

George Philip Bible Readings

The Book of Isaiah

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Since our purpose is spiritual instruction and not technical scholarship, we do not intend entering into discussion as to whether this whole book is a unity and the work of one mighty prophet Isaiah, or should be divided into two or even three sections (Ch. 1-39; 40-55; 56-66) with separate authors. The New Testament constantly refers to statements from the whole book as from Isaiah and this is the attitude we adopt. The opening verse sets the historical situation and it must be considered. We try to give a very rough introductory sweep of dates: Abraham is about 2000 years B.C.; Moses about 1200 B.C.; and David about 1000 B.C.. During the reign of Solomon the Kingdom of Israel reached the zenith of its power and glory, but after his death, about 930 B.C., the kingdom was divided (1 Kings 12). From then on when Israel is referred to it means the ten Northern Tribes, and Judah is the Southern Kingdom. Israel in the north had its national shrines of worship at Dan (in the far north) and at Bethel (near the border with Judah), but its capital city was Samaria and the whole northern kingdom is often referred to as Samaria. Judah, the southern kingdom had Jerusalem as its capital. Roughly two hundred years after the division of the Kingdom, Israel fell before its enemies and its people were deported by the Assyrian conqueror. The population was replaced by colonists from parts of the Assyrian empire, thus in Jesus' time we have the situation that "the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans," because they were not considered Jews. The nation of Israel or Samaria fell in 722 B.C. because of her long-persisted-in national sins. Then, 136 years later, in 586 B.C., Judah fell as a nation and was carried away captive to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. Part of the deep reason why Samaria fell so soon was that she had a strange succession of evil kings who walked contrary to God, while Judah had many good kings who did that which was right: in the sight of the Lord. Now, as a spiritual commentary read 2 Chronicles 7:12-22 and link that with Matt. 21:28-43. Such passages help us to consider what *our* future might be.

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We continue our background studies and remind ourselves that Amos and Hosea exercised their ministries prior to Isaiah but in the Northern Kingdom. In Judah, Isaiah and Micah were contemporary (Isa. 1:1 and Micah 1:1). Four kings of Judah are named. Uzziah began to reign about 780 B.C. and reigned fifty-two years, during which time the whole nation prospered, not least because the king's heart was towards God. Their enemies in Assyria and Egypt were weak (no doubt connected with the spiritual strength of Judah. Remember it is God who holds the balance of power in international affairs and He thinks in spiritual and moral terms). The nation had never had it so good, and they knew it. But, read 2 Chron. 26:1-5, 15b-23 and also 2 Kings 15: 1-4 (Azariah is Uzziah). Along with the material prosperity there was a spiritual laxity and complacency which was tolerated as if it were not important. The prospering nation had a sick soul that was being neglected, and the reckoning was sure to come. Isaiah was called to the prophetic ministry in the year King Uzziah died (Isa. 6:1), a time when the nation was staggered by the significant death of their king who had been rebuked by the priests and judged by God (2 Chron.26:16-21). The opening years of Isaiah's active ministry were in the days of Jotham (2 Chron. 27:1-6). He did right but he did not probe deeply enough, and his influence was to *restrain* the developing symptoms of national sin rather than effect a cure by heart-repentance and change of life.

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1:1

Jotham's reign was a significant time for both Israel and Judah. Read very carefully 2 Kings 15:27-30, 35-37. In the last year of Azariah's (Uzziah's) reign in Judah Pekah, an evil king, began to reign in Israel and there began to appear the obvious signs of Israel's ultimate downfall at the hands of persecuting neighbouring nations. The thing was happening and could not be denied, but it could be ignored, and that is what both halves of the Kingdom did. They refused to be warned by the message of political circumstances. The situation did not appear so sinister for Judah, but 2 Kings 15:37 is awesome. The slow workings of God had begun and it might be that things had already gone so far that even repentance would be of no avail to stop the national landslide. The next king of Judah was Ahaz and he did evil in the sight of the Lord. Read 2 Chron. 28:1-6, 16-19, 22-25 and remember that it was in this context that Isaiah ministered the Word of God! The last king under whom Isaiah ministered was Hezekiah and he did right in God's sight, no doubt as the result of the prophet's ministry

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and influence. Read 2. Chron. 29:1-11. We shall read much about this king in Isa. 36-39 and, although no doubt political considerations influenced his actions and attitudes, the testimony given concerning him in 2 Kings 18:1-7 marks him out as a man used of God to turn the heart and quicken the spirit of the nation he ruled. A godly occupant of a throne is a mighty power for good. Overshadowing all this mighty revival was the fact that in 722 B.C. Israel had collapsed as a nation and was now no more. (Hezekiah began to reign in 716 B.C. but was probably co-regent from 729 B.C. perhaps with limited power.) To watch an empire dissolve is a sobering experience and should make us ask, "What next?" or rather "Who next?" Even good Hezekiah faltered and fell, and his influence did not save the nation, but only provided a stay of execution. Let him that thinks he stands firm take heed lest he is even now slipping away from God.

