah's purpose is to make an appeal to people: listen and return to God (see Ch.2 vv.5/22). Hence, he ends the introduction with a further warning.

Today's passage comprises two parts: the famous "Song of the Vineyard" (vv.1-7) and a further passage relating to God's judgment (vv.8-30). The passage largely repeats what has already been said in Chs.1-4 but the messages are conveyed in different, memorable turns of phrase.

The relationship between a land owner and his vineyard is a common analogy for the relationship between God and his people. Isaiah himself has already used it twice, in Ch.1 v.8 and Ch.3 v.14, and Jesus was to use it several times (e.g. Matthew 20:1-16 and Matthew 21:33-46, which is tomorrow's passage, and Luke 13:6-8).

Isaiah imagines that an owner of land prepared ground on a hillside and planted the vines before standing watch over the vineyard (v.2a-d). He naturally looked forward to a crop of good grapes but in fact all he got was bad fruit (v.2ef). Could he have done more for the vineyard (v.4)? Clearly not. So, what should he do? The vines are no good so he will destroy the vineyard (vv.5-6). The lesson is obvious: v.7. God is saying that he will bring upon the Israelites the covenant curses that he told them that he would bring (see Leviticus 26:27-35 and Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

Isaiah then denounces those who disobey God and indicates that judgment awaits them (vv.8-30). Many sins are mentioned but the central theme is the defiance of God: people sarcastically doubt that God will act (v.19, in essence, "*So, where is this God of yours?*"); they reject his moral order (v.20) and believe that they know best (v.21), they are self-absorbed hedonists (v.22); they do not act justly (v.23). Consequently, God will act, using foreign nations to effect his judgment (vv.26-30): the Israelites will be exiled (v.13).

1. *What does the song of the vineyard teach about the character and actions of God? Look back at Ch.1 v.2.*
2. *How can we avoid the attitudes set out in vv.18-21 and, especially, being "wise in our own eyes"? C.f. Proverbs 3:5-8.*



## Friday: Matthew 21:33-46

Jesus told a parable that is similar to Ch.5 vv.1-7 (see Luke 13:6-8). He also used the analogy of a vineyard and its owner on other ways including in the parable in today's passage (the "Parable of the Tenants"), which is the only part of this reading plan that is not taken from Isaiah. Jesus uses the analogy to make a point that is slightly different from that in Isaiah 5:1-7.

Jesus began, as Isaiah did, by noting the care that the owner devoted to establishing and, particularly, protecting the vines (v.33; c.f. Isaiah 5:2). He then added a twist: the vineyard was rented out and the owner withdrew (v.33). Instead of getting his fruit directly, the owner was entitled to the payment of a proportion of the fruit as rent (v.34). As in Isaiah's analogy, the owner did not get any fruit but the fault in Jesus's analogy lay not with the vines but with the tenants, who did not respect the owner's rights and ruthlessly sought their own advantage (vv.35-39).

Jesus's hearers recognised that the owner would punish the tenants and obtain new tenants (v.40). This enabled Jesus to draw a lesson from the parable but it may not have been quite the lesson that the people expected or even fully understood. They probably thought that the lesson was simply that God would punish and replace those who have been unfaithful to him, primarily their religious leaders (i.e. the lesson in Isaiah 5). If so, they would not have been wrong but their understanding would have been incomplete.

Jesus's focus was not so much on the initial rejection of the owner but on the subsequent rejection of the owner's son. He was talking, of course, about himself and claiming that he was the son of God who had been sent to earth by God and whose rejection by the people would be the reason for God taking membership of his kingdom away from them (note that v.43 begins "*Therefore*"). Furthermore, although the Pharisees rightly perceived that they were the primary target of the parable, Jesus did not limit his condemnation to them (vv.43-44).

1. *Think about Jesus's statements about the consequences of the rejection of the owner's son. What does this say about his view of himself and his role?*
2. *What are the implications today of Jesus being the "cornerstone" (v.42; see 1 Peter 2:4-8)?*

## Week 3 (16<sup>th</sup> September to 20<sup>th</sup> September)

### Isaiah 6:1-10:34 – Immanuel

#### Monday: Isaiah 6:1-6:13

The main part of the book begins with Isaiah's overwhelming vision of God and call to be a prophet. Isaiah does not say what God looked like but the statement that he was sitting on a throne (v.1) suggests that he was in the form of a man. He is described as being "*high and exalted*" (v.1). These words similar to those used of the "suffering servant" of God described in Ch.52 v.13, who the New Testament identifies with Jesus (e.g. 1 Peter 2:21-25). We are left with the impression that Isaiah saw that servant of God and the apostle John confirms this: Isaiah saw Jesus (John 12:41).

Isaiah's reaction was like that of many people who realise that they are in the presence of God: he was terrified on account of God's holiness and his own sinfulness (v.5; c.f. Peter's reaction to Jesus; Luke 5:8). Furthermore, in his vision, he immediately received a sign of purification and was told "*your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for*" (vv.6-7). He received instant absolution not on account of anything he had done but owing to something to do with the temple altar, the place of sacrifice in Old Testament times.

Having been accepted by God, he immediately offered himself as God's servant (v.8) and received his commission (vv.9-10). Verse 10 is not an order to be obscure when speaking. He was being warned of the inevitable hardening effect of his words in many people. Sadly, the preaching of the Gospel often has this effect and, on several occasions, Jesus and the apostles quoted what God said to Isaiah to explain what was going on in their day (see Matthew 13:10-15; John 12:37-40 and Acts 28:25-28).

God's reply to Isaiah's final question (v.11a) ends with a cryptic phrase: "*the holy seed will be the stump in the land*" (v.13e). What is this "*seed*"? The righteous Israelites? Isaiah's prophetic words? Or something or someone sent by God? The remainder of the book will provide more information.

1. *Think about God's holiness. What are its implications for people?*
2. *Have you accepted God's commission to serve him? And do you recognise that it may be a tough one? Why or why not?*

## Tuesday: Isaiah 7:1-8:8

Today's passage relates to important events in Isaiah's early ministry (five or so years after his call to be a prophet). If you have not done so already, please read *"The historical background"* in the Appendix (page 67ff below).

When the kingdoms of Aram and Israel (also called "Ephraim") attacked Judah, the king and people of Judah were scared (Ch.7 v.2). Isaiah, at God's prompting, urged that they *"Keep calm and carry on"* (vv.3-9b). He offered Ahaz a sign that what he said was reliable (v.10). Asking for a sign may be indicative of unbelief and thus be sinful (Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 4:7) but refusing God's offer of a sign, as Ahaz did, is indicative of a lack of willingness to believe. Isaiah, therefore, pronounced God's judgment on Ahaz (vv.13-17).

Ahaz had probably already decided to submit to the king of Assyria and seek his intervention (see 2 Kings 16:7). Isaiah told Ahaz that he would get what he had requested but the result would not be what he was hoping for (v.17). As Isaiah had previously said, the result of not standing firm in his faith would be that Ahaz did not stand at all (v.9c) and this prophecy was to be fulfilled: the Assyrians brought trouble to Judah not help (2 Chronicles 28:20) and Judah was never again a truly independent nation.

Ahaz's unbelief did not in any way alter God's plans in respect of Aram and Israel (vv.7-8). Isaiah, therefore, expanded upon what he had said and warned of the coming destruction of both kingdoms (Ch.7 v.18 to Ch.8 v.8).

All of this is important to our understanding of God's sovereignty but there something else to note: his prophecy of the birth of Immanuel (Ch.7 v.14). Isaiah said that, in the light of Ahaz's unbelief, God would himself impose a sign on the house of David (not Ahaz personally; v.13). It may appear that a fulfilment in the near future is contemplated but the time frame is open ended (v.16) and there is clearly something very unusual about the coming child since we are told that the land of Israel is *his* land (Ch.8 v.8). Quite apart from his virgin birth (Ch.7 v.14), this will clearly be no ordinary child!

1. *What does this passage teach about God's control over world affairs?*
2. *How should Ahaz have responded to what he was told by Isaiah? How should we do so?*

### **Wednesday: Isaiah 8:9-9:7**

The prophecies in yesterday's passage were largely depressing from the point of view of the Israelite people but, in today's passage, there is a change of tone: having been told that Assyria would crush the kingdom of Israel (vv.4-8), we hear that the further plans of the nations will then be thwarted since "God is with us" (v.10c), which is literally simply "Immanuel".

Isaiah tells us of the instruction that God gave him: fear God and not anyone else (vv.12-13, freely quoted in 1 Peter 3:14). Then, he explains that, as in the case of Ahaz, God's holy presence will be a stumbling block for many (v.14, which is frequently alluded to in the New Testament: see 1 Peter 2:8; Romans 9:33; 1 Corinthians 1:23; Luke 2:34; remember Ch.6 vv.9-10).

Isaiah says that he is waiting on God (v.17) and accepts that he and his children are signs from God (v.18; quoted in Hebrews 2:13). Indeed, his name and those of his children were full of meaning (see paragraph 2:1 of the Appendix on page 67). He urges us to trust only in God's word (vv.19-20) and warns of the consequences of failing to do so (vv.20-22).

This leads on to one of the most famous passages in the Bible. Isaiah uses words that suggest that the future he describes already exists (the so-called, "prophetic perfect"), thus implying that God's word is certain of fulfilment. Having warned of the gloom that awaits those who reject God's word (Ch.8 vv.19-22), he asserts that there will be no more gloom for those who trust God (Ch.9 v.1) since God will deal with the enemies of his people (vv.2-5). The places referred to in v.1 were in northern Israel and were the places to suffer most when the Assyrians invaded in 734/3 BC but the prophecy far transcends the events of Isaiah's day. As in Ch.7, we learn of a child being born (v.6) who, extraordinarily, is the "Mighty God" (v.6d; the other terms used in v.6 also implying his divinity). This child will be a king in the line of David and will achieve God's purposes in justice and salvation (v.7). God born on earth: Immanuel! Unsurprisingly, the New Testament applies the passage to the birth of Jesus (Matthew 4:12-16).

1. *Think about what Ch.9 vv.6-7 tells us about who Jesus is and what he has done and will do. Why is he a stumbling block (Ch.8 v.14)?*
2. *How does the passage as a whole help us to fear God alone (Ch.8 v.13)?*

## Thursday: Isaiah 9:8-10:4

Characteristically, having described the glorious plans of God and the future of his redeemed people, Isaiah immediately returns to the harsh reality of the present: sin and God's inevitable judgment.

As in the second half of Ch.7, his focus is on the fate of the northern Israelite kingdom, the Kingdom of Israel (also referred to as "*Jacob*"). He appears to be referring to the situation after the devastation caused by the Assyrian invasion in 734/3 BC. The people are still optimistic (vv.9-10) but their confidence is misplaced: God is equipping their enemies (v.11).

The reason is that, despite what has happened to them, the people have not repented and turned back to God (v.13). As in Ch.1 vv.5-9, Isaiah points out that they have failed to draw the right conclusions from events in their lives. They continue to do all those things that led to God punishing them previously (Ch.10 vv.1-2). Therefore, God will continue to condemn them and take action against them (Ch.9 vv.14-17). The result will be further disaster (vv.18-21) and there will be no escape from it (Ch.10 vv.3-4).

Isaiah was, of course, right about all of this. Under King Hoshea, the people of Israel thought that they could recover and challenge Assyria again. They were wrong: they suffered a further invasion, the devastation of their land and a three-year siege of their capital, Samaria, culminating in its destruction in 722 BC. The people were deported and were never to return. The Kingdom of Israel was history.

1. *Why did the Israelite people not draw the right conclusions from events in their lives? How can we avoid a similar failure of understanding?*
2. *Today's passage is quite short and simply underlines points that we have considered previously in this reading plan. In contrast, the first three days of this week introduced some major new points. You may, therefore, like to look back over Ch.6 v.1-Ch.10 v.4 to make sure that you have taken on board the key points. Note also how God's warning to Isaiah about the reception of his message (Ch.6 vv.9-10) was soon fulfilled and think about how the words and images used to convey the nature and character of God in Ch.6 are reflected in the acts of God that are described in the following chapters.*

## Friday: Isaiah 10:5-10:34

Today's passage is one of the greatest declarations of God's sovereignty in the Bible. Most of what it says is implied in previous chapters of Isaiah but none of them states the position as clearly as this one.

Israel was going to be destroyed by the Assyrians, who had recovered their power in the second half of the eighth century BC (see Ch.7 v.18 to Ch.8 v.8 and Ch.9 v.8 to Ch.10 v.4). There were rationally understandable reasons for their recovery. The Bible does not dispute this. However, it indicates that secular accounts of the recovery (or indeed any other world affairs) miss the most important point: God himself was the ultimate cause of what happened. The Assyrian king (it is unclear precisely which king is in mind) was simply *"the rod of [God's] anger, in whose hand is the club of [God's] wrath"* (v.5). It was God who sent him on his mission (v.6): he simply *"whistled"* to summon him to his task (Ch.7 v.18; c.f. Ch.5 v.26b). This occurred notwithstanding that the king did not acknowledge God and was perhaps the most powerful person in the world of his time.

So was the Assyrian king, therefore, acting justly? No, he wasn't! His objectives were evil (v.7), he was arrogant (vv.8-9) and saw God as nothing more than one not very good idol among many (v.10). He believed it was his own greatness that resulted in his successes (vv.13-14). God was thus using an evil king to secure his just purposes.

So, would the Assyrian king be let off by God on account of that? No, he wouldn't! Today's passage is a denunciation of the king (hence, it starts, *"Woe"*, v.5). God would not allow Assyrian evil to go unpunished any more than he would allow Israel to get away with its evil. God would soon show the king who was in control (vv.16-19).

Of course, all of this had, and has, implications for God's people and, in vv.20-33, Isaiah considers some of those implications. We will revert to them in a few weeks' time. For the moment, just note that the theme of a remnant of God's people being saved is mentioned again (vv.20-23).

1. *How does this passage help us to understand the interaction of God's sovereignty and human responsibility?*
2. *Do you find the passage comforting? Why or why not? See vv.24-25.*

## Week 4 (23<sup>rd</sup> September to 25<sup>th</sup> September)

### Isaiah 11:1-20:6 - The Sovereign Lord

#### Monday: Isaiah 11:1-12:6

Isaiah's vision of God ended with a cryptic reference to "*the holy seed*" being "*the stump*" (Ch.6 v.13e). He now tells us that "*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse*" (Ch.11 v.1a). Jesse was King David's father (1 Samuel 16:10-13). Isaiah is saying that there will be a new Davidic king but he clearly does not have in mind an ordinary king.

We are told that, in contrast to King Ahaz, this coming king will be totally committed to God and equipped by God (vv.2-3a). He will not judge by outward appearances but on the basis of righteousness and justice (v.3b-4b). Righteousness and faithfulness will be his defining characteristics (v.5).