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1:1-9

The prophet, whose name means "God is salvation", speaks in the name of God and declares in the form of a trial in court the issue between God and His people. God has a controversy with them and refuses to let them alone. He is pressing through into their dulled consciences by means of natural and political catastrophes, speaking louder and louder to compel them to take heed and to think. Now God speaks in clear verbal terms, calling the people to consider their relationship to Him personally in view of all His gracious dealings with them. What preacher now would dare to compare his congregation unfavourably with the beasts when it comes to response to kindness? But this is a people who have forgotten their God even though He is their life. From v.4 God shatters their repulsive arrogance and tells them what they and their nation really are behind the curtains of material prosperity. They are rotten. Look at your country and stop making excuses. Look at the facts of corruption and degradation and stop pretending it is not there or there only in a tiny minority of areas. "This will go on, if you go on the way you are doing," says God in verse 5. Then in verse 8 He likens this proud people to a "ruined croft", a "deserted lodge" or a "city in the midst of desolation," waiting for its doom. It was only the mercy of God that preserved a remnant and because of them, though they were by no means faultless, God was sparing the nation and giving it another chance. God's purpose centred on the remnant, not the nation, and He could do without the enervating gathering of moral dissolutes and spiritual philanderers that constituted the general populace of the nation. God was not tied to them, nor was He in any way obliged to preserve them or bear with them. *So far* the salty remnant had preserved the nation from righteous judgment, but remember that in earlier days Abraham's prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah failed because there were not enough righteous left to constitute a remnant of hope. We shall see the significance of this in tomorrow's reading.

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1:10-20

God, through Isaiah's words, calls Judah, so proud, complacent and full of religion, by the names of the wicked cities of judgment! Not one class, stratum or area of society was free of the moral sickness that was draining the nation's vitality and bringing it to judgment. But alongside this deplorable situation, and indeed an integral part of it, was a surfeit of religion. It was what one commentator calls "temple-treading", that is, tramping out the routine of elaborate religious palaver and observation which is entirely without significance. This is the poultice with which the religious Judah tried to cure the cancer of its national sin. The prophet is very blunt. Their religion made God sick and He had had enough and wanted no more part in it. Look very carefully at verses 13-15. It means that when God saw His professing people gathering in church He made haste to get out of the building as quickly as He could. What a condemnation! God looked on their hearts and saw their religion to be a performance, and one that was increasingly insensitive to His heart and will, and disobedient to His moral requirements. The Holy One of Israel (v.4) had risen up to have a reckoning with His own people, and all their future usefulness, let alone their blessing, was now at stake in the hour of decision and repentance. Right at the start of this evangelical prophecy we have the two-fold call of the New Testament Gospel: repentance and faith. God makes quite clear that we may have Him *or* our sinful, carnal indulgence, but not both. Choose!

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1:10-20

It is perfectly clear here, as it is in all the Scriptures, that the strong warnings of God are filled with mercy, and His one desire is to turn people from their sins so that they may be saved. Having stated the case against Judah and marshalled the undeniable facts of national experience, God now cries, "Come, bring our reasoning to a close, though your sins be scarlet they shall be white as snow" (18). What a Gospel of resounding good news to people who have blighted their lives, wasted their chances, lost their way and well nigh forgotten their spiritual address. This is total and instant forgiveness and restoration by the grace and undeserved mercy of God. Why then do sinners refuse such a call and offer? Is it because they are too proud to acknowledge their sin and need? When the Jews were finally carted off to Babylon there was little left to be proud of! Do people sit lightly to the Gospel because they do not believe God really means what He says about the punishment of sin in this world and the next? Or is it the claim of obedience and discipleship that holds people back from God? The Gospel is no empty "believism" and God states the alternatives very clearly in verses 18-20:- "Be My people and live by My word and be blessed indeed in the life of salvation, or refuse Me and My mercy and, by going your own way, destroy yourselves." God calls people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). Come, let us return to the Lord with contrite heart, and at least start the business of getting our lives reconciled to God! He who has ears to hear, be he worldling, professing Christian or backslider, let him hear, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it. God is in earnest. He has much to do, and gets tired of waiting for His foolish children.

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1:21-31

This whole passage serves to amplify verses 18-20, and the theme is intermingled mercy and judgment. But the object of God's chastisement is not the godless nations but His own people, who are described as living the life of harlots. It is a terrible description but truly portrays the nature of infidelity to the God who has redeemed them, blessed them, and given them all they possess. The objective of this strong rebuke of God is seen in verse 27(AV), "Zion shall be redeemed by judgment." This stern shattering of His own people is described by Isaiah later as God's "strange work" (28:21), and we understand it best in the light of Hebrews 12:5-17. But many who are in fact undergoing the chastisement of God are not aware of the significance of their circumstances and consequently are not exercised thereby. This is the tragedy of backsliding. As we have pointed out so often, when we digress from the way of faithfulness, we lose the capacity for discernment (Ps. 36:9) and become the most obtuse, unreasonable and unapproachable characters, resenting even the faintest suggestion that we are not quite all that we should be. But it is of the mercy of God that He perseveres with us and refuses to give us up. He will rather hurt His own than leave them to destroy themselves. He is a true Father!