Was Isaiah simply speaking of an exceptional king? No. He describes the king using language that elsewhere used about God (e.g. compare v.4 with Psalms 96:13 and 98:9); the king is clearly the divine child of Ch.9 vv.6-7 (compare v.4 with Ch.9 v.7); and the king is, mysteriously, the "*Root of Jesse*" (v.10) as well as a branch from Jesse's root (v.1b). Furthermore, this king will usher in the realisation of God's perfect world as envisaged in Ch.2 vv.2-4, Ch.4 vv.2-6 and Ch.9 vv.2-7). He will bring peace (vv.6-9); he will be God's "*banner for the peoples*", the means by which God gathers the people of the world to himself (v.10; c.f. Ch.5 v.26a) and God's means of reuniting the remnant of his Israelite people (vv.13-16). In short, the king is both God's anointed saviour, the Messiah, and God incarnate.

Isaiah was doubtless amazed at what had been revealed to him. He envisages the praise that will arise when his prophecy is fulfilled (Ch.12 vv.1-6). Yet he could only guess at how it would be fulfilled. We are in a more privileged position: we know about Jesus. He is the "*Root of Jesse*" (Romans 15:8-12; Revelation 22:16), on him God's Spirit rests (Matthew 3:16) and he is "*the banner for the peoples*" (John 12:32).

1. *In what ways did Jesus's earthly ministry match up to the description in Ch.11? Which parts of this description remains to be fulfilled?*
2. *Think about Ch.12. Respond to all that you have read in Isaiah so far.*

## Tuesday: Isaiah 13:1-14:27

The praise in Chapter 12 brings the second major section of the book to a close. Isaiah now moves on to a long section (Chs.13-27) that might be entitled “God’s universal sovereignty and plans”. This expands on some of the themes of Chs.6-12.

Most of this section comprises prophecies against various nations but, with a couple of exceptions, there is no evidence that the nations concerned ever knew about them. They were addressed to the people of Israel. In addition, although specific historic situations underlie the prophecies, their abiding relevance is not in these situations but in the principles of God’s governance of the world that these situations reveal and exemplify. Indeed, Isaiah frequently moves back and forth between the specific and the general.

Today’s passage mainly comprises long prophecies about Babylon (Ch.13) and its king (Ch.14) but there is a brief prophecy about Assyria (Ch.14 vv.24-25). The fulfilment of the prophecies about Babylon lay some years in the future but the prophecy against Assyria was fulfilled in 701 BC. That fulfilment thus acted as a sign that the prophecies about Babylon were reliable, as they proved to be when Babylon was destroyed in 689 BC.

Having studied Ch.10 vv.5-19, it should come as no surprise that God states that he has summoned (human) armies to act against Babylon (Ch.13 vv.2-4; the agent of God’s action being the Medes, v.17). Likewise, we should anticipate that the reason is the sin of the people of Babylon (v.9). God has a moral purpose and he states, as a general principle, that he “*will punish the world for evil, the wicked for their sins*” (v.11). God has a plan for and sovereignty over the whole world (Ch.14 vv.26-27).

The Bible does not obscure the awfulness of God’s judgments. The day of his judgment will be “*a cruel day*” (Ch.13 v.9b) of dreadful acts (vv.14-16) without mercy (v.18b). This is a grave warning to those who oppose God but a comfort to those who do not (Ch.14 vv.1-3).

1. *What conclusions did God want the Israelites to draw from this passage? What equivalent conclusions might be drawn by us today?*
2. *What are the implications Isaiah’s assertion that God punishes nations for their wrongdoing?*



## Wednesday: Isaiah 14:28-16:14

The prophecy relating to the Philistines is dated to the year in which King Ahaz died (716/15 BC; v.28). We learn that the Philistines had sent envoys to Judah (Ch.14 v.32a). We don't know their mission but the Philistines constantly plotted against Assyria and the death of the pro-Assyrian Ahaz may have suggested an opportunity to form an alliance with Judah. This makes good sense of Isaiah's prophecy, which essentially says that the Philistines should not rejoice that Judah is weak because Judah will be safe and they will be destroyed. Judah can rely on God and does not need the Philistines (vv.29-32). God's people should not rely on pagan assistance.

The prophecy about Moab is very different. The first part (Ch.15) is a lament (see v.5) and it is followed by what seems to be a poetic description of the diplomatic efforts of the Moabites in the face of an attack: they send lambs as tribute to Jerusalem (v.1; which had been done before, see 2 Kings 3:4) and they plead for protection for their people (vv.2-4b).

Verses 4c-5 relate to the Moabite pleas. Isaiah has told us that the coming Messiah will bring peace and protection not only for Israel but for all nations (see especially Ch.11 vv.10-12). There was thus the possibility of help for the Moabites from the coming Davidic king (the "Branch"). Pagan peoples may turn to God and rely on him. The Moabites had appealed for help from Judah but they should instead look to the LORD. He sustained Judah and he could sustain Moab (perhaps *through* Judah).

That should have been encouraging to the Moabites (if they knew of the prophecy) but there was a problem: the pride of the Moabites (v.6). We don't know the details of what happened but, despite sending tribute and appealing to Judah for help, the Moabites seem to have remained arrogantly confident in themselves. Perhaps they needed to accept the LORD and declined to do so. In any event, the lament for them continues (vv.7-12) and we are told that Moab will be destroyed (vv.13-14). It was devastated by the Assyrians in 715-13 BC.

1. *How can you avoid relying on help from people (even Christians) rather than relying on God (recognising that he may use other people)?*
2. *In what ways does pride get in the way of you seeking God's help?*

## Thursday: Isaiah 17:1-18:7

In Chs.15-16, we heard of a pagan nation being told that it may turn to God and be saved (Ch.16 vv.4c-5). In Ch.17, we have an example of God's punishment of his chosen people (the Kingdom of Israel).

This chapter relates to the same situation as Ch.7 (see page 17). It begins with another prophecy of the destruction of those who were threatening the Kingdom of Judah (vv.1-5): first, Damascus (i.e. the Kingdom of Aram); secondly, Ephraim (also called, "*Jacob*"; i.e. the Kingdom of Israel). This prophecy had been fulfilled by the time that it was incorporated into the book of Isaiah, since Damascus fell in 732 BC and Samaria (the capital of Israel) fell in 722 BC. It thus serves as another "guarantor" of the reliability of other prophecies. Isaiah draws out the principle that God ultimately thwarts the machinations of those opposed to him (vv.12-14, which are addressed to Judah not to Israel, which was subject to God's punishment).

We also have yet another mention that there will be a "remnant" of people who are not destroyed but are loyal to God (v.3c/6-8). This is not a mere repetition of the previous prophecies about this: this time we are told that the remnant will not only comprise Israelites but also "*the remnant of Aram*" (v.3c) and we are reminded that "*people*", not merely "*Israelites*", will "*look to their maker*" (v.7). Although God will judge the nations, he has people in them who will turn to him.

Chapter 18 moves on to consider events in relation to Egypt ("*the land of the whirring wings*", i.e. insects). It had a strong new Pharaoh from Ethiopia (see the Appendix, paragraph 2.4), which explains why Cush in the far south is mentioned. Envoys had been sent out by the Pharaoh (v.2a) and, since Egypt wished to oppose Assyria, they were probably trying to persuade and threaten Judah into joining an anti-Assyrian alliance. God's message about this is simple: he is watching and will act in due time (vv.4-6). There is an implied threat but the message is not all negative: no-one, not even great powers, can find security apart from God (Ch.17 v.10a) but some Egyptians and Cushites will join other nations in worshipping God (Ch.18 v.7).

1. *Is your security truly in God or in other things? Are you sure?*
2. *Are you confident that, if you turn to him, God will accept you whoever you are? If not why not? Think about what Isaiah says.*

## Friday: Isaiah 19:1-20:6

The Israelites' ancestors had been slaves in Egypt (see Exodus 1) and Egypt was viewed as the archetypal enemy of God's people. The indication at the end of Ch.18 that Egyptians would be part of God's people might, therefore, have received a mixed reception from Isaiah's contemporaries. If so, Ch.19 would have been even more troubling to them.

The chapter begins with a prophecy against Egypt. We have already heard that, before God, the greatest power of the time, Assyria, was powerless and merely a tool in his hands (Ch.10 vv.5-19). It should thus not come as a surprise that the other great power was similarly powerless (vv.11-14). The conclusion is that Judah should not be terrified of Egypt but rather Egypt terrified of Judah or, to be precise, the God of Judah (vv.16-17).

We might expect the prophecy to stop at this point and we might not notice if vv.18-22 were missing from the book. However, Chs.13-17 should have alerted us to the fact that Isaiah is not simply denouncing those who opposed the Israelites. This is not a nationalistic tirade: he has told us that the Israelites themselves will be punished by God (Ch.17 vv.3ff) and that the Moabites, Aramaeans and Egyptians may join God's people (Ch.16 v.4a-5; Ch.17 v.3c; Ch.18 v.7). Now he reveals the full import of what God is saying.

Christians disagree as to whether vv.18-22 should be taken literally but the overall thrust of the passage is clear. People from the great pagan powers will pledge allegiance to God (vv.18/23c); having punished them, God will heal them (v.22), reveal himself to them (v.21a) and send them a saviour (v.20b; the language suggests that God will save the Egyptians just as he had saved the Israelites from the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus). In fact, the Egyptians and Assyrians will be God's people just as the Israelites are God's people (vv.24-25)! There will be one unified people under God (v.23).

This may sound incredible but Ch.20 is a confidence building prophecy: it was fulfilled when Assyria crushed Egypt at the battle of Eltekeh in 701 BC.

1. *Do you have any problem accepting that God plans to draw people of all nations to himself? Why or why not?*
2. *Can you accept that even people who have oppressed others may be forgiven? Do you rejoice about this?*

## Week 5 (30<sup>th</sup> September to 4<sup>th</sup> October) Isaiah 21:1-28:29 - The king of the cities

### Monday: Isaiah 21:1-23:18

Chapters 21-23 are different in tone from Chs.13-20. Most of the prophecies are addressed in cryptic ways conveying an ominous tone (*“the Desert by the Sea”*, Ch.21 v.1; *“Dumah”* or *“Silence”*, Ch.21 v.11; *“the Valley of Vision”*, Ch.22 v.1). This reflects their contents: Chs.13-20 contain many prophecies of destruction but there are also reminders of God’s salvation and these move towards the revelation of God’s multi-national saved people (Ch.19 vv.18-25); in Chs.21-23, in contrast, the only note of hope comes in the very last verse (Ch.23 v.18). What is going on?

It is no accident that these chapters bring us down to earth with a bump after the great vision of Ch.19. God wants us to be realistic. His plans are glorious but we need to live in the world of the present and understand what is going on. There is sin, there is suffering and there is judgment. It is simply not true that *“Every day, in every way, things are getting better and better”* (a common misquote of Emile Coué). Some Christians have fallen into the trap of expecting this and have become disillusioned. Others believe in universal salvation and can’t come to grips with either suffering or God’s judgment. Isaiah wants us to base our lives on reality not dreams.

Isaiah tells us that his vision of what was going to happen to Babylon was so dreadful that he recoiled from it (Ch.21 v.3) and we should not worry if we have a similar reaction to some of the things that we are told. We are being warned that dreadful things will continue to happen. The question regarding how long *“the night”* will last is met with a qualified answer: *“Morning is coming, but also the night”* (vv.11-12). What we hope for will come but there will be much before then and we cannot forget suffering and judgment. Furthermore, whilst God’s salvation is glorious, we cannot ignore the fact that, for some, the message is *“Till your dying day, this sin will not be atoned for”* (Ch.22 v.14).

1. *Do you ever become disheartened by world events? How might today’s passage help you? Think about God’s sovereignty.*
2. *In view of Chs.21-23, how should Christians react to evil in the world?*

## Tuesday: Isaiah 24:1-24:23

In Chs.13-20, historical situations were clearly in view, although Isaiah's concern extended to universal issues; in Chs.21-23, historical situations are less prominent and the focus is mainly on the undefined future; in Chs.24-27, the historical situations disappear and Isaiah deals with God's ultimate judgment and salvation using dramatic language. For this reason, these later chapters are sometimes referred to as "Isaiah's apocalypse".

Like the rest of the book, they are carefully structured. They begin and end with the judgment of God (Ch.24 vv.1-13 and Ch.27 vv.7-11) and the prophecy of Mount Zion is the central focus (Ch.25 vv.6-10a). The imagery centres on the idea of there being two cities, which we first saw in Ch.1 vv.21-31: there is the unnamed city, which is to be destroyed and which stands for those opposed to God; and there is Mount Zion, the City of God, which will be established and which stands for those who submit to God's rule and enjoy his salvation (e.g. Ch.26 vv.1-6); c.f. various Psalms that use the "City of God" imagery, including Psalm 87:1-3, on which the Hymn "Glorious things of thee are spoken" is based).

Today's passage begins by focussing on God's judgment: it will be of the whole earth (v.1); it will impact everyone, religious or not, rich or poor (v.2); and it will be total (v.3; all previous judgments have been but pre-figurings of God's ultimate judgment). The reason, of course, is people's rejection of God (v.5). This has resulted in God cursing the earth (v.6).

This is clearly a terrible prospect and the response in v.16c is unsurprising. What is perhaps more surprising is the response in vv.14-16b: shouts of joy! Who are these people who are cheerful about the destruction of the earth (the "they" of v.14)? Having studied Chs.1-23 we may guess but, in any event, Isaiah makes it clear: these are the people who are the remnant left after God's judgment (v.13, "gleanings"). They are those we have heard about before and, as we have been told before, they come from the whole earth (v.16). They see the destruction of evil for what it is, the glorious vindication of God (v.23), and they "give glory to the LORD" (v.15a).

1. How does God's judgment relate to his character as revealed by Isaiah?
2. Are you uncomfortable with the idea of rejoicing about God's judgment? Why? Consider what is said above.

## Wednesday: Isaiah 25:1-26:21

If God's plans simply involved judgment, the future would be rather grim, at least for us. However, as we have seen more than once, they involve much more than this. In addition to judgment, he plans salvation.

In Exodus 24:9-11, we read of an extraordinary banquet of the elders of Israel in the presence of God. Isaiah uses this as a picture of what God has planned for the end of time. His people will be invited to a great banquet of wonderful food and drink that he himself has prepared for them (Ch.25 v.6). Those present will be "*all peoples*" (which does not mean each and every human being but people from all nations).

Equally importantly, God will "*swallow up death for ever*" (v.8a). Adam and Eve were told that, if they disobeyed God, they would die (Genesis 2:17) and the Old Testament indicates time and again that the penalty for sin is death (e.g. Proverbs 10:16; Ezekiel 33:14). Isaiah is telling us that the curse resulting from sin will be removed along with the disgrace that goes with it (v.8c). Death will no longer exist (vv.7-8a/Ch.26 v.19). This will not be as a result of anything that people have done; it will be an act of God (Ch.25 v.9).

Of course, the New Testament takes up this theme. Freely interpreting Isaiah, the apostle Paul says that, at the end of time, death will be swallowed up in victory and adds that this victory comes through Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). As he puts it elsewhere, "*the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 6:23).