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1:21-31

In verses 21 and 27 the word "justice" (judgment in AV) highlights the emphasis on God's righteous anger against the corruption that marks the life of the nation. We must always remember that God is fully aware of all that ever goes on in society, and at significant times He comes down in person to investigate and intervene (24-25). Consider also Gen. 18:17-22 and realise that God has communicated to Isaiah His intentions with regard to Judah. This must have given tremendous point and poignancy to the young man's ministry. He prophesied as he did because he knew the thoughts of God and could see in the nation's life the crying need for judgment to purify the body politic. Note how the charge is levelled against the princes or leaders of society. When there is forgetfulness of God and His righteousness amongst the ruling classes, there is little hope for the nation's life. Look down to verses 30-31 and compare with Rom. 1:20-32. Because they have turned away from God and remain heedless of His calls to repentance, they would become like a tree blasted by excessive heat, a garden shrivelled up into desert by lack of water. Not even the strong or secure would escape, for they would become like tinder set on fire by the sparks of their own evil activity. There would be none to quench the fire, for God is a stranger in the land. It is of these things that we must reason together through the chapters of this prophecy.

2:1-5

The paraphrase of these verses is often sung in churches and mostly it is misunderstood, being taken as some earthly utopia to which this present world order is slowly progressing. But since the passage is found in the context of justice and judgment proclaimed by God, we must realise that this tremendous, final, godly peace and blessedness will not come apart from the ultimate climax, and indeed cataclysm, of judgment. The chapter we have just concluded spoke generally of national decline, spiritual apostasy, and religious formalism that was an offence to God. Now, the section comprising ch. 2-4 falls into three sections, dealing with :- Ultimate Victory (2:1-5), Judgment on Sin (2:6-4:1), and the Issue of Judgment (4:2-6). It is only when persuaded of the ultimate triumph of God and truth that you can face the rigorous reality of the world as it is and accept the present, operative fact of God's judgment. Then you are also able to see the ultimate emergence of victory, but not in universal terms as if all men were to be saved. It is the righteous remnant that the prophet sees on the dawning of the day of victory. If we fail to grasp this we shall never cope with our Christian work and witness in the world, especially when after many years of pleading and warning, the people we seek to bring to God seem more indifferent than at the beginning. We are a saviour of Christ unto life for some, but to others we bring only intimation of judgment (2 Cor.2:15-16). Our charge is to see that our light of witness is clear and constant.

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2:1-5

This word is something Isaiah saw, that is, a vision rather than a reasoned statement. But it was no dream or magical display. The word "saw" means literally "to split open", that is, to see into and to get down beyond the surface impressions to the real nature of the situation. A man with the vision of God will not be deceived by show, but will get at real values, and in so doing will declare both what man is and what God will do. There is no suggestion here of God's holy work, people and Church being "the forgotten remnant of a broken-down army." The world may see it as such, but the world's eyesight is poor and ill-focused. In like manner the world still thinks of Jesus Christ as the crucified and rejected One, as indeed He is in the lives of many. But that is not the final word. All things shall yet be subject to Him (Heb. 2:8-10). And it is always the joy that is set before us that enables us to endure the Cross and shame, which is the way to victory. It may be that what we read here is the young prophet's ideal, just as many a young (and not so young) minister visualises what he would like his church to be. But the time is not yet. Isaiah speaks of the last days (the "after days") and this indicates a road that is long, for this glorious manifestation is geared to the coming of the One who is the Word of the Lord out of Zion. Note that this is a kingdom of instruction and obedience (2-3) and the people will gladly say to each other "Come, and let us walk in the light of the Lord." (5) That means a willingness to walk in the light of obedience and fellowship, and it is in such light that the vision of final triumph becomes the garrison and dynamic of both heart and life.

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2:6-22

There was no such vision as we spoke of yesterday in Judah, and as a result the people cast off restraint (Prov.29:18). That is why the realism of the prophet now addressed itself to the actual situation of which he was a part. In verses 6-9 God's charge against the people is renewed. They have forgotten the spiritual values of life and are obsessed with trade, armaments and idolatry. Then in verses 10-22, in contrast to Jerusalem lifted up and established, Isaiah tells of the great depression (11, 12, 17, 19). When you read verse 10, think of all we read in the Book of Revelation of how God confronted men to their confusion, but not repentance. What a text for a sermon on some national occasion is found in verse 22: Is it not true that our whole national outlook is focused on man to the point of idolatry. God, if He is thought of at all, is regarded as the almighty insurance agent to be called on in time of distress, or even worse as a glorified servant to minister to human whims and desires. But twice over Isaiah speaks of "the splendour of His majesty," (10, 21), and this is the God who presides in righteousness over the histories and destinies of men and nations. There are no accidental developments, nor are the changes to be explained away in material and circumstantial terms. The explanations are spiritual! When the prophet spoke thus of the possibility of Judah being invaded and brought low by the enemy, people said it would never happen. But it came! Perhaps they wished *then* they had taken more heed of

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the word spoken to them when repentance was still a possibility. The fear of the Lord is still the beginning of wisdom! (Cf. Heb 2:1-4; 1 Cor 10:1-15).

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3:1-15

"The scorn of these passages is scathing; the eyes of the glory of God burn through every rank, fashion and ornament in the town. King and court are not spared; the elders and princes are rigorously denounced. But by far the most striking effort of the prophet's boldness is his prediction of the overthrow of Jerusalem itself (3:8).