Isaiah envisages those who have trusted in God rejoicing in what has been done for them (Ch.25 v.9). Most of the rest of today's passage comprises songs of praise. As in Ch.24 vv.14-16, God is praised not only for his acts of salvation but also his acts of judgment (e.g. Ch.25 v.2). They are two sides of the same coin: God has to deal with the evil "city" for the righteous "city" to exist (consider vv.4-5). Above all, God is praised for his faithfulness to his character and promises (v.1; note the personal "*my God*").

1. *How should we respond to Ch.25? Consider Ch.26 vv.4/8/13*
2. *Consider exactly what God is praised for in Ch.26. Can you praise him for these things?*

## Thursday: Isaiah 27:1-27:13

The long examination of God's plans for the nations that began in Ch.13 ends with a final passage that sums up these plans. The focus is on the Israelite people but Isaiah has told us time and again that, to use St Paul's words, on the one hand, *"Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel"* (Romans 9:6b; i.e. not all of the Israelites are members of God's redeemed people) and, on the other hand, people from other nations have been *"grafted in"* to Israel (Romans 11:17). This is thus a universal vision.

The passage begins by reasserting that God will punish evil (v.1; *"Leviathan"* was a mythical sea monster that represents all people and powers ranged against God). It ends by reasserting that God will gather his people from the world so that they may come and worship him (vv.12-13; remember also Ch.19 vv.23-25). The contrast is stark, as it is throughout Isaiah.

Verses 2b-6 contrast with Ch.5 vv.1-7. In both passages, God's people are represented by a vineyard. In Ch.5, God condemns the vineyard and announces that he will destroy it but, in today's passage, God says that he will protect and nurture it (v.3). The vineyard in Ch.5 is unproductive but that in today's passage is fruitful (v.2b): it will *"fill all the world with fruit"* (v.6c). Is this a contradiction? No: both are true; as we have read over the last few weeks, God will punish but he will also preserve a remnant that will serve him properly: the remnant of the vineyard will be divinely nurtured.

God has not treated all the Israelites as their sins deserved and has always shown restraint (v.7). The sins of his redeemed people are atoned for and the fruit of this is total allegiance to God (v.9). Verse 9 may appear to suggest that Israel's suffering was the atoning action but that would not make good sense and it appears that Isaiah means that the atonement will be as a consequence of God not dealing with the people as they deserved. Sadly though, not all will get the point since they will follow their own understanding and not discern God's way of salvation (vv.10-11).

1. *How does today's passage illuminate Jesus's statement that "I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18)?*
2. *Reflect on the main things discussed in Chs.13-27. How should these impact the way in which you now live?*

## Friday: Isaiah 28:1-28:29

Having given us an overview of God's universal plans, Isaiah returns to the world of his time, alternating threats and promises for several chapters.

Chapter 28 opens with a prophecy about the northern Israelite kingdom (here called "*Ephraim*") and its capital, Samaria (referred to obliquely in v.1). Isaiah repeats his statement that God will use Assyria (here simply called "*one who is powerful and strong*", v.2) to punish the people (vv.2-4). In addition, following a pattern that we should recognise, he interjects that there remains a wonderful future for a remnant of the people (vv.5-6).

The focus then moves to the southern kingdom. Isaiah describes a scene, perhaps during a court banquet, where people are drunk (vv.7-8) and mock Isaiah's presentation of God's word (vv.9-10). The people were saying that Isaiah was uttering nonsense like a young child. God's response is that, if they won't listen to his word, he will "*speak*" to them through the actions of the Assyrians (vv.11-14). Paul later paraphrased Isaiah's words to support his accusation that the Corinthian Christians were being childish in relation to speaking in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:20-22). God speaks to us intelligibly but, if we fail to listen, he may withdraw his word and act in judgment.

The Israelite leaders are charged with arrogance. The reference to a "*covenant with death*" (v.15) is probably a derogatory reference to a treaty with Egypt on which Judah relied near the end of the eighth century when threatened by Assyria. God's response is that he has provided a "*sure foundation*" that they can rely on (v.16) but, if instead they seek to rely on their treaty, they will find that it is useless (vv.17-18). Indeed, they will find that God is against them. He who roused himself to give King David his greatest triumphs (v.21ab; see 2 Samuel 5:17-20/5:22ff) will perform "*his strange work*" in attacking his chosen people (v.21cd).

The whole message was calculated to bring "*sheer terror*" (v.19c) yet, once again, there is a ray of hope: God's judgment is measured and won't continue for ever (vv.23-28). His plan is more complex than that (v.29).

1. *The New Testament says that Christ is our sure foundation (1 Peter 2:6). How does today's passage help you better to understand this?*
2. *How are God's plans wonderful and his wisdom magnificent (v.29)?*



## Week 6 (7<sup>th</sup> October to 11<sup>th</sup> October)

### Isaiah 29:1-35:10 – Threat and promise

#### Monday: Isaiah 29:1-29:24

Chapter 29 opens with another prophecy against Jerusalem (called “*Ariel*” for reasons that are unclear; vv.1-4). Then, illustrating what he has said in Ch.28 vv.23-28, Isaiah suddenly changes tack and says that God will scatter the enemies of “*Ariel*” (vv.5-8). We shall look at the fulfilment of this next week but, for the moment, Isaiah is not concerned about this. He is concerned about the reaction of the Israelite people to God’s word.

Isaiah envisages the people being completely befuddled in the face of God’s plans (vv.9-12). This is both their fault (“*blind yourselves*”) and God’s judgment on their unbelief. It is an example of “Judicial hardening”: the people are left unable to understand what God says (vv.11-12). There are many examples of this, the best known being Romans 1:21-32.

The people do follow the outward form of religion but without commitment to God (v.13). This has always been a problem (e.g. Jesus quoted Isaiah when denouncing the Pharisees, Matthew 15:1-9). God’s response is that he will astound the people and make a mockery of their “*wisdom*” (v.14). In the light of vv.9-10, it is clear that many would not understand what God was doing but their lack of understanding would merely condemn them.

As we shall see, this prophecy may have had an interim fulfilment in Isaiah’s day but its ultimate fulfilment came when Christ died on the cross. That was the ultimate expression of God’s wisdom and it made a mockery of human wisdom (see 1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

Rejecting God’s wisdom is absurd and arrogant: how can we hide from him (v.15) or reject our maker or believe that we know better than him (v.16)? People who do so will be judged (v.20) but there will be others who, in contrast, “*stand in awe of the God of Israel*” (v.23e).

1. Do you “*stand in awe of the God of Israel*”? Think about God and consider your reaction to him.
2. In what ways does the cross make a mockery of human wisdom?

## Tuesday: Isaiah 30:1-30:33

You may by now be tiring of endless denunciations of the Israelites but they reinforce Isaiah's basic messages regarding God's judgment and also his determination nonetheless to ensure that his plans in salvation are fulfilled. Furthermore, each prophecy contains some new angles on the basic issues.

Chapter 30 contains another condemnation of Judah's reliance on alliances with one or other of the pagan powers (e.g. Ch.7 vv.13-17 and Ch.28 vv.14-19). The Israelites are told in stark terms that their alliance with Egypt has been entered into without God's blessing (v.2) and will be utterly useless (v.7). In fact, having defied God, the result will be shame (vv.3-5).

Of course, the people did not actually say what is attributed to them in vv.10-11. They had the outward form of religion (Ch.29 v.13) and doubtless dressed up their reasoning in suitably religious sounding language. Nonetheless, the bottom line was that they were, in essence, telling Isaiah (and, perhaps, Micah, who lived around the same time) to stop challenging them and shut up. They were refusing to accept God's word and hence in reality saying *"stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel"* (v.11).

God's judgment is typical of the judgments that we are told about time and again in the Bible. The sin of the people will end up hurting them (vv.12-14). They have rejected quiet trust in *"the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel"* (v.15; see paragraph 4 of the Appendix). They will get a punishment that fits their crime (vv.15-17; v.17 reverses the blessing in Leviticus 26:8).

But, as always, judgment is not the final word: God wants to be gracious (v.18); punishing his people is *"his alien task"* (Ch.28 v.21d). He promises that he will once again guide his people and they will return to him (vv.19-22). The vision then becomes similar to those that we have seen before (e.g. Ch.11 vv.6-9): God's final salvation is being described (vv.23-26).

Isaiah then turns back to the contemporary world: although the fulfilment of what is prophesied in vv.19-26 may be far off, in the meantime, God will deal with the Assyrians (vv.27-33) - without Egypt's help, by the way!

1. *Are you in danger of not listening to God's word because deep down you don't want to? How can you avoid this danger?*
2. *How can you ensure that you obtain guidance as promised in vv.20-21?*

## Wednesday: Isaiah 31:1-32:20

Chapters 28-32 contain five main sections of prophecy, each commencing with “Woe” (see 28:1/29:1/29:15/30:1/31:1). Each section begins by announcing God’s judgment on the Israelites for their rejection of God and contains further words of judgment later in the section, with particular focus on the Israelites’ rejection of God’s revealed will (see 28:9-10/29:11-12/29:16/ 30:10-11/31:1) and their reliance on themselves or other people rather than God (see 28:14-15/29:15/30:1-2/31:1-2). In addition, each section, contains promises that the possibility of relying on God remains and that judgment will not be the final word (see 28:16/28:23-29/29:5-8/29:17-24/30:18-33/31:4-9). Some of the promises clearly originally related to the near term (e.g. 29:5-9/30:27-33/31:4-9), whilst others appear to have a much longer-term view (e.g. 30:23-26/32:15-20).

Chapter 31 has many similarities with Ch.30. Its focus is on the immediate political situation and it is asserting yet again that it is absurd to rely on people (v.3) and that God will act to achieve what the people on whom the Israelites are relying cannot (v.9). However, the words “*in that day*” (v.7) should alert us to the fact that Isaiah is not looking solely to the short term, He is asking the Israelites to behave today in the light of God’s coming final acts of judgment and salvation.

Isaiah’s prophecies about the nations of his time (in Chs.13-23) were followed by prophecies about God’s final judgment and salvation which (Chs.24-27). Chapters 28-35 follow a similar pattern with prophecies about the Israelite kingdoms (Chs.28-31) being followed by more prophecies about God’s final judgment and salvation (Chs.32-35). Chapter 32 begins by referring to a righteous king. Isaiah does not expressly say who this king is but, in Chs.7-11, he told us a lot about a coming divine king and this is surely yet another reference to that king. This is confirmed by the description of the kingdom that he will inaugurate (vv.2-5 and vv.15-20), which has considerable similarities with previous descriptions of the Messianic kingdom (Ch.9 vv.7-9 and Ch.11 vv.1-9)

1. *Try to summarise the key messages that Isaiah is conveying in Chs.28-32. What do you need to try to remember?*
2. *Glance back at Chs.9/11. How does what they say link to what is said in Chs.28-32?*

## Thursday: Isaiah 33:1-34:15

The “Woe” with which today’s passage opens is directed not at the Israelites but at an unnamed “destroyer”. We have moved from a focus on God’s judgment of the Israelites to a focus on their salvation.

Verses 1-12 probably originally related to a crisis involving Assyria but the absence of specific references allows Isaiah to express general principles: woe to any destroyer, betrayer or enemy of God; peace to God’s people!

The “Woe” passage is brief and moves swiftly into a prayer of faith (vv.2-6) in the context of a dire world situation (vv.7-9). God responds: he will act (vv.10-12). As a result, all “sinners” need to fear (v.14). How can any sinful person stand in the face of the holy God? The answer is that they can’t since only those who are righteous can do so (vv.15-16; see Psalms 15/24).

Nonetheless, Isaiah asserts that salvation will come for some: they “*will see the king in his beauty*” and enjoy his redeemed world (vv.17-24). So, who is this king? There is a simple and a more complex answer to that. The simple one is that the king is the LORD himself (v.22). The more complex one is that king is the divine Messiah (Ch.9 v.6).

But how will can anyone enjoy that salvation in the light of the requirements of vv.15-16? Isaiah tells us that they can do so because God forgives sin (v.24; literally, “*the people living in [Zion] will be lifted up in respect of iniquity*”). And what is required for this? The answer is given in v.6c which literally says, “*the fear of the LORD is the key to his treasure*”.

As we have seen before, judgment and salvation are linked and, in Ch.34, Isaiah moves back to the theme of judgment. Unsurprisingly, this chapter has similarities with Ch.24. All nations are condemned (v.2) but, as in other parts of the Bible (e.g. Ezekiel 35), Edom is used as the archetypical enemy of God’s people (vv.5-15). God’s judgment will be total and final (vv.2/10; the word translated “destroy” in v.2 is the word used in the book of Joshua to describe the total destruction of the Canaanites).

*“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). Consider what the fear of the LORD involves in the light of what you have read in the book of Isaiah. Do you fear the LORD? Why or why not?*

## Friday: Isaiah 34:16-35:10

The message of the final two verses of Ch.34 is simple: if we want to know what is going to happen, we should look at God's word. God will fulfil what he has said he will do (v.16): he has power to do so and, in particular, power to decide the destiny of people (v.17). With that in mind, we turn to Isaiah's great vision of the redeemed people of God.

Isaiah use the imagery of the Exodus (Exodus 13ff). Verse 1 literally begins saying that the desert will be glad *"of them"*. We are not told who *"they"* are but we soon realise that they are God's people travelling through the desert. The whole of creation rejoices because it realises its potential (v.2).

Nonetheless, the focus of God's people won't be on creation; it will be on God himself (v.2ef). Why? Because God will come and put the world right (v.4; note once again the link between judgment and salvation). This will involve the renewal of creation (vv.5-7; note that the third line of v.6 should begin *"For"*: what follows is the explanation of the rejoicing in vv.5-6b).

Isaiah then returns to the Exodus imagery, imagining a highway in the desert (v.8). Its name (*"The Way of Holiness"*) indicates that it is the path to be followed by those set apart for God (i.e. those who are holy). Hence, no-one who is not deemed pure in God's eyes (*"unclean"*) and no-one who is spiritually blind (*"fools"*) will be on the path. The only people who will be on it will be *"the redeemed"* (v.9d): those *"the LORD has rescued"* (v.10a); those who God has made pure and spiritually sighted.

The highway will lead to *"Zion"* (v.10b), the mount of the temple, the place of the presence of God. The people will enter with *"singing"* (literally, *"shouts of joy"*). They will go beyond normal happiness because they will see the Glory of God and be in his presence (v.10de).

Of course, this prophecy is closely linked with several earlier in the book (e.g. 2:2-4/4:2-6/9:2-7/11:10-16 (where the highway image is used)/19:23-25 (another highway!)/25:6-9). All are talking about the same thing.

1. *Re-read today's passage and try to visualise what Isaiah says. Are you excited by this? Why or why not?*
2. *Are you sure that you part of "the redeemed" (v.9)? If not, speak to one of the Church leaders about this.*

## Week 7 (14<sup>th</sup> October to 18<sup>th</sup> October)

### Isaiah 35:1-39:8 - Faithfulness in the face of danger

#### Monday: Isaiah 35:1-10

Today's passage is almost the same as Friday's. There is more to consider.

Some people think that Isaiah's vision in Ch.35 comes from the time when the Israelites were in exile in Babylon and relates to their return to Canaan at the end of that exile (i.e. the 530s BC). If this were the case then the Israelites could justifiably have accused Isaiah of exaggeration and giving them false expectations. However, there is no need to do so because the view that the prophecy relates to the return from Babylon does not do justice to the passage or its context in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is clearly telling us about the final everlasting triumph of God and the salvation of his people, which he has indicated includes people from all nations.

Isaiah does not tell us when this will happen nor does any other part of the Bible. We must not fall into the trap of believing that we can predict the day. Even Jesus did not know that (Matthew 24:36). The apostle Paul says that *"the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed"* and that, when God's salvation comes, creation will be *"liberated"* (Romans 8:19-21). Paul clearly has in Ch.35 vv.1-2 in mind and he is telling us that, like the rest of creation, we have to wait patiently for God to act (Romans 8:25).

We should also avoid speculating about precisely how the prophecy will be fulfilled. Isaiah's description is poetic and we should not look to it for geographic or historic precision. We should simply respond as indicated in vv.3-4a and focus on the fact that God will come (v.4). Verse 4c (*"Your God will come"*) literally says, *"Behold your God"*. As the letter to the Hebrews puts it, we should be *"fixing our eyes on Jesus"* (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus is the divine king who is referred to often in Chs.6-35. His death and resurrection are the guarantee of the fulfilment of the vision of Ch.35.

1. What does *"fixing our eyes on Jesus"* involve? Do you do this?
2. Do you *"wait patiently"* for God to do what he has promised to do (both in the short and long term)? How can you do better?

## Tuesday: Isaiah 36:1-37:20

We now move into a new section of the book (Chs.36-39). This is unlike any other section. It is narrative and it almost (but not quite) duplicates 2 Kings 18:13-20:19. Isaiah, the author of 2 Kings or someone else may have been the author. It doesn't matter.

As we have seen, a number of Isaiah's prophecies related to the political situation of his day. His credibility depended upon them being fulfilled and the fact that they were preserved strongly suggests that they passed the test. In the case of some of the prophecies, we can't verify this but, in the case of others, either the Bible or another source records the fulfilment (e.g. other sources confirm the destruction of Tyre in fulfilment of Ch.23).

Chapters 36-37 record the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecies about the failure of the Assyrians to capture Jerusalem in 701 BC (Ch.36 v.1). That is doubtless why they are in the book. That event may have been the thing that resulted in people ceasing to doubt that Isaiah was a prophet of God.

The Assyrians had overrun Judah (v.1) and wanted to secure the surrender of Jerusalem without a siege. They tried to undermine King Hezekiah. First, they suggested that, since he had removed the "high places", the LORD would not be with him (v.7). This was cunning since Hezekiah had destroyed many religious places and, although the Bible applauds this, some Israelites doubtless disagreed with his action and others may have been worried (2 Kings 18:4). The Assyrian king also claimed to have consulted the LORD (v.10). Then, when this approach failed, the Assyrians tried another one: they asserted that their king was more powerful than the LORD (vv.18-20).

Hezekiah sought God both in prayer and through Isaiah (Ch.37 vv.1-4). The message he got was clear (vv.5-7). Would he trust God? If he did so and his trust was misplaced, he and many of his people would die dreadful deaths. Furthermore, what the Assyrians said about the fate of the gods of other peoples was true (vv.18-20). However, as Hezekiah noted that there is a fundamental difference between the LORD and other gods: the LORD is "God over all the kingdoms of the earth" (v.16); the (only) "living God" (v17).

*Have you ever had your faith tested to the extent that Hezekiah's was? What was the result? What can you now do that might assist in any future test?*

## Wednesday: Isaiah 37:21-37:38

The precise sequence of events in 701 BC is not entirely clear. We are told that, following Isaiah's first prophecy (Ch.37 vv.6-7), and in fulfilment of it, the Assyrians withdrew (v.8). Nonetheless, the threat to Jerusalem remained and the Assyrians continued their psychological warfare (vv.9-13). This resulted both in Hezekiah's prayer that we considered yesterday (vv.14-20) and in a further prophecy from Isaiah (vv.21-35).

First, the prophecy addressed the king of Assyria. He had mocked God and in return, God tells him that the people of Jerusalem mock him (v.22). The questions in v.23 convey incredulity, a sense of "*You just don't realise what you have done*". The king of Assyria was proud of his military might (vv.24-25) and especially his victory over Egypt (v.25cd) but the idea that he could take on God was absurd. It was God who planned all of the things that the king had achieved (vv.26-27) and he would deal with the king's arrogant insolence (vv.28-29; nose hooks were used to humiliate capture enemies).

We looked at the idea that the king of Assyria was merely God's pawn when we considered Ch.10. The idea of God controlling world affairs is also implicit in many of Isaiah's other prophecies. Amos pithily sums up the reality: "*When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?*" (Amos 3:6). The LORD is the Lord of the nations, although, as we have also seen time and again, he responds to human actions (e.g. vv.28-29).

It is doubtful that the King of Assyria heard the prophecy about him. Like all of Isaiah's prophecies, the primary audience was a domestic one. In v.30, he addresses Hezekiah directly. God is going to give a sign. This would not be a sign in advance in order to produce faith (such as that offered to Ahaz in Ch.7) but one that would confirm in retrospect that it was God who had acted not mere chance. Hezekiah was assured that a remnant of Judah would remain (i.e. the people of Jerusalem would escape the destruction that had been visited on the rest of Judah; Ch.36 v.1) and, specifically, that Sennacherib's siege would fail (vv.31-35). And it was so (vv.36-38)!

*Are you conscious of being arrogant about your abilities and gifts and believing that you are in control of your own life? Whether or not you are, how can you protect yourself against the danger of this?*



## Thursday: Isaiah 38:1-38:22

You might assume that the events of Chs.38-39 followed the events of Chs.36-37 but they did not: they occurred sometime earlier (probably in early 702 BC). The failure to follow the chronological order will puzzle you if you think that we are being presented with pure narrative history (if such a thing could exist). We are not: the history of Israel is set out in the Bible for a purpose.

The events of 701 BC were a crucial confirmation of the reliability of the prophecies that Isaiah had been uttering, many of which are recorded in Chs.7-35, and the history of these events rounds off that part of the book. Chs.38-39, on the other hand, have a different purpose: they act as the historical background to Chs.40-48, which we are about to get to. Hence, the chronological order needed to be reversed.

Today's passage combines very human elements with some extraordinary events. Hezekiah was ill and Isaiah conveyed God's message that he was going to die (v.1). Hezekiah reacted as most of us would react: he didn't want to die (v.2) and he pleaded with God to take account of his good works (v.3). His works for God were impressive (see 2 Chronicles 29-31) but so what? God already knew about them and, in any event, he was not perfect (e.g. his faith sometimes wavered; see 2 Kings 18:7/14, relating to his rebellion against Assyria relying on Egypt in defiance of Isaiah's prophecies and his abject subsequent submission). Hezekiah's theology left something to be desired but God still heard his prayer, saw his anguish and determined to extend his life (v.5). He also indicated that he would save Jerusalem (v.6; remember that this occurred before the events of Ch.36-37).

In 2 Kings 20:8-10, we learn that Isaiah offered Hezekiah a choice of sign: the sun's shadow could either go forward or back ten paces. Hezekiah chose what he considered to be the more difficult thing and it occurred (v.8). We need not speculate what precisely happened. What matters is that, like Ahaz (Ch.7 v.10), Hezekiah was offered a sign and, unlike Ahaz, he responded in faith, received the sign and recovered (v.9). He realised that he had been forgiven his sins (v.17). He had learned from his experience.

*Have you ever had an experience of great personal need? Did you seek God's help? What was the result and what did you learn from this?*

## Friday: Isaiah 39:1-39:8

Marduk-Baladan (also known as Merodach-Baladan) had managed to set himself up as king of Babylon in defiance of his theoretical overlord, the king of Assyria. Relatively recent archaeological research has indicated that he was a serious problem for the Assyrians. We are told that he sent ambassadors to Judah at the time of Hezekiah's recovery (v.1). This doubtless provided a convenient opportunity to try to stir up trouble for the Assyrians. He needed to do so because, although he had defeated the Assyrians at the Battle of Kish in 703 BC, he would have known that the Assyrians would soon be back.

Hezekiah appears to have been delighted by the attentions of the celebrity king of Babylon and, probably to try to impress the envoys, showed them around his capital (v.2). We are not told about his response to their proposals but the implication may be that he agreed to join the rebellion against Assyria (although he may already have told Egypt that he would do so). In doing so, he was ignoring God's word to him through Isaiah (e.g. Ch.31 vv.1-3). Sadly, his faithfulness to God had not lasted long!

This led to a dramatic new revelation. Isaiah knew that Assyria would not destroy Jerusalem (e.g. Ch.31 vv.8-9) yet his prophecies suggested that the destruction would occur eventually (e.g. Ch.22 vv.1-13). Now God revealed that it would be the Babylonians who would destroy it (v.6) and that the disaster would be so great that it threatened the royal house of David (v.7).

Hezekiah and his contemporaries, and even Isaiah, probably assumed that it would be Merodach-Baladan or one of his successors who would be the instrument of destruction. They were wrong in this. Merodach-Baladan was defeated in 702 BC and it was to be nearly another century before Babylon recovered. Nonetheless, Isaiah's prophecy would eventually be fulfilled.

Hezekiah's reaction (v.8) may be taken in different ways. Some argue that he is expressing faith but his response looks dreadfully short sighted and self-centred. His horizon was not God's horizon!

1. *Does your faith waiver like Hezekiah's? What can you do to ensure that you are more steadfast?*
2. *Is studying Isaiah assisting you in being steadfast? Why or why not?*

## **Week 8 (21st October to 25<sup>th</sup> October)**

### **A pause for thought**

Our main morning services on 20<sup>th</sup> October are All Age services and so we have a week's break in the reading plan. You may want to use this to catch up, if you have fallen behind, or simply to look back at things that you feel you have not fully grasped or want to study further. Alternatively, you may like to think further about some of the themes that we have been considering and, in particular, how they are developed in the rest of the Bible.

Here are some ideas:

1. Chs.4/11 refer to the Messiah as "the Branch". This idea was picked up by Jeremiah and Zechariah and you could read their prophecies about this (see Jeremiah 23:1-8 and 33:14-26 and Zechariah 3:8 and 6:12).
2. Chs.7/9 naturally remind us of the birth of Christ and you could look at the account of this in Matthew 1 (noting the stress on Jesus being in the line of David as well as the reference to Ch.7 v.14).
3. You could think of the relationship between some of the other prophecies of Isaiah and Jesus (see especially the New Testament passages cited in the reading plan in relation to Ch.11 and Ch.25 and also Luke 7:18-23, which relates to Ch.35 vv.5-6).
4. There are many other New Testament passages that pick-up themes from Isaiah. For example, if you want to consider what Isaiah says about the "remnant" of Israel and the incorporation of the Gentiles (non-Jews) into God's people, you could look at Galatians 3 and Romans 2/4/9-11 (the final passage being referred to later in this plan).
5. If you have not already done so, you could look up some of the other New Testament references that are set out in the reading plan.
6. You could read the prophecies against various nations in other prophetic books (e.g. Jeremiah 46-51, Amos 1:3-2:3; Ezekiel 25-32).
7. You could read the history of Judah from Isaiah's time to the time of its destruction so as to understand better the way in which some of the prophecies in the next part of the book of Isaiah were fulfilled. 2 Kings 15:17-25:30 is the fullest account of this. 2 Chronicles 27-36 covers the same period but with slightly different emphases.

## Week 9 (28<sup>th</sup> October to 1<sup>st</sup> November)

### Isaiah 40:1-45:25 - The God of all comfort

#### Monday: Isaiah 40:1-40:31

In Ch.39, Isaiah states that, at some unspecified time in the future, the Babylonians will overwhelm Jerusalem. That raised a serious question: would it be the end of God's people? Isaiah immediately provides reassurance: there will come a time when the punishment will be over (vv.1-2) and, better still, God himself will come (vv.2-5) and he will bring salvation (vv.9-11; c.f. Psalm 23, Jeremiah 23:2-3; Ezekiel 34:1-31 and John 10:1-18). The Israelites (and we) can rely on this because, in contrast to human unreliability (v.6c-7), God is faithful and his word is certain (v.8).

Isaiah's original audience may have assumed that this salvation would take the form of rescue from the Babylonians and Chs.40-48 indicate that it included this. However, they also indicate that it will involve something far more dramatic and, in the New Testament, we are told that the prophecy of vv.3-5 was fulfilled by John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus (Mark 1:1-8, which, in the light of vv.3-5, implies that Jesus is the LORD).

Isaiah then invites us to reflect on the majesty of God. He is the creator and sustainer of the world (v.12/25-26); he is wise beyond measure (vv.13-14; quoted in Romans 11:34 and 1 Corinthians 2:16); one cannot compare human powers to him (vv.15-17/21-24); nor can one compare idols to him (vv.18-20; "*idols*" here referring to all of the gods of other nations). We may imagine God to be some kind of superman but that is completely inadequate. There is no-one and nothing like him. He is incomparable. The realisation of his majesty should overwhelm us, even terrify us (see the comments about this in the notes relating to Ch.6 above)

And there is something else to consider: God is of infinite power and wisdom – and he uses this power and wisdom for our benefit (vv.28-29)! The result is that, if we rely on God, we ourselves gain strength (vv.30-31).

1. *Use today's passage to reflect on the majesty of God and respond to this in praise.*
2. *How and to what extent do you rely on God for strength (vv.28-31)?*

## Tuesday: Isaiah 41:1-42:17

In Ch.40, we are told that God cannot be compared to the nations or to idols (Ch.40 vv.15-20) and this is the main subject of Ch.41.

The nations are summoned to hear God's judgment (v.1). He has "*stirred up one from the east*" who is a conqueror (vv.2-4). This statement is similar to others (e.g. Ch.7 v.18). It relates to the King Cyrus of Persia, who conquered most of the ancient Near East between 559 and 530 BC (see Ch.45 v.1). We should understand by now that God is the Lord of history!

The advent of Cyrus causes the nations to panic and turn to their idols (vv.5-7) but Israel is told not to fear but to rely on God for strength (vv.8-10/13-14; remember Ch.40 vv.28-31). God will vanquish the nations (vv.11-12/15-16a) but God's people will rejoice in his salvation, which will exceed anything that they have previously experienced (vv.16b-20).

The idols are then called to give an account of themselves (v.21). Can idols predict the future (vv.22-23a/26ab)? No (v.26c-e). Can they do anything, whether good or bad (v.23c)? No (e.g. they cannot counsel anyone: v.28). Some Christians attribute power to idols but they have none. We should take comfort from Isaiah's words. Idols are "*less than nothing and their works are utterly worthless*" (v.24); "*they are all false! Their deeds amount to nothing: their images are but wind and confusion*" (v.29).