What it cost Isaiah to utter and the people to hear we can only partly measure. To his own passionate patriotism it must have felt like treason, to the blind optimism of the popular religion it doubtless appeared the rankest heresy - to aver that the holy city, inviolate and almost unthreatened since the day David brought to her the Ark of the Lord, and destined by the voice of her prophets, including Isaiah himself (2:1-5), to be established at the head of the mountains, was now to fall into ruin. But Isaiah's conscience overcomes his sense of consistency, and he who has just proclaimed the eternal glory of Jerusalem is provoked by his knowledge of her citizens' sins to recall his words and intimate her destruction. It may have been that Isaiah was partly emboldened to so novel a threat by his knowledge of the preparations which Syria and Israel were already making for the invasion of Judah. But, of these outward movements Isaiah tells us nothing. He is wholly engrossed with Judah's sins. It is his growing acquaintance with the corruption of his fellow countrymen that has turned his back on the ideal city of his opening ministry and changed him into a prophet of Jerusalem's ruin. It is a sign of the degradation to which society shall be reduced, when Isaiah with keen sarcasm pictures the despairing people choosing a certain man to be their ruler because he alone has a coat to his back! (3:6)."

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3:1-15

Having grasped the sweep of the passage we look now at the details, noting that preaching like this, particularly when verses 16-26 are added, guarantees unpopularity. The plain truth, with no window-dressing to conceal its stark reality, is always unacceptable. We see brash, harsh society in verse 5. There is no respect of persons or conventions. In v.6 anyone at all is called upon by officialdom to keep the wheels of organised society turning. Their faith and morals, or lack of them, are of no account. In v.9 we have a society in which there is no shame and no one makes any attempt to hide his sins. We have it in our own day when young film stars in their teens declare with proud intention that they will marry at least twice. We heard on B B C. recently (1977) the statistics that one in every seven children is conceived out of wedlock and one in every fourteen is actually born illegitimate. And society accepts the situation without a tremor, while prominent churchmen produce reports which seem to accept as permissible, if not desirable, pre-marital and extra-marital experiences in the interest of developing personality. In v.12 we have an attack on the rulers and public persons who set the pattern and example. But in v.15 God demands an explanation. The three verses 13-15 are quite startling, for they picture the Holy One of Israel rising to take action, and the result of His intervention is the collapse economically, socially and ecclesiastically of the whole nation (8). There is little of such preaching today and where such a note is sounded it is most rigorously resented. But history is still being written and who can tell what the story will be? God is not mocked; whatsoever men and nations sow, they must reap, together with the increase of the harvest. (Gal.6:7)

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3:16-4:1

God, through the prophet, now addressed the women of Zion, and made clear that their outward appearance and behaviour exposed the vanity and backslidness of their hearts. How this preaching must have incensed them! How they must have compared the young prophet's earlier sermons, so full of hope and confidence (2:1-5), with these depressing utterances in which all their fashionable mincing and prattle, and ostentation of dress, and preoccupation with beautification were taken to task. This is the world of fashion idolatry now, with its turnover of millions of pounds each year, and of the beauty parades with their unseemly exposure. But there is more here than just the denunciation of all the preoccupation with the superficial and the indulgent luxury of their way of

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life. There is even more - God's anger at the crushing of the poor, which made such luxury possible for the few fortunate enough to acquire wealth. The women are the last stronghold of moral purity and integrity in the nation, and if they consent to go with the tide of vanity and immorality, then the nation is doomed. We do not seek to deny the right to appear as attractive and womanly as possible, but there is a seemliness that betokens purity, just as there is a brashness that speaks of looseness. The quality of the women will set the tone and temperature of many a gathering. But these women in Judah are going to lose everything they have desired and their deepest, most natural longings for marriage and motherhood are to be destroyed by the standard they themselves have set (4:1). Vanity can produce nothing but vanity, and life that is adrift from God can only destroy.

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4:2-6

Now the prophet speaks of the certain hope of final salvation beyond the judgment that is to fall. We have the first indication of the "Branch" that is to come (cf. 11:1; Jer. 23:5; 33:15-16; Zech. 3:8; 6:12-13). It is this One who will come who will rule in righteousness and bring the blessings of salvation to the believing remnant of the nation. Note the emphasis on the remnant in the words "survivors" and "those left and who remain." Note also the thought of names written in the Book of Life in verse 3. The prophet is not thinking of an irreversible predestination here, but of those whose lives, being in conformity with the holy desire of God, testify that they belong to Him. There is never blessing without righteousness (4), and therefore, in the midst of the situation of human sin and disloyalty that is destroying the nation, we have at work the spirit of justice and the spirit of burning (4). Justice is the impartial government of God actively controlling the issues of human affairs. Burning is the controlled process whereby the evil and unworthy is destroyed and that which is essentially good is purged of all dross. It is quite clear that the prophet here conceives of the company of holy Jerusalem as being far fewer numerically than he visualised in chapter 2:1-5, but they are a people whose hearts are the Lord's and it is upon them and through them that His purposes are furthered to reach people of all nations. God's pattern is always, "I will bless you - and make you a blessing,"