In contrast to the powerless idols, God presents his "*servant*", who will be the instrument of his saving acts (Ch.42 vv.1-7). Who is this servant? Isaiah does not say but he will return to the subject, and so will we.

There is only one God who acts (v.25) and gives accurate notice of his plans (v.27). We owe allegiance to this God and anyone who chooses another is "*detestable*" (v.24). In our multi-cultural world, this may seem harsh but it is important to remember that the choice is between the God whose majesty has been described in Ch.40 vv.12-31 and a "god" that is nothing. God says that he "*will not yield ... [his] praise to idols*" (Ch.42 v.8). The correct response to God's majesty is praise of him (vv.10-13).

1. *To what do you turn when in need? Is there a danger that any of these things will detract from God's claim to your allegiance?*
2. *What are the main characteristics of God's servant in Ch.42 vv.1-7?*

## Wednesday: Isaiah 42:18-43:21

It is not only pagans who are blind to God's mighty acts and deaf to his word: God's people were also blind and deaf (vv.18-19). They did not see the significance of what was going on and the reason for that was that they did not listen to God (vv.20/23). This is a common problem including among those who profess allegiance to God (e.g. Jesus accused the Pharisees of being blind in exactly the same way as their predecessors in Isaiah's time, see Matthew 15:14). We all need to beware.

*"But"* (Ch.43 v.1) God's purpose in salvation will not be thwarted by this blindness and deafness. He will protect all those who comprise his people (vv.2-3) and gather them from the ends of the earth (vv.6-7) because he has a relationship with them (he is *"the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your saviour"*; v.3) and he loves them (v.4). This relationship is personal and its formation depends entirely on the act of God: he created his people (vv.1/7) and he called them to himself (*"I have summoned you by name"*; v.1). This is all for God's glory (v.7; see also v.21). The result is that, for God's people, salvation is certain and there is no need to fear (vv.1/5).

The Israelites are then summoned together with all of the nations to witness to the significance of the acts of God (vv.8-9a). Who can testify that another god foretold what had happened (v.9)? The implication is that no-one can. In contrast, Israel (*"my servant"*; v.10b c.f. Ch.42 v.19) can testify in favour of God. The conclusion is obvious: the LORD is the only God (v.10ef); he is the only saviour (v.11); if he decides to act whether in judgment or salvation, no-one can prevent it (v.13; see Romans 8:31).

Specifically, we are told that he will rescue his people from captivity in Babylon (v.14). No longer will they need to look back to their rescue from Egypt (alluded to in v.3) because God will effect a new act of salvation (vv.18-19). This prophecy was in part fulfilled after Babylon was conquered by the army of King Cyrus in 539 BC (see Daniel Ch.5 and Ezra Ch.1).

1. *What can you do to guard against being blind to God's acts and deaf to his word?*
2. *We have previously reflected on God's sovereignty in history. What does this passage tell us about his sovereignty in judgment, mercy and salvation?*

## Thursday: Isaiah 43:22-44:23

Today's passage covers the same ground as yesterday's but with different emphases: it begins with God's problem people (Ch.43 vv.23-28; see Ch.42 vv.18-25); there is then a "But" (Ch.44 v.1; see Ch.43 v.1) followed by the assurance that God's people need not fear since God created them and will save them (Ch.44 vv.1-5; see Ch.43 vv.1-7); God then calls on his people to draw the obvious conclusion and bear witness to it (vv.6-8; see Ch.43 vv.8-13); the futility of idols is stressed (vv.9-20; which contrasts with the benefits of relying on God, Ch.43 vv.14-19); and the passage ends with a reminder of God's saving acts (vv.21-23; see Ch.43 vv.20-21). The repetition indicates the importance of what is said. It is a foundation of the Gospel.

The complaint against Israel in yesterday's passage centred on the people's failure to listen to God (Ch.42 vv.18-20). That in today's passage relates to the failure to worship God (vv.22-24b) and the commission of other sin (vv.24cd/27). The charge is not that the Israelites were failing in religious observance. They engaged in plenty of that. The charge is that their observance failed to honour God (v.23b) because of their sin. It was meaningless. In other words, it is the same as the charge laid in Ch.1 (Ch.1 vv.10-15). Religious observance cannot save anyone.

The promise in yesterday's passage focussed on the safe ingathering of God's people (Ch.43 vv.2-7). That in today's passage focusses on the blessing of God's people (Ch.44 vv.2-5) and on the fact that God's people will include people who are not Israelites (v.5.).

Back in Ch.1 v.18, Isaiah told us that God would eradicate sin. He has not said much more about this since then but, in today's passage he indicates that God will do something to deal with his people's sins: he will blot them out (Ch.43 v.25) and sweep them away like a cloud (Ch.44 v.22). Redemption from Babylon was merely an interim measure. Redemption from sin is the ultimate goal (v.22). This is the work of God. Idol worshippers make their gods and plead for salvation (vv.12-17). In contrast, the true God makes his people and grants them salvation (vv.21-22).

1. *Is there a risk of you relying on religious observance for salvation rather than the acts of God himself? How can you avoid this trap?*
2. *Consider the blessings that God promises in Ch.44. Thank him for them.*

## Friday: Isaiah 44:24-45:25

We are again reminded that God is both creator (Ch.44 vv.24c-26b) and saviour (vv.26c-28). His salvation involves both the short term saving of his Israelite people from Babylon (see most of today's passage) and the longer term saving of all of his people from sin (Ch.45 vv.22-25). In relation to the former, Isaiah tells us that God is going to use a pagan king, Cyrus (Ch.44 v.24-Ch.45 v.7). Cyrus is both his "shepherd" and his "anointed" (Ch.44 v.28 and Ch.45 v.1). These are terms that were used of King David (2 Samuel 5:2/19:21) and the Hebrew term translated "anointed" is "messiah".

We can imagine some of Isaiah's contemporaries recoiling from this. They might have swallowed the idea that God would use pagan kings to execute his judgment (e.g. Ch.10 vv.5-20) but equating a pagan king to King David? How could God do such a thing?

God gives the objectors short shrift. He created us and a thing that has been made may not question its maker's actions (vv.9-10). We have no right to question God's way of achieving his goals (vv.11-12; see Job 38:2/40:2). We might find his means surprising (v.15) but it is effective (vv.14-17).

This leads to yet another contrast between God and idols (vv.18-21), culminating, at the end of v.21, in the great declaration that: *"there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is none but me"*.

In previous chapters, God summoned the nations to justify their reliance on idols and hear his judgment on them (Ch.41 v.1/21; Ch.43 v.9). In Ch.45, however, God summons the nations to hear another message: they can turn to God and be saved (v.22)! Time and again, Isaiah has indicated that God's people will include people from the whole world (e.g.Ch.44 v.5) and now he appeals to everyone to accept God. They have a choice: turn to him and be saved (v.22) or continue to *"rage against him"* and *"be put to shame"* (v.24b). God has determined that everyone will ultimately bow to him (v.23). The question is whether this will be the voluntary submission of the saved or the forced submission of those facing judgment.

1. *In what ways may you improperly question God's ways? Are you willing to accept that he is entitled to act as he wishes, whatever you think?*
2. *Have you submitted to God as your Lord? Why or why not?*



## Week 10 (4<sup>th</sup> November to 8<sup>th</sup> November)

### Isaiah 46:1-53:12 - The LORD's servant

#### Monday: Isaiah 46:1-48:22

God has stated that idols are nothing and that he is in control and, in Chs.46-48, Isaiah again prophesies events that will demonstrate this: the destruction of Babylon and its empire. God provides strength to his people (Ch.40 vv.29-31) but the idols of Babylon will prove to be, literally, a burden to their followers (Ch.46 vv.1-2) and Babylon's magicians and astrologers will merely wear people out and prove useless (Ch.47 vv.12-15).

It is unlikely that the Babylonian's ever heard Isaiah's prophecies and, in any event, they would not have cared about them. Like those in Chs.13-23, the prophecies were not directed at the pagan nations of the ancient Near East but at the Israelites and, in the case of Chs.46-48, specifically at Israelites who were not listening to the word of God (the "rebels": Ch.46 v.8).

In Ch.45 v.9, we read about those who objected to the idea of God using Cyrus as his instrument of salvation. Now we hear about Israelites who continued to rebel against God. In Ch.46, they are told to keep in mind what God has said about Babylon (v.8), remember that God has previously fulfilled his promises (vv.9-10, perhaps a reference to the Exodus) and to listen to God's plans for salvation (vv.12-13). Then in Ch.48 they are challenged again (vv.1-11). In both cases, they are condemned for being stubborn and not possessing God's righteousness (Ch.46 v.12/Ch.48 v.1/6) and the chapter ends on a gloomy note: they have rejected God and so rejected peace (Ch.46 vv.18/22).

Before that, however, God says that he will tell new things to the stubborn (vv.6c-7). What are these things? The thing that is next mentioned is God's use of Cyrus to defeat Babylon (v.14) but there is something else. A voice interjects: he has been sent by God and endowed with his Spirit (v.16). Who is the speaker? We will consider this tomorrow.

1. *Read Romans 9:6-8. Paul says that "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel". How does this link with today's passage?*
2. *What is the fundamental problem of those who are called "rebels"?*

## Tuesday: Isaiah 49:1-50:3

Chapter 42 vv.1-7 begins *“Here is my servant”*. It is the first of four so-called *“Servant Songs”* (Ch.42 vv.1-7; Ch.49 vv.1-9a; Ch.50 vv.4-11; Ch.52 v.13 to Ch.53 v.12). We may at first assume that the servant is the people of Israel collectively since Israel is called God’s servant in Ch.41:8, Ch.42:19 and Ch.43:10. However, in Ch.42:1-7, among other things, we are told that the servant will bring justice (v.1d), be faithful (v.3c) and *“be a covenant for the people”* (v.6). Does that sound like the Israel as described by Isaiah?

In Ch.49. the servant is called *“Israel”* (v.3) but ministers to Israel (v.5) and, since the servant speaks and summons everyone to listen, he appears to be a person (v.1) who is called to be a prophet (v.2). Some have suggested that Isaiah is talking of himself but no Old Testament prophet ever told people to listen to *their* words (rather than to *God’s* words) and it would be extraordinary for God to say that kings would do homage to a mere man (v.7). Furthermore, this servant is to inaugurate God’s final salvation (vv.9c-13, which picks up Ch.35). And what do we make of the statements that the servant is to *“be [the LORD’s] salvation to the ends of the earth”* (end of v.6, lit) and that he will *“be a covenant for the people”* (v.8d)?

The New Testament is clear about who the servant is: the prophet Simeon identified Christ as the servant shortly after his birth, paraphrasing Ch.49 v.6 (Luke 2:25-35) and the apostle Paul and Barnabas later used that verse to explain their mission to the Gentiles (Act 13:47). Paul also identified *“the time of my favour”* (v.8) with the time of the preaching of the gospel (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Israel may think that God has forgotten them (v.14) but it is not true (vv.15-23). They may think that their foes are too powerful but God is more powerful (vv.24-26). They may think that he has *“divorced”* them or had to give them up but that is not true (Ch.50 v.1bc). The issue was their sin and God was able to save them even from that (vv.1d-3). The requirement is simply that people answer his call (v.2). So why don’t they?

1. *Go back to yesterday’s passage and consider Ch.48 v.16 again. Who is the speaker? What does v.16 and Ch.49 vv.1-9 tell us about the servant?*
2. *Do you ever think that God has forgotten you? How does today’s passage provide reassurance?*

## Wednesday: Isaiah 50:4-51:8

Ch.50 vv.4-11 comprises the third “servant song”. The second song (Ch.49 vv.1-9a) indicates that the servant will not find his mission easy and we now learn that he is to endure suffering (v.6). The servant learns from God (v.4) and obeys God (v.5). He knows that God helps him, so he won’t be disgraced (v.7) and that he is innocent of all charges that may be brought against him, so he will be vindicated by God (v.8-9). Yet he suffers.

What are we to make of this? It becomes clear once we understand that the servant is Christ: he learned from God (Luke 2:52; Hebrews 5:8); he obeyed God (Philippians 2:8); he was perfect in every way (Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 1:19; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Nonetheless, he suffered both in life and in his death. He was then vindicated by God in his resurrection. We shall return to this when we look at the final servant song on Friday.

Isaiah poses a question: do we fear the LORD and obey the words of his servant (v.10a)? This equates the fear of the LORD with obedience to his servant. If we fear God (and this is the beginning of wisdom; Proverbs 9:10) then we need to do what the servant says. In short, we need to obey what Jesus say. Jesus himself said the same thing (John 12:47-50).

We have a stark choice. We can recognise that we are “*walking in the dark*” (i.e. do not know how to live our lives; v.10c), trust in God and rely on him (i.e. obey his servant). That way, we will receive the light that the servant provides (Ch.51 v.4) and will have no need to fear (vv.7-8). Alternatively, we can continue to think that we can “*walk in the light of our fires*” (i.e. go our own way; v.11cd). That way, we will receive judgment from God (v.11ef).

God urges that his people listen to him (Ch.51 vv.1/4). They should exhibit faith like Abraham (v.2) and will then receive his salvation, as will people from all nations (vv.4-5). This salvation will last for ever (vv.6fg/8cd).

Jesus said that he is the light of the world (John 8:12). He promised that, if we trust in him, we will not walk in darkness. The problem is that many people prefer darkness (John 3:19) or try to walk in their own light.

1. *Do you seek to walk in the light of Jesus? How does this manifest itself in how you live?*
2. *What new things does the third servant song tell us about the servant?*

## Thursday: Isaiah 51:9-52:12

The things that Isaiah prophesied should have provided comfort for those Israelites who “*pursued righteousness*” (Ch.51 v.1) but, leaving aside those Israelites who had no faith at all, it is easy to imagine that many people felt forgotten by God. Hence, the prayer in vv.9-10 rings true. In essence, it is a plea to God to wake up and act in the way that he once did when he rescued the Israelites from Egypt (Exodus 14:5-33).

God responds by reminding the people of several central truths: first, his promise of final salvation (vv.11-12, which repeat Ch.35 v.10); secondly, the fact that he is the creator of the universe (vv.13/16); and, thirdly, the fact that he is protecting them because they are his people (vv.14-16). In the middle of these assertions, God challenges his people: in the light of who he is and his promises, how can they be scared (vv.12-13)?

God then turns the table on his people: it is not he who needs to wake up but them (v.17)! He has punished them (vv.17-20) but he has now forgiven them and is acting against their tormentors (vv.21-23). They need to wake up and act in accordance with the new reality: be who they really are (Ch.52:1-6). They will be redeemed (v.3). The timidity apparent in their prayer needs to be replaced with confidence and joy (vv.7-10).

The meaning of vv.11-12 is uncertain but the best explanation is that God is continuing to address his redeemed people, as he has been doing since the start of Ch.51, and is saying, “*In the light of your redemption, be pure!*”. In other words, live lives that are appropriate for the redeemed people of God.

All of this is easily applied to us. Like the ancient Israelites, modern Christians can easily become timid and discouraged. We may well pray, or feel like praying, the prayer in Ch.51 vv.9-10 and, if we have faith in Jesus, we need to be reminded of the truths in vv.11-16. We need to wake up and understand who we really are: the redeemed people of God. We need to act accordingly.

1. *Re-read and think about Ch.51 vv.11-16. How does your life reflect the reality expressed in this passage?*
2. *Do you share the joy of Ch.52 vv.7-10? Why or why not? How can you ensure that you do so?*

## Friday: Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Isaiah has asserted that a remnant of his Israelite people and others from all nations will be saved and that this will not merely comprise rescue from the Babylonians but God's final salvation in a redeemed world. God has said *"My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way"* and *"my righteousness will last for ever, my salvation through all generations"* (Ch.51 vv.5/8). Isaiah has told us that this is linked to a servant of God but has not told us what that link is or how God's righteousness will benefit us. In today's passage, one of the most famous in the Bible, all is explained.

We learn that God's servant is a man who will be rejected and suffer (Ch.53 v.3; also Ch.52 v.14). In fact, he will be killed (vv.8c/9ab/12c). This will not be because of wrongdoing on his part (v.9) but because he will bear the punishment of God's people. His suffering will be vicarious (i.e. he will suffer in place of God's people, vv.4-6; compare with Ch.1 vv.5-6). In this way, the people of God are forgiven and have peace with God (v.5cd/12ef). Furthermore, the benefits of the servant's suffering will extend to *"many nations"* (Ch.52 v.15d; the word *"sprinkle"* has overtones of the priests in the temple sprinkling the blood of sacrificial victims; Leviticus 4:6).

Some may ask whether it is fair that an innocent person should suffer for guilty people but we need not worry on this account. First, the servant will receive his reward (vv.11-12). Secondly, and more importantly, as we have seen, the servant will be no ordinary man. The language used about him in Ch.42 may remind us of the language used of the divine child in Ch.9 vv.6-7) and the statement that the servant will be *"raised and lifted up and highly exalted"* (Ch.52 v.13) is a further indication of who he is. There is only one person who the Bible considers worthy of such language: the LORD (e.g. Ch.6 v.1/Ch.57 v.15). Although a man, this servant is God himself!

Of course, the New Testament identifies Jesus as the servant. We will look at this in more detail during the week after next.

1. *Think about what today's passage tells us about Jesus's suffering and how we benefit from it.*
2. *Replace the words "our", "us" and "we are" in v.5 with "my", "me" and "I am". Are you sure that the resulting statement is true? If not, talk to someone in the Church about it.*

## Week 11 (11<sup>th</sup> November to 15<sup>th</sup> November)

### Isaiah 54:1-59:21 – Responding to God

#### Monday: Isaiah 54:1-54:17

The revelation in yesterday's passage is wonderful and it demands a response. Chapter 54 is a call to reflect on the results of the work of God's servant. It is worth reading slowly and prayerfully. It is important to remember that it is poetry and to reflect on the significance of its imagery.

The "*barren woman*" (v.1) is Jerusalem, which is personified and called on to rejoice because, although she never gave birth and has no husband, she finds herself with many descendants (vv.1-3). These "*children*" are the people who have been redeemed and are part of God's people. They result from God being Jerusalem's "*husband*" (v.5). It is he who brings the people to physical birth (as their "*maker*") and spiritual birth (as their "*redeemer*")

The apostle Paul picked up on this picture (Galatians 4:21-31). He quotes v.1 and contrasts the Jerusalem of his day with "*Jerusalem that is above*" envisaged by Isaiah. He says that the latter Jerusalem is the mother of those who have experienced spiritual birth. It is they who live there.

The image of God as a husband or bridegroom and his people as his wife or bride is common in the Bible (e.g. Jeremiah 2-3; Hosea 1-3). Jesus likened himself to a bridegroom and thus, implicitly, to God (Mark 2:19-20) and this analogy was used by Paul (Ephesians 5:22-33) and John (Revelation 21:2/9).

Underpinning the rejoicing is God's assurance that, "*my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed*" (v.10). We have previously been told that the servant is to be "*a covenant for the people*" (Ch.42 v.6/Ch.49 v.8). In the light of Ch.53, we can understand what this means: by dying, the servant (Jesus) has sealed a new covenant with God for the benefit of his people. Nothing more needs to be done. As Jesus cried from the cross, "*It is finished*" (John 19:30).

1. *Read and reflect on the New Testament passages quoted above.*
2. *What are the implications of Jesus's work being finished?*

## Tuesday: Isaiah 55:1-55:13

Who can become one of God's people? Anyone can! God invites everyone who is (spiritually) thirsty or hungry to come to him so that they can obtain the salvation that they need (v.1) and Jesus repeated this invitation by reference to himself (John 7:37-39).

God says that this is an offer "*without money and without cost*" (v.1f). That is clearly good news but it does not mean that there is nothing for us to do and that all people will automatically be given the benefit of God's salvation. To obtain that benefit, it is necessary to act.

First, it is necessary that we listen to what God says (v.2c): that our behaviour has angered him; that we need his mercy and salvation; and that this is available, without us needing to work for it, as a result of what his servant has done. We need to listen to what Paul said: "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus*" (Romans 3:23-24).

But simply listening to this is not enough. We need to act on it, turning from wicked acts and thoughts and turning to God (v.7; see John 7:38). This does not mean that God will only forgive us if we become perfect. It means that we need to acknowledge our rejection of God and his ways and pledge to follow him. In short, we need to come to God (v.1) and call on him to save us (v.6). If we do so, God will pardon us (v.7cd).

Isaiah says that God will "*make an everlasting covenant*" with us, the covenant of love promised to King David (v.3c). To understand this, we need to think back to Chs.7-11: God's anointed saviour (the Messiah) is not just the suffering servant we have read about recently; he is also the divine king in the line of David that we read about some weeks ago (Ch.11 v.1). He is the fulfilment of God's promise to David (2 Samuel 7:15-16) and God is saying that, if we come to him in repentance and faith, we will enjoy the benefits of that promise. This is the benefit of the new covenant that the suffering servant of God will establish for God's people (Ch.42 v.6)

1. *Have you listened and acted as, in Ch.55, God urges you to do?*
2. *What are the implications of God having made an everlasting covenant with his people?*

## Wednesday: Isaiah 56:1-57:21

Over the past two days, we have heard that God's people should rejoice in the salvation that has been secured by God's servant, Jesus, and that all may come to God and be forgiven. What else needs to be born in mind?

First, God's promises will not be fulfilled immediately. When Isaiah wrote, Jesus's life and death lay seven hundred years in the future and we don't know how many more years will pass before the promises of final salvation (e.g. Ch.35) will be fulfilled. We must be patient and, while waiting, *"Maintain justice and do what is right"* (Ch.56 vv.1-2). God pardons us as an act of grace: *"the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 6:23). However, this does not mean that we can do what we like. As Paul puts it *"Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those that have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer"* (Romans 6:1-2). We are committed to serving God.

Secondly, we need to remember that God says that *"all who are thirsty"* can come to him (Ch.55 v.1). The Old Testament indicates that all non-Israelites were always able to be part of the people of God (e.g. Exodus 12:48-49 and the book of Ruth; the exclusion of foreigners from the temple was to illustrate God's purity not his rejection of the people concerned). Sadly, the Israelites often forgot that, when God says *"all"*, he means *"all"*! Hence, he told them that even eunuchs (i.e. the physically damaged) were acceptable to him (Ch.56 vv.4-5; see Acts 8:26-40), as were all foreigners (vv.6-7). He will gather who he wills to become part of his people. Christians can be just as exclusive as the ancient Israelites but we need to be as inclusive as God.

Thirdly, we need to recognise that, despite God's grace, many will still reject him and as a result they will remain subject to his judgment (Ch.56 v.9-Ch.57 v.13). God has said that he will gather in people from *all nations*; he has not said that *all people* will turn to him. It is sad but true. Many will reject God's offer of peace (Ch.57 vv.18-19) or seek to accept it on their own terms (e.g. without repenting and submitting to God's stated will). For them, God's word remains, *"There is no peace for the wicked"* (v.21; Ch.48 v.22).

1. *As you await the fulfilment of God's promises, are you doing what Ch.56 calls on us to do (e.g. vv.1-2)?*
2. *Have you made sure that you have accepted God's offer on his terms?*



## Thursday: Isaiah 58:1-59:15b

We now move into the final section of the book. It looks at the issue of God's salvation again but from a different perspective. Hence, it repeats things that have been said earlier in the book but also says new things.

It starts, as we might expect having read the first 57 chapters, with the problem of sin. The first part of Chapter 58 has a lot in common with Ch.1 vv.10-20. It is a condemnation of the religiosity of the Israelite people. On the surface, they appear to want to know God (v.2ab) and they certainly want him to help them (vv.2e). Appearances are, however, deceptive: there are serious problems. They have "*forsaken the commands of [their] God*" (v.2d). They engage in wrongful behaviour even as they engage in religious observance (vv.3e-4b) and, perhaps even worse, they clearly think that their observance can be used to manipulate God (v.3a-d).

As we saw when we looked at Ch.1, God hates this kind of thing and he won't be manipulated. The Israelites behaviour was totally unacceptable to him (vv.4c-5) and he tells them that he requires obedience to his commandments (vv.6-7). Nonetheless, the message is not entirely gloomy since the implication is that God is prepared to forgive: if they turn back to him and do what is right, they will have his blessing (vv.8-14).

Unfortunately, the fundamental problem is that the Israelites won't do this. They are enslaved by sin (to use Paul's expression in Romans 7:14) and continue to do dreadful evil (Ch.59 vv.3-8). The result is there is a barrier between them and God (vv.1-2) and their sin boomerangs on them (vv.9-11). The bottom line is that they are in rebellion against God (vv.12-13) and so "*justice is driven back and righteousness stands at a distance*" (vv.14-15).

The language may, in places, sound extreme but it is looking at the evil of sin from God's perspective and it is a fair description of all human societies at all times. The apostle Paul makes use of Ch.59 vv.7-8 and various Psalms to make exactly this point (Romans 3:9-20). That is the fundamental human problem: our iniquities have separated us from God (Ch.59 v.2).

1. *What does God demand of his people in today's passage?*
2. *Do you agree that Ch.59 vv.12-13 describes human societies in general? Why or why not? Look also at Romans 3:9-20.*

## Friday: Isaiah 59:15c-59:21

Yesterday, we focussed on the problem of sin. Today, we focus on God's solution. Isaiah has considered this in Ch.49-53 but he has more to say.

Sin angers and appals God (vv.15c-16b). No-one else was going to do anything about the problem and so he himself acted (vv.16c-17). If we had not read the rest of the book, we might expect that his acts would comprise acts of judgment and they certainly include this (vv.18-19). However, strikingly, the first thing that is mentioned is that he "*achieved salvation*" (v.16c). We are told that he "*put on garments of vengeance*" (v.17c) but not until we have been told that he "*put on righteousness as his breast plate and the helmet of salvation on his head*" (v.17ab). The picture is of God as a warrior on a mission: dealing with his global foes (v.18) and rescuing his people ("*those in Jacob who repent of their sins*", v.20; c.f. v.19).

Of course, the apostle Paul borrowed the picture of a warrior putting on his equipment when he urged us to make use of the power that God makes available to us so that we can live as followers of Jesus (Ephesians 6:10-20). God himself is equipped to achieve salvation and he equips his saved people to live their lives as he wants them to live them.

In vv.20-21, we glimpse how God achieves his goal. We are told that "*The Redeemer will come ... to those ... who repent of their sins*" (v.20) and God then explains his "*covenant with them*" (v.21). This involves giving the Holy Spirit and God's word. We might assume that these are given to those who repent and, indirectly, this is true but the word "*you*" in v.21 is masculine singular. God is saying that he will give his Spirit and word to an individual and that his word will also be with this person's "*children*". Who is this? Isaiah has told us that God's servant will be endowed with God's Spirit (Ch.42 v.1c/Ch.48 v.16) and God's word (Ch.49 v.2a/Ch.50 v.4) and that he will have "*offspring*" (Ch.53 v.10c) and be God's "*covenant for the people*" (Ch.42 v.6c/Ch.49 v.8d). The suffering servant is the person who is going to "*come to Zion*" (Ch.59 v.20) and do the things described in Ch.59 vv.17-19.

*In what ways does what Isaiah says about people coming into a covenant relationship with God through the suffering servant illuminate what the New Testament says about Christians being "in Christ"? Look at 1 Corinthians 1:4, Galatians 3:26, Ephesians 2:6 and Hebrews 3:14.*

## **Week 12 (18<sup>th</sup> November to 22<sup>nd</sup> November)**

### **Jesus the fulfilment of Isaiah**

Our main morning services on 17<sup>th</sup> November are All Age services so there are no daily readings this week. Instead, it is suggested that you think about the way in which Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's suffering servant prophecies (Ch.42 vv.1-7; Ch.49 vv.1-9a; Ch.50 vv.4-11; Ch.52 v.13 to Ch.53 v.12). This can be done by considering those parts of the New Testament that quote or allude to these prophecies. You could (in fact, should!) look at the following passages, which particularly relate to the final servant prophecy (including, in some cases, quoting or alluding to it):

1. Jesus being endowed with the Holy Spirit and God's word (Ch.42 v.1c/Ch.48 v.16/Ch.49 v.2a/Ch.50 v.4): Matthew 3:13-17; John 7:16-18/6:68; c.f. Matthew 7:24-27/12:15-21.
2. Rejection of Jesus and the Gospel (Ch.49 v.7/Ch.53 vv.1/3): John 1:11/12:37-8 (Jesus rejected); Romans 10:16 (apostles' message rejected).
3. Jesus as a "tender shoot" (Ch.53 v.2): Luke 2:40/52 (and the narratives of Jesus's birth at the start of Matthew and Luke).
4. Jesus being abandoned (Ch.53 v.3): Mark 14:50; John 18:15-18/25-27.
5. Jesus unprotesting (Ch.50 v.6/Ch.53 v.7): Matthew 16:21-23/27:12-14.
6. Jesus's vicarious suffering (Ch.53 vv.4-5/8d/11d/12ef): Matthew 20:28; Romans 4:25; 1 Corinthians 15:3; 1 Peter 2:23-24/3:18.
7. Jesus's death (Ch.53 vv.8-9/12c): Any of the Gospel narratives of Jesus's trials and death. Note his burial (John 19:38-42; c.f. Ch.53 v.9).
8. People as straying sheep (Ch.53 v.6): Luke 15:3-7 (the lost sheep); 1 Peter 2:25; John 10:11-18 (Jesus laying down his life for his sheep).
9. Jesus as the lamb of God (Ch.53 v.7): John 1:29; Acts 8:32-35; 1 Peter 1:18-19; Revelation 5:6-14 (John's vision of "the Lamb who was slain").
10. God's overruling in Jesus's suffering (Ch.53 v.10): Acts 2:23.
11. Jesus's resurrection (Ch.53 v.11b): Any of the gospel narratives of this.
12. Jesus's exaltation: (Ch.52 v.13b/Ch.53 v.12ab): Philippians 2:5-11; Acts 2:22-36 (especially vv.32-33); Acts 3:13.
13. The benefits of Jesus's death being for all nations (Ch. 42 v.6; Ch.49 v.6; Ch.52 v.15): 1 Peter 1:1-2; Romans 3:22/15:17-22 (especially v.21).
14. Christ's vindication resulting in assured salvation (Ch.50 v.8-9): Romans 8:28-39 (especially, v.33).