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4:2-6

When you think of the spirit or breath or blast of justice, judgment and burning that the nation is to know in its life, it would be easy to fear with a terrible dread, for these are mighty concepts. Even though the righteous remnant (righteous in Christ by the grace of God) know the issue is sure because it is of God, they may still be greatly apprehensive and God gives a tremendous comfort in verses 5-6. The Lord will create, by the same sovereign power which is spoken of in Genesis 1, over the whole of Zion and its life, a canopy and pavilion of shelter. The words of verse 5 remind us of the pillars of cloud and fire that followed Israel after the Exodus (Ex. 13: 21-22; 14:19-20). In all the glory of the mighty outworking of God's holy purposes of justice and judgment, His people will find a protective tent of shelter in which they can rest and be at peace. God is always near His own who are seeking to please Him and walk with Him, and His everlasting love in its infinite tenderness and understanding is their shield and comfort and encouragement. This is a theme dear to Isaiah's heart, as you will see if you look forward to chapter 43:1-7 and chapter 40:9-11, 28-31.

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5:1-7

The parable is used here, as elsewhere in Scripture, to compel the people to pass judgment on themselves. The logic of the illustration is inescapable. If everything possible has been done by the farmer, and the vineyard still proves a dead loss bringing forth only wild grapes, the only thing to do is to leave it alone and allow it to degenerate and revert to its former wild state. If you keep in mind that this is spoken of God's people and not of the heathen nations, you will grasp the message, whether it is applied to the nation, congregation, family or individual. Some of us sorely need to be reminded of what we are by nature, and where we were going and what we were becoming before the grace of God laid hold on us. Would you go back to that? The only alternative is to go on with God. But this is just God's complaint. We are not willing to go on into His purposes. Why? Consider well verse 4, for in it God is asking us wherein *He* has failed us. With shattering humility He asks if

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there is something He has omitted to give us or do for us, that we hold back so long and so painfully from Him, so that His heart is grieved. Then God says plainly that if a people and a work do not bring forth the fruit for which they were raised up He will abandon them. It is when we speak thus that we see the shame of our sin and the dangerous position we find ourselves in when we trifle with our holy calling. Now read Luke 13:6-9, noting the final question in verse 7. Go on to consider Matt. 21:43 and that will be more than enough for one day.

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5:8-17

Here are the first two of the six woes that Isaiah addressed against the nation, and by means of which we are given a picture of the conditions of Judah's society and life. The six woes are against greedy landlords (8-10), drunkards (11-17), unbelievers (18-19), the moral corrupters (20), the self-confident (21), and the unjust judges (22-24). The woe against the landlords is specifically against those who by fair means or foul gathered great tracts of land and thus ousted the crofters, just as modern combines strangle the small trader. When you rob a man of the dignity of work and independence of life, making him virtually a slave dependent on charity, you destroy him. The whole life of Israel was based on the idea of small proprietors, and the Levitical laws of land tenure were enacted to guard this manner of life. But greedy men were heedless of God and of their fellows, and might became right, and if people became redundant they were cast on the rubbish heap and forgotten while their oppressors enjoyed their estates (cf. 1 Kings 21:1-22). No nation can long prosper if that which was intended for the *satisfaction* of many is reserved for the *indulgence* of the few. There are take-over-bids that deal in bodies and personalities, and they too are an offence to God. No man has the right to make use of another who is made in the image of God, and God, who sees, will recompense.

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5:8-17

In all levels of society and all areas of industry, the spirit of greed which is concerned to grasp and acquire but has no thought of giving and service is never unrequited. It will know God's retribution, not least when wages and salaries that have been drawn but not worked for bring economic stagnation and collapse. Such a society seems also to have the curse of strong drink. It is a constant amazement to us how so many people can afford to spend so much money on this indulgence and still have the effrontery to moan about the cost of living. You will note in the passage that for all their indulgence of both food and drink the people remain hungry and thirsty. Why? It is because man cannot live by bread alone, not even when it is accompanied by the jollifications of many kinds of circus. Look at the picture: late nights and kindled craving; an ever deepening morass of bondage from which there is no escape. Above all, there is a deadening of the moral and spiritual conscience until people become less and less able to register, let alone grasp, the significant things of the Spirit and the Word of God. Is this not a picture of modern society? Isaiah's word to it was one of inevitable judgment unless a spirit of repentance became evident.

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5:18-20

Here is the mockery of contemptuous worldly sinners jeering and saying, "If there is a God let Him do something." This is the voice which shouts (usually a sign of uncertainty) to Christians, "Your God is out of date, dead, and your church is finished. Where is your God? Produce Him." But what kind of society has this spirit produced? Isaiah tells them in verse 18. They are drawing sin (iniquity AV) upon themselves and confirming their self-judgment and self-destruction. The progression from cords to ropes in that same verse tells the pitiful story of the progression of bondage that evil brings. When youngsters have experimented with all simple forms of drinking, they may go on to elaborate forms of the same thing in the realm of drugs. When they have explored the normal avenues of sexual experience they venture into excesses and perversions. They must, for the enlarging mouth of hell is insatiable (14). The gambler, the miser, the would-be public idol, in whatever realm, are all in the same boat. And so much does their particular bondage hold them that they reach the stage when moral distinctions disappear completely. Moral confusion becomes complete, for not only are people incapable of distinguishing things that differ, they see black as white and evil as good, and any thought of an absolute standard of behaviour coming from the Word of God is absolutely anathema. The desolation is

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complete when ecclesiastical leaders seem content to concur with the world's standards of values. This is the beginning of judgment.