## Week 13 (25<sup>th</sup> November to 29<sup>th</sup> November)

### Isaiah 60:1-66:24 - The God who saves

#### Monday: Isaiah 60:1-61:9

Zion (God's redeemed people) is called upon to wake up and respond to the coming of God's Redeemer (Ch.60 v.1; see Ephesians 5:14). The world is in darkness in consequence of sin but God has given us light (v.2). Nations will come to worship God (vv.3-14), there will be peace (vv.17e-18), security (v.21b) and prosperity (v.17a-d/22) and people will be accepted as righteous by God (v.21a). All of this will last for ever (v.15).

This vision of salvation is linked to the man anointed by God mentioned in Ch.59 v.21 (Ch.61 vv.1-9), who is also the suffering servant of the "*servant songs*" and the king in the line of David of Chs.6-11: the Messiah.

God has anointed the Messiah to proclaim and effect salvation: to proclaim good news of salvation; to release people from darkness of sin; to proclaim God's favour for his people and vengeance in relation to God's enemies; to bestow the benefits of salvation (vv.1-3). As a result, God's people will be "*oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour*" (v.3ef). In other words, the repentant people of Ch.59 v.20 will be firmly established as righteous by the acts of God's Messiah.

Isaiah has said that the suffering servant will "*justify many*", which could be translated, "*provide righteousness for many*" (Ch.53 v.11b). Also, referring to those who serve him, God declares their "*vindication from me*", literally "*their righteousness is from me*" (Ch.54 v.17). "*Righteous*" here refers to being innocent and in good standing before God. God is saying that his Messiah will provide his people with the righteousness that they need.

Jesus said that he is the fulfilment of all of this (Luke 4:17-21). As a result, as Paul put it, "*all are justified [i.e. declared righteous before God] freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus*" (Romans 3:23).

*What are the implications of the fact that, despite our wrongdoing, if we trust in Jesus, we are righteous before God because Jesus's righteousness is imputed to us? See also Romans 3:21-26 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21.*

## Tuesday: Isaiah 61:10-63:6

The “I” of Ch.61 v.10 appears to refer to the Messiah, who continues to describe his mission. He confers righteousness and salvation on Jerusalem (Ch.62 v.1; Jerusalem, like Zion, being a symbol for the people of God).

The vision of vv.2-12 is similar to previous prophecies of the redeemed people of God but, this time, Isaiah adds that *“as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you”* (v.5). God rejoices over the people that he has made righteous and saved! Furthermore, he promises that he will never turn against them (vv.8-9). They will be called *“the Holy People”* (v.12; i.e. the people set apart for God).

Isaiah then has a vision of someone like a mighty warrior returning from battle with his clothes stained with the blood of his enemies (Ch.63 v.1). We learn that the warrior is the Messiah (v.1e; in the light of what has preceded Ch.63, “I” must refer to him) and that he is bloodstained because, in his anger against sin, he has been destroying those who oppose him (vv.3c-f/6). This is likened to treading grapes in a winepress, crushing the grapes beyond recognition (v.3a; see similar images in Joel 3:13; Lamentations 1:15; and Revelation 14:17-20/19:11-16).

It is not a comfortable vision. It is not meant to be. In Ch.53, we heard of the Messiah’s glorious work in salvation and it is tempting to stop at that point. There are, however, two aspects to his work. In yesterday’s passage, we heard that the LORD anointed the Messiah *“to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour”* (Ch.61 v.2a) and, in the first part of today’s passage (down to Ch.62 v.12), we see what that favour comprises. However, we also heard that the Messiah is to proclaim *“the day of vengeance of our God”* (Ch.61 v.2b) and, in Ch.63, we move on to this. These two things cannot be separated. When the bloodstained warrior identifies himself, he says that he is *“proclaiming victory, mighty to save”* (Ch.63 v.1ef). Judgment is part of salvation (vv.4-5). This is why Jesus spoke so often about judgment and why the Bible talks of *“the wrath of the lamb”* (Revelation 6:16).

*How do the statements about the Messiah judging the world fit with John’s statement that “God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him” (John 3:17)? Consider Matthew 13:24-30/13:36-41/24:30-44/25:31-46, Mark 8:38, Luke 4:17-21; John 5:30.*

## Wednesday: Isaiah 63:7-64:12

After several of the prophecies in Isaiah, there is a response (e.g. Ch.42 vv.10-13/Ch.49 v.13/Ch.54 vv.1-17). Today's passage is Isaiah's response to the overwhelming prophecy of God's judgment in Ch.63 vv.1-6).

Isaiah begins by looking back to God's rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt (vv.7-9; see Exodus 13:21-22 regarding God's presence with the Israelites at that time). The people rebelled against God and so he opposed them (v.10; e.g. Deuteronomy 1:26-46) but he still blessed them and eventually led them into the promised land (v.14; see Joshua 1-3).

Having reminded himself that God has a record of saving people despite their behaviour, Isaiah turns to prayer (v.15). He acknowledges the people's sin: they are like lepers before God (Ch.64 v.6a) and even when they try to do good things they are tainted with sin (v.6b). Hence, they are destroyed by their own sin (v.6cd). But Isaiah wants to know why, given God's character and dealings with past generations, he has not saved them (Ch.63 v.15). Isaiah asks why, instead, God has made the people sin (v.17)?

Some explain this away by suggesting that Isaiah is merely asking God why he allows sin but this is not consistent with what he says. Isaiah understands that, as a judgment, God may "*harden*" people such that they continue to sin to their own destruction (see above in relation to Chs.6/29). He knows that God has given the Israelites over to their own sin (Ch.64 v.7d). He doesn't doubt God's right to do this but he wants to know why God has done so despite his character and his promises to his chosen people.

This caused Isaiah anguish. He longed for God's salvation (Ch.64 vv.1-4) and prayed that God would forgive his people (v.9ab), look at their sorry state (v.9c-11) and act (v.12).

Isaiah's anguish was shared by the apostle Paul hundreds of years later (see Romans 9:1-5/10:1). However, Paul knew that Isaiah's prophecies (and other parts of the Old Testament) contained the answer to the issues that troubled both Isaiah and him (see Romans 9-11 generally)

1. *What is that answer? Take a look especially at Romans 9:6-29).*
2. *Isaiah reminds us that the Israelites "grieved [God's] Holy Spirit". Do you do so? Take a look at Ephesians 4:29-5:2.*

## Thursday: Isaiah 65:1-65:25

The prayer of Ch.64 leads to the climax of the book, which is God's answer to the prayer. God will act not "hold back" or "keep silent" for ever (Ch.64 v.12) but the implications of this will be different for different people.

First, God states that he has revealed himself to those who did not seek him (Ch.65 v.1). He has made himself known to non-Israelites (v.1c; literally "to a nation not called by my name"; see Romans 10:20). As Isaiah has kept telling us, salvation is not going to be confined to Israelites.

Conversely, as Isaiah has admitted (Ch.64 v.6), although God has appealed to the Israelites, they have rejected God's call (Ch.65 v.12cd) and provoked God to anger (vv.2-3). As Isaiah has kept telling us, their status as Israelites will not protect them from God's judgment (vv.6-7/12ab) and, as we have noted previously, "not all who are descended from Israel [i.e. the patriarch Jacob] are Israel [i.e. God's people]" (Romans 9:6).

That said, God has not rejected his promise to Abraham that he will bless his descendants (Genesis 22:17-18). There will be a remnant of the Israelites who will enjoy his salvation and he will multiply that remnant (vv.8-10). The contrast with those who are not part of the remnant will be stark (vv.13-15). In particular, whilst the sins of those who are not part of the remnant will be punished (vv.6-7a), those of the remnant will be forgiven (v.16ef).

Isaiah has given us many glimpses of what is in store for God's saved people (e.g. Ch.2 vv2-4/Ch.4 vv.2-6/Ch.11 vv.6-9/Ch.25 vv.6-8/Ch.35 v.10/Ch.54 vv.11-15). His final glimpse is dramatic because it makes express what is only implicit in the others: he is going to recreate the whole universe (vv.17-18)! The effect of the fall (Genesis Ch.3) will be reversed (see especially v.23) and all God's people will be blessed (vv.19-25).

Of course, this vision of a new heaven and a new earth is taken up in the book of Revelation (Revelation 21:1-22:5). The Bible begins with the creation of a perfect world and it ends with that perfect world recreated.

*Refresh your memory of the Isaiah passages listed in the penultimate paragraph above. Do you believe that God really will do what he has promised? How does this impact the way that you live? How should it? Take a look at 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 and Colossians 3:1-4.*

## Friday: Isaiah 66:1-66:24

Had we been editing the book of Isaiah, we might have decided that it should finish with the wonderful vision of Ch.65. If so, we would have been misguided. There are things to remember and a decision to be made. Isaiah thus reiterates a number of key points.

He starts by reminding us of the majesty of God our creator (vv.1-2b) and repeating that responding to God with mere outward religious observance is worse than useless (vv.3-4). On the other hand, God accepts those *“who are humble and contrite in spirit, and tremble at my word”* (v.2c-e).

As Isaiah found, trembling at God’s word is not always easy since some people will hate us (v.5) but we can rest assured that they will be dealt with (v.6) and our salvation will come in an instant, like a woman giving birth without labour (vv.7-8). God’s judgment and salvation are sure (vv.9-17). God will gather people from all nations as his people (v.18) and all people will be accepted equally (vv.20-21). He will give them a sign (v.19; could that be the cross of Jesus?) and they will inhabit the new heaven and new earth for ever as God’s people (v.22-23). That is what is on offer to us.

Having regard to this, we can answer the questions in v.1. When Solomon built the Temple, he asked *“But will God really dwell on earth?”* (1 Kings 8:27a). The answer is “yes”! Although the whole of creation cannot contain him (1 Kings 8:27bc) God promises to be with his people. Jesus said that he would be with us *“to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20) and he will be with us in the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:3). He is not called, *“Immanuel”* (God with us; Ch.7 v.14) for nothing!

But we can’t get away from the other side of the equation: the alternative to inhabiting God’s eternal city is to be in the cemetery outside the city (v.24). All people have a decision to take and it has eternal consequences.

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out!  
Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?  
Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?  
For from him and through him and for him are all things.  
To him be the glory for ever! Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)*



# Appendix

## Additional information

### 1. Understanding Isaiah

**1.1 An edited collection of prophecies:** Isaiah gave hundreds of prophecies over the course of a period of at least 40 years (see paragraph 2.1 below). Some of these related to the immediate political situation, some to the less immediate future and some to the end of history. Of course, except in a few cases in which some time-scale was revealed to him (e.g. Ch.16 v.14), Isaiah would not have known when his prophecies were to be fulfilled. We can only know that in retrospect. For example, he would not have known when his prophecy of the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (Ch.39 vv.5-7) would be fulfilled but we know that it occurred 105 years later in 597 BC.

Unlike many earlier prophets (e.g. Elijah and Elisha), but like his eighth century near contemporaries Amos and Micah, Isaiah wrote his prophecies down (or had someone write them down for him). Indeed, he may well have composed them in writing since many comprise carefully constructed poetry. Furthermore, he or someone else collected them and the result was that, by the end of Isaiah's life, there was a collection of a large number of prophecies that dealt with many different situations, some very specific to their immediate context, some very general, and some in between these extremes.

These prophecies could have been discarded but God ensured that they were not. Probably, someone, perhaps Isaiah himself, believing both that they were inspired by God and that they were of abiding significance, assembled into what we now have as the book of Isaiah.

The person who assembled the collection of prophecies could have simply placed them in the order in which he<sup>1</sup> found them or he could have attempted to place them in the order in which the prophecies were given. However, he did neither of these things. Instead, he undertook a careful editing process and placed the prophecies in an order designed to bring out

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<sup>1</sup> I think that we should assume that it was a "he"!

their key themes and relate them to one another. He started with an introduction to the key themes of the prophecies (Chs.1-5) and set out Isaiah's account of his call to be a prophet (Ch.6) before starting the main sections of the book.

Of course, the editor believed that he was handling the word of God to his people. Hence, he did not feel able to amend or adapt the prophecies as he saw fit. It is clear that, on occasions, he detached part of a prophecy and placed it in a different part of the book from the rest of the prophecy (e.g. Ch.5 vv.11-25 may well originally have been part of the same prophecy as Ch.9 vv.8-21 but it has been detached in order to make a point in the introduction to the book). However, the book suggests that this was the limit of what was permissible.

Imagine that you were given copies of a number of sermons of a famous preacher and you wished to edit and publish them without fundamentally altering them. You might decide to adopt a similar approach. You might decide on the key themes around which you would assemble the collection and then, using some material for the introduction, sort the sermons into some kind of order. Of course, you would have to recognise that this categorisation by theme would be less than perfect. For example, any individual sermon would probably cover a number of points in addition to its main theme (e.g. a sermon on the sovereignty of God might well talk about salvation and a sermon calling on people to repent might include comments about God's law and his holiness). Furthermore, there would be a lot of repetition as well as references to specific circumstances which might not be so relevant to future readers as they were to the original audience. If you wished to respect the original text, you would accept these things as unavoidable.

In essence, this is what the editor of Isaiah's prophecies did: the big difference between the analogy in the last paragraph and what the editor did being the fact that, unlike the person compiling a book of sermons, the editor was dealing with a large number of relatively short prophecies and so the transitions from one prophecy to another come thick and fast (e.g. there are at least six different prophecies underlying Ch.1 v.1 to Ch.2 v.5 alone).

The more one studies Isaiah, the more one appreciates the enormous care and effort that has gone in to the editing process and the skill of the editor, whoever he was. Unfortunately, in this reading plan there is insufficient space to draw attention to more than a very small number of the many ways in which the editor has structured the book so as to bring out the meaning of the prophecies.

The result of the various points made above is that one cannot read the book in the same way as one reads the Gospels, the New Testament letters or the history books of the Old Testament. If you try to do that, you will end up confused and frustrated. You need to keep in mind that the book is an edited collection of prophecies and to look out for the big themes that come through them, whilst accepting the repetition and discontinuities that are inherent in the editing of the book.