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5:21-24

The society we have been describing always produces a crop of arrogant know-all who, although they have made an utter mess of their own lives and situations, are always at hand to offer advice in spheres they know nothing at all about. Read your daily newspapers and you will find many people, whose acquaintance with the Bible and the inside of a church is infinitesimally small, strident in their denunciation of the church's doctrine and lordly in their advice as to how to make the church successful and attractive to a modern generation. They should mind their own business (Ezra 4:1-3; 6:6-7). Whenever mere human wisdom is found preening itself in its supposed superiority, we need to confront it with the Scriptures, e.g. Rom. 1:21-22; 12:16; Prov. 3:1-8; and especially 1 Cor. 1:17-2:5; 3:18-23; 2 Cor. 10:12. Finally, in considering true wisdom that gives a man a right to speak, consider 2 Tim. 3:15 and Psalm 111. That will be an abundance of Scripture to ponder for one day. Pray God it will make you begin to think balanced thoughts about life.

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5:21-24

The upper classes and the judges of the nation are lashed because their might or heroism lay in feats of wine-drinking, the cost of which they met by bribes and fees they received in the course of perverting justice. But here, as in all the previous "woes", the visible moral declension and corruption that is bringing God's judgment to the nation has a spiritual root. They have rejected the imperishable moral law of God's commandments and have despised the prophetic word addressed to them and pressed in upon their consciences by God's commissioned men. They knew the ageless truth of God and had sermons beyond numbering about it, but they counted it as nothing. This is what happens Sunday by Sunday as God speaks to congregations. They listen but many do not take it as from God. To them it is *only a sermon*. Perhaps they feel they could not take the preaching as from God and still go on living as they do. In the end they choose to adjust the Word of God rather than change their lives. That is to make God a liar, and you may have to tell Him to His face one day that that was your policy of life.

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5:25-30

God is angry with His own people because of their perversity and stubborn refusal to listen to His appeals and warnings to repent of their sins. Now, instead of concentrating on the sore affliction that God brings, think rather of the amazing persistence of God, taking such trouble *with His own children* so that by painful disciplines, He might bring them to Himself where their highest good is found (cf. Heb. 12: 5-11). The means God uses to bring His people to their senses are varied, and in verse 25 the trembling hills refer to a significant earthquake still very fresh in the people's minds (Amos 1:1). This national calamity, that caused so much distress, was the loud voice of God warning and calling His people back from the precipice of moral and spiritual danger. But it was to no avail. Therefore God's hand was still stretched out in anger and rebuke. We shall find the same solemn message in chapter 9:8-10:4, which many scholars say should be fitted in between verses 25-26 of today's passage. The last sentence of verse 25 is called by George Adam Smith the booming of the storm bell in awful refrain, and he comments: "The persistence of Divine wrath, the long-lingering effects of sin in a nation's history, man's abuse of sorrow and his defiance of an angry Providence, are the elements of this great drama. The prophet goes on to picture an invasion of Judah by an enemy summoned to God's standard and given power against the people of God by none other than God Himself. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hand of the living God." It is also a fearful thing when God's own people neither love, trust nor obey Him.

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6:1-13

Here is the prophet's personal testimony of the spiritual experience that lay at the heart of all his life and ministry. It is understandable that it should be recorded after the section of the five chapters we have read,

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because his early experiences had clarified many issues in his mind and heart, and he could see now more clearly the nature and significance of the work he was called to. Chapters 1-5 have revealed the national situation, the prophet's message of repentance, and the long-term judgment and salvation of God, all of which indicated a life-time's work that was both demanding and unpopular. If you look on to chapter 53:1 and 65:1-2 you will see the costly reality this man had to face. His ministry seemed to have no effect, no success, and it produced no national repentance and revival. It was necessary then that he should go back often to the original call and commission, to find in that vision of the throne of God and the call of God, the secret spiritual reserve that would enable him to cope and to go on in all the fluctuation of the situation of which he was a part, and to be undismayed by the postponement of all his deepest heart's desires for Judah. In the temple that day he saw all the grimness of the present and the even grimmer future, but he saw *also* the Lord, high and lifted up, and His glory filled the whole earth (v.3). You can imagine Isaiah making his way to the House of God that day with many perplexing burdens, but he went to the right place, for God was waiting for him. (cf. Psalm 73, especially verses 16-17.)

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6:1-4

We have often been challenged by the statement, "Your God is too small," and such a passage as this is fitted to enlarge our apprehension of Him whose Person and purposes are eternal and all glorious. The shameful collapse of Uzziah (2 Chron 26:16-21) had been a terrible blow to Isaiah, the young man, who may have been guilty of idolising the great king. If one so great as this was found to have feet of clay, what hope was there left? If such a mighty reign as this could collapse thus under the displeasure of God, could any king now be found to do better? Isaiah doubted it until he saw the Lord in the Temple. Over against the temporary, unstable thrones of earth, even the best of them, stood the high, settled, glorious throne of heaven, occupied by Him who is eternal and rules in absolute power. We need the words of the Shorter Catechism: "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." We need also the last four verses of Romans 11, and Ephesians 1:17-23. Isaiah is given to see behind the merely earthly scene to where God dwells in light no man can approach (1 Tim. 6:16). In the earthly temple there was seen Uzziah's presumption and Judah's hypocrisy, but here God is recognised in the fulness of His glory, worshipped in holiness and served with instant reverence. This is the God who came to Isaiah, spoke with him and called him to service. His was the glory, power and government. This was peace and hope and Isaiah could never forget it (57:15). See also James 1:17 (RSV) - "no variation or shadow due to change." Remember too that all Christian work has its beginning, direction and dynamic in the God of Glory (Acts 7:2).

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6:5-8

Isaiah's first reaction to the vision was anything but confident. Confidence came as the long term fruit of his experience (cf. 40:18-31). Here, the sight of God drains from him all his strength, empties him of all sense of sufficiency and all criticism of others, leaving him with an overpowering sense of sin that seemed to exclude him for ever from any possibility of holy service. But note what follows. This Jew, brought up under the dispensation of elaborate sacrifice and ritual as the only way by which a man can enter the presence of God, here offers only the sacrifice of confession; not merely a recital of sins and failures, but the sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit. Note that it was God who sovereignly granted Isaiah this access into the holiest, the privilege granted to us through the blood of Jesus Christ. Note that it was God who instantly granted this man forgiveness and cleansing. The fact that the confession and cleansing is closely focused on the lips, may refer to Isaiah's sense of unfitness to be the spokesman of God, but when the nation is included in like confession it seems to refer to the falsehood and insincerity of heart in life and religion, as expressed in the speech of the people. Isaiah, having heard heavenly worship and sensed its ring of reality and worthiness seems to feel the worthlessness of that religion which has been all words and no obedience. The life of the nation had been diagnosed and exposed by the quality of its dealings with God and His holy temple.

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6:5-8

Make verse 8 the basis of our thinking today. It was when Isaiah's sin had been confessed and taken away that he heard in clear understandable terms the voice of God, and he responded with willing freedom of choice. He was not in any way compelled or conscripted into the prophetic ministry, for God's word was a general statement of need and an open call to service. But with conscious willingness and unqualified consent, having faced the national situation and thought through its massive crisis of need, he gave himself to God. The words, "Here am I," are typical of the whole of his life. He never looked back. There is a magnificent sureness right through his ministry as he pressed toward the mark for the prize of his high calling. This man was no drifter, had no entrammelling lack of resolution, and had no personal axe to grind. He gave himself over to God and for the rest of his life he was a man God could trust and use. You see the depths of Isaiah's religion in this whole passage. His conscience is exercised in the house of God, as are his affections and thoughts. And, as he thought through the implications of his faith, he could never forget the forgiveness of God that had come to him, nor the immense privilege granted him of being a servant and spokesman of the Most High God. That kind of Christian makes his mark.

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6:9-13

No harder task than this was ever set to any man, and it tried and tempered the ardent enthusiasm of the young prophet in the hour of his consecration to service. All that he was to say and do was apparently to increase the evil of the situation and confirm the people in judgment. Some scholars suggest that from the moment of his call Isaiah had forebodings about the issue of his ministry and that the opening years of it, as recorded in chapters 1-5, served to confirm his apprehensions and etch them more clearly on his tender heart. It is interesting to note how much use the New Testament makes of these verses from Isaiah. Christ used them (Matt. 13:14-15; Mark 4:12), John used them (John 12:40), and Paul used them (Acts 28:26-27) as finding fulfilment in their own work in their particular situation. In the context of the living word and work of God, history repeats itself, and wherever men are sent to proclaim the saving truth of God there is always a twofold reaction. This is inevitable because the manner and attitude of people's lives can turn the gifts and blessings of God into judgment. We have the same principle at work in the reckless, headstrong attitude of Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus. He defied repeated restraints and warnings, hardening his heart in relation to what God was saying to him, and ultimately his heart was hardened beyond any remedy. Consider these references: John 15:22 and 2 Cor. 2:15-16.

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6:9-13

The prophet is awed by his commission and asks how long this desolating reaction to his ministry will last. The focal point of the answer is the word "until". It speaks of an unerring purpose proceeding through the devastation and dereliction of national judgment into a day when the holy remnant of God's people shall be His in truth and righteousness. But first there is a great cutting down until only a stump remains (13). The holy seed is its stump. The tree will yet be stripped of leaves and branches until a bare, dead-looking stump is all that remains; but from that seemingly finished stock, pruned down by the chastisements of God, there will yet stem holy fruit, a people consecrated to God who will carry forward His holy purposes. No matter how deeply submerged the work of God may seem at any given time, we are not to be deceived, for the line of continuity is unbroken and vital with God's own power. His ways of advancing His work may not be ours, but they are exceedingly effective. If this lesson is applicable on the general level of the work, it is equally so on the personal level. We are all too quick to pass judgment, to devalue and to write off someone as sub-quality. But it is by fruit people are judged, and not by green fruit, and ripeness takes time to mature. It sometimes even needs a touch of frost! Ponder John 15:1-8 and 1Cor. 4:1-5.