**1.2 Types of material:** Paragraph 1.1 above refers to all of the material in Isaiah as “prophecies” but this is slightly misleading. There is a variety of material in the book. Much of the book comprises declarations of God’s word in poetic form but there is also autobiography (Ch.6), narrative history (e.g. Chs.7 and 36-39), songs of praise (e.g. Ch. 26) and prayer (e.g. Ch.33 vv.2-6 and Ch.64).

It is important to be conscious of the type of material you are reading when you seek to understand what Isaiah is saying. For example, the poetry makes extensive use of imagery which is not necessarily intended to be taken literally and the Hebrew text makes extensive use of alliteration and assonance which results in words being piled on top of one another so as to reinforce a single point rather than to make a series of different points, which might be the case in a prose passage using multiple words.

**1.3 Structure:** As indicated above, the structure of Isaiah is complex and it can be analysed in various different ways. Nonetheless, broadly, the book can be divided up as follows:

Introduction: Chapters 1 to 5

Isaiah’s call to ministry: Chapter 6

The coming King: Chapters 7 to 12

God’s universal sovereignty and plans: Chapters 13 to 27

Threat and promise: Chapters 28-35

An historic bridge: Chapters 36 to 39  
God's unique glory and manifestation in history: Chapters 40 to 48  
The servant of God and our response to him: Chapters 49 to 57  
The final vindication of God, his Messiah and his people: Chapters 57 to 66

It is important to stress again that the nature of the prophecies and the editing process results in the above outline being only very broadly accurate. Thus, for example, it may be objected that there are passages about the final vindication of God throughout the book. This is true but it is only in the final part of the book that this becomes the central theme.

More generally, it should be noted that themes often appear in a passage and are then developed later in the book (e.g. the significance of God being the creator of all things, which is implicit almost everywhere and is expressed on a number of occasions before it takes centre stage in Chs.40 - 48). Furthermore, themes are often looked at from different perspectives. By far the most important of these themes is that of the coming Messiah: in Chs.7-11 (which contain some of the most famous Messianic prophecies), the stress is on the Messiah as the coming king; in Chs.49-53 (and also Ch.42, where the theme is introduced), the stress is on the Messiah as the suffering servant; and in Chs.59-63, the stress is on the Messiah as what Alec Motyer (who wrote one of the leading commentaries on Isaiah) calls "the Anointed Conqueror", the one bringing judgment and salvation at the end of time.

**1.4 Does all of the book come from Isaiah?** There has long been a debate about whether Isaiah was the author of all of the prophecies in the book that bears his name. In particular, it has been suggested that the material relating to the destruction of Judah by the Babylonians and the subsequent return from exile as a result of the actions of Cyrus the Great of Persia must come from another, much later prophet. In fact, some commentators perceive the hand of many different writers in the text.

There is not space here to analyse this issue in detail. Suffice to say that the case for multiple authors is not nearly as strong as many people suggest. Indeed, as Alec Motyer has demonstrated, that case is full of problems and the case for a single author (i.e. Isaiah himself) is much stronger, assuming that one does not simply reject the possibility of predictive prophecy.

It is also worth noting that the importance of the book for us is not dependent upon it all having been written by a single person in the eighth century BC. Of course, if the historical prophecies were “fake” in the sense of having been written after the events that they purport to predict then there would be a serious problem but there is absolutely no reason to suppose that this is the case. Indeed, the most plausible reason for Isaiah’s prophecies having been collected and preserved is that those that were subject to the testing of history proved right and so he was demonstrated to be a true prophet and not a false one.

## 2. The historical background

**2.1 The prophet Isaiah:** Isaiah lived in the second half of the eighth century BC and the beginning of the seventh century BC. He tells us that he experienced his famous vision of God in “*the year that King Uzziah died*”, which was 740/39 BC (Ch.6 v.1). He then ministered during the reigns of Jotham (died 732/1 BC), Ahaz (died 716/15 BC) and Hezekiah (died 687/6 BC; see Ch.1 v.1).<sup>2</sup> His last dateable prophecies comes from 701 BC (e.g. Ch.37:21-35).

He was clearly a member of the royal court in of Judah, with access to the king, and he may have been a nobleman. Jewish tradition says that he was murdered by King Manasseh of Judah sometime after 686 BC (by being sawn in two) but this is not stated in the Bible.

He was clearly married and had several children. Both his name and the names of his children formed part of his prophetic witness: “*Isaiah*” means “*the LORD is salvation*”; “*Shear Jashub*” (the name of one of his children) means “*A remnant will return*” and “*Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz*” (the name of another child”) means something like “*Quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.*”

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<sup>2</sup> It appears that the kings of Judah frequently arranged the crowning of their designated successor during their own reign. This resulted in co-regencies and, hence, overlapping reigns. In particular, Ahaz became co-regent in 735 BC, approximately three years before his father’s death, and Hezekiah became co-regent in 729 BC, approximately thirteen years before Ahaz’s death.

**2.2 The Israelite kingdoms:** Following the death of Solomon around 930 BC, the Israelite kingdom had split in two: in the south, the descendants of King David continued to rule over the tribes of Judah and Simeon from their capital, Jerusalem; in the north, other dynasties ruled the remaining ten tribes from their capital, Samaria. The southern kingdom was normally referred to as the “Kingdom of Judah” whilst the northern kingdom was called the “Kingdom of Israel”. However, confusingly, the northern kingdom was also sometimes called “Ephraim” (after the largest of its constituent tribes) or “Samaria” (after its capital). Furthermore, the name “Israel” was also used of the two kingdoms collectively and even, on occasions, of the southern kingdom.

**2.3 Events in the early part of Isaiah’s ministry:** The two Israelite kingdoms enjoyed a period of relative peace and prosperity during the first half of the eighth century BC. For various reasons, no great power sought to intervene in their area and they enjoyed political stability.

This was to change dramatically in the seventh decade of the century. In 744 BC Tiglath Pileser III ascended the throne of Assyria.<sup>3</sup> He commenced an aggressive foreign policy that was to result in the rapid expansion of the Assyrian empire and, in the 730s BC, he began to threaten Canaan (see 2 Kings 15:19-20).

Probably with a view to meeting this threat, Pekah, the King of Israel, entered into an alliance with Rezin, the King of Aram (also known as the “King of Damascus”, after his capital city). Together they attacked the Kingdom of Judah, perhaps because Ahaz, King of Judah, was reluctant to join their anti-Assyrian alliance (see 2 Kings 16:5).

Isaiah urged King Ahaz to rely on God for protection (Ch.7) but Ahaz rejected this advice and instead declared himself a vassal of Assyria (2 Kings 16:7-8 and 2 Chronicles 28:5-8). Tiglath Pileser was doubtless delighted and responded by invading the Kingdoms of Aram and Israel. Aram was destroyed and incorporated into the Assyrian empire, with Damascus being captured in 732 BC. Israel was stripped of Galilee and its other northern

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<sup>3</sup> See paragraph 3 below for an overview of the political geography of the time. Tiglath Pileser was also known as “Pul”, which was his Babylonian throne name (e.g. 2 Kings 15:19).

territories in 733 BC but a rump state was allowed to continue to exist. Judah survived but had to pay heavy tribute to Assyria (see 2 Chronicles 28:20-21) and Ahaz sought to appease Assyria in various other ways (2 Kings 16:18).

**2.4 Events in the later part of Isaiah's ministry:** This state of affairs was unstable. A few years later, Hoshea (who became King of Israel in 732/1 BC) rebelled against Assyria and the Assyrians, under Shalmaneser V (who succeeded Tiglath Pileser in 727 BC), invaded Canaan again. A three-year siege of Samaria followed before it fell in 722 BC. The whole Kingdom of Israel was then incorporated into the Assyrian empire as a province and a large proportion of its people were deported (see 2 Kings 17:3-6). They were replaced over time by people from other parts of the empire (2 Kings 17:24, 2 Chronicles 33:11 and Ezra 4:2). These people were the ancestors of the Samaritans of Jesus's day.

Judah continued to exist as an Assyrian vassal state but international politics became more complex in 715 BC with the re-unification of Egypt under Piankhi, the first of the powerful 21<sup>st</sup> dynasty pharaohs, who were from Ethiopia. The new dynasty began to meddle in Canaan and, despite Isaiah's warnings, King Hezekiah of Judah (who had become sole king on the death of his father Ahaz in 716/15 BC) rebelled against Assyria. The inevitable result was a further Assyrian invasion, this time under King Sennacherib (who had become king in 705/4 BC). The Assyrians defeated the Egyptians at the battle of Eltekeh in 701 BC, captured most of the major cities of Judah and besieged Jerusalem.

At this point, however, things went wrong from the point of view of the Assyrians: as prophesied by Isaiah, God intervened dramatically and they had to return home without capturing Jerusalem (see Chs.36-37).

**2.5 The rise of Babylon and events after Isaiah's death:** During most of the eighth and seventh centuries BC, Assyria ruled Babylon but for a long time after 720 BC its hold was tenuous. The ruler of Babylon was Merodach-Baladan (called "Marduk-Baladan" in the Bible). He was initially an Assyrian appointee but he rebelled and was a thorn in the side of Assyrian emperors down to his final defeat in 702 BC. His attempt to enlist the support of Judah was the occasion of Isaiah prophesying that, one day, Babylon would defeat Judah and carry off its wealth (Ch.39).

As indicated above, Isaiah was not to live to see this happen since, unknown to him, the events he foresaw were not to occur for over 100 years. In the last quarter of the seventh century, however, the Assyrian empire crumbled and, in 612 BC, its capital Nineveh was destroyed by a coalition of Medes and Babylonians. The Babylonians then replaced the Assyrians as the great power of the area.

It is doubtful whether the people of Judah would have seen much difference between the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Culturally and militarily they would have appeared very similar. Indeed, although the Babylonians were in some ways less autocratic and more cultured than the Assyrians, from the point of view of the Israelites, a decadent Assyria was probably preferable to an aggressive and powerful Babylon.

Sadly, the Judean kings of the time made exactly the same mistake as Hezekiah had made in 701 BC: they relied on Egypt. This led them to rebel against Babylon. Unfortunately for them, the hoped for Egyptian support failed to materialise and the result was that Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians in 597 BC. Then, following a further rebellion and a long siege, it was destroyed in 586 BC. Many of the people of Judah were then deported to Babylon and there followed seventy years of exile, which had been prophesied by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25). This ended after Babylon itself was captured by the forces of King Cyrus of Persia in 539 BC. He allowed the people of Judah to return home and a new chapter opened in the history of the region.

### **3. The geo-political setting**

Many places are mentioned in the book of Isaiah and there is not enough space to mention them all here but the following may be helpful.

During the time period covered by the book of Isaiah, the other nations with which it interacted were, broadly, the following: **Egypt**, which was located primarily in the Nile valley and at times stretched further south than modern Egypt; **Cush**, which was part of Egypt at certain times and which was in the south of the country, near where the pharaohs of the 21st dynasty came from; the **Philistine cities**, which were independent of one another and were located on or near the coast of what is now Israel; **Edom**, which was a small state to the south-east of Judah; **Moab**, which was



another small state to the north of Edom and east of the River Jordan; **Aram** (or **Damascus**), which, until its destruction by the Assyrians in 732 BC, was a powerful state in the southern part of modern Syria; **Tyre** and **Sidon**, which were **Phoenician** city states on the coast of modern Lebanon; **Assyria**, which was the great power that dominated most of the ancient Near East for several centuries and which was centred on the Tigris river in modern Kurdistan in the north of modern Iraq; **Babylonia**, which (as indicated above) was part of the Assyrian empire for a long time but which eventually itself became the dominant power in the Near East and which was centred on its capital Babylon on the River Euphrates about 75 miles from modern Baghdad (i.e. well south of Assyria).

Isaiah also mentions the **Medes**, **Elam** and **Tarshish** on several occasions. The **Medes** were a people from modern Persia; **Elam** was a region to the east of Babylonia; the precise location of **Tarshish** is not certain but it may well be Tartessus, a city on the south-west coast of the Iberian Peninsula.

## 4. The name and titles of God

**4.1 The name of God:** God is normally referred to in Isaiah by his covenant name that was given to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:13-15). In the original Hebrew, this is spelt YHWH (using Latin script) and it is linked to the verb “to be”, thus reminding us of God’s statement, “*I am who I am*” (Exodus 3:14).

Ancient written Hebrew contained only consonants and we are not sure how YHWH was pronounced. One suggestion is “*Jehovah*” but scholars now generally prefer “*Yahweh*”. In any event, in ancient times, the name was considered too holy to utter and, when the Hebrew Bible was read, the name was replaced by “*the Lord*”. This convention is followed in our modern English Bibles but, in order to distinguish references to the name of God from other words that are also best translated “*the Lord*”, our Bibles use upper case letters (i.e. “*the LORD*”) whenever translating “*YHWH*”. This convention is followed in this reading plan.

On occasions, God is referred to in Isaiah using the Hebrew word “*EI*”. This is a general term for God not carrying the overtones of God’s covenant with his people that YHWH carries. Our Bibles translate it simply as “*God*”.

**4.2 “The LORD Almighty”:** In many English translations of the Isaiah, the term *“the LORD Almighty”* is frequently used of God. This translates the expression *“YHWH sabbaoth”*, which literally means *“Yahweh of hosts”* and which is used no less than 62 times by Isaiah. It is sometimes suggested that its meaning is *“God of the armies of Israel”* but the usage in the Bible shows that it is far broader than this. The meaning is something like *“God over all of the heavenly and earthly beings”*. Hence, the translation *“the LORD Almighty”* is as close as one is likely to get.

**4.3 “Sovereign LORD” or “the Lord, the LORD Almighty”:** Sometimes, Isaiah adds another word to his reference to God, *“ha’adon”* or *“adonay”*. This means, *“lord”* in the sense of someone who is a ruler. Hence our Bibles translate the expression *“YHWH adonay”* as *“Sovereign LORD”* and the multiple title *“Ha’adon YHWH sabbaoth”* as *“the Lord, the LORD Almighty”*.

**4.4 “The Mighty One of Israel”:** On one occasion (Ch.1 v.24), Isaiah refers to God as *“the Mighty One of Israel”* (an expression that is similar to the expression *“the Mighty One of Jacob”* which appears in Gen 49:24 and Psalm 132:2/5). This obviously stresses God’s power and, in context, the use of that power to purify his people.

**4.5 “The Holy One of Israel”:** Isaiah also frequently refers to God as *“the Holy One of Israel”*. It is possible that he invented this title. It is a very expressive one since it stresses both God’s awesome holiness (i.e. his otherness and perfection) and his close relationship with and commitment to his people, Israel. The term thus expresses the central issue in the book of Isaiah: how can this God both be true to his holy character and true to his commitment to his people and how can his people survive in the presence of this holy God.

## **5. The Messiah**

The term *“Messiah”* literally simply means *“anointed”*. It is used in the Old Testament of various people including King David. However, over time, the title *“the Messiah”* came to be used to refer to the anointed king and saviour of God promised by several Old Testament prophets (including Isaiah). The term *“the Christ”* is the Greek equivalent.