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7:1-9

Fear is the great factor in this whole chapter, but there are different kinds of fear. The fear of the Lord is both clean and the beginning of wisdom (Ps 19:9; Prov 1:7; 9:10). The fear of man is a snare (Prov 29:25). Fear, in the hands of the Devil, becomes a subtle psychological weapon that tyrannises the whole personality, warping the thoughts and bringing a brooding, ominous depression to the spirit. It is in the darkness of fear that the Devil succeeds in making us panic into action that is contrary to both faith and facts, and that enslaves us in depression, tortuous thoughts that seem to abide even in the face of the Word of the Lord. This is why we must be awake to the insinuations of evil, so that we may resist the Devil right from the moment of his appearing, refusing, in the name of Christ the mighty victor, to be made slaves to uncertainty. Fear is darkness and God is light; and in this passage the prophet is seeking to bring light into Ahaz' mind and heart by the word of the Lord (Ps 119:130). But *he will not* hear in faith. He hears the words of the message but his eyes are so focused down upon men instead of upwards unto God that he begins to sink, just as Peter sank in the sea when he looked at the waves rather than at Jesus. Do we really believe that the waves of evil are stronger than God and His Christ? No! But moral and spiritual compromise is at work within our personality and life, wearing down our resistance so that when the crisis comes we are unable to resist. The fibre and vitality of faith is gone. This is the hidden work of the well laid stratagems of the evil one.

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7:1-9

Trace the steps of the story to bear out yesterday's message. Verse 1 is the general summary of the whole war. Verse 2 begins the history. At the news of the alliance against him, Ahaz is moved by fear for his safety and his crown, but not with repentance that would have drawn him to God. But God had compassion and sent a message of tremendous hope and assurance, through Isaiah and his son whose name means, "The remnant shall return" (3-4). Take heed and be quiet, that is, keep your eyes wide open and your heart quite still until you apprehend the facts as they really are: that is, as they are in God's sight. The two enemy kings are likened to two stumps of firebrands, smoking because they are nearly burned out. For all their threatening they have but a very short time left (Rev.12:12). Let them roar as they will, they shall not stand, for God has spoken it. The heads of Syria and Ephraim are mere men, and in a few years they will be gone and forgotten, but the head of Judah is Jehovah Himself, who abides forever. God is your salvation, but if you go and entangle yourselves with carnal powers like Assyria, putting yourselves under obligation to them, and creating complications that take years to unravel, you will regret it. If you will not believe, you will not be established. But poor Ahaz could not accept the word from God. His eyes were focused on the immediate crisis and to extricate himself was his one concern. But to live thus for the moment is disastrous. Stand behind the shield of faith and use your head to do some cool thinking. Rate your foes correctly. Get your thoughts enlarged. Get up higher into God's clear air and you will see further and then be able to plot your course safely. But this is to challenge the reality of our walk with God and our spiritual integrity. Exactly!

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7:10-16

Ahaz' attitudes and actions are full of panic and prejudice and passion. Isaiah, believing that God is Master of all situations, has taken time to study this particular gathering and development of evil and is undisturbed, and certainly not fatalistic. His unquestioned belief in the sovereignty of God makes him address himself to the practical situation with great diligence and action. This is a man who, having allowed his religion to touch his heart and conscience in a very personal way, is able to address himself to the wider implications of his faith and to press on into God's solution even though that solution centres on "only a remnant". How very different is Ahaz. He is challenged to ask for a sign of mercy and safety from God, but he declines *on religious* grounds! This is not merely false piety, it is rankest hypocrisy. Does he not want a sign from his God? NO! Because his mind is already made up as to what he is going to do next, and a sign from God, especially with Isaiah knowing about it, would be manifestly inconvenient. Is this the reason why we are so secretive about our affairs and so unwilling to discuss them even with those we are supposed to trust most? Are we afraid that unmistakable guidance will be given? Is it not truer to say that guidance is already given and we are not disposed to take it? God had spoken to Ahaz, but the word had fallen on deaf ears, therefore a sign or miracle is offered to make the

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issue clear. This is a concession to weakness and stubbornness. The purer and stronger faith is, the less it needs the props of signs. Real faith takes God at His word. Ahaz was in a fix. Either he would ask the miracle and thus be compelled to trust God rather than the Assyrians: or he would refuse the miracle and be unmasked by Isaiah as a spiritual fraud. When God means business, there is no escape. It is best not to try.

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7:10-16

God gives the sign, but it is not the sign of safety that was first offered but, in spite of all its Christian association, it is a sign of judgment. A certain virgin or young woman of marriageable age is pointed out, though not identified; and Ahaz is told of a child to be born. And, by the time this child is come to years of discretion he will be eating curds and honey, the food of privation and desolation, for not only Syria and Israel, but Judah also will have been laid waste by the Lord. That is the theme of the rest of the chapter. But why is this promised child to have such a glorious name, "Immanuel, God-with-us", if he is a sign only of coming judgement? There is no doubt that the mention of the coming one with such a glorious title would register with Ahaz, Isaiah and all Judah, and bring to mind the promises of God that Messiah would come. This is confirmed in Matt. 1:22-23. But the name "God-with-us" is a tremendous rebuke to the unbelief of Ahaz, who is determined to trust his future to Assyria rather than to God. Thus this early mention of the coming of Christ places people in the testing balances of God (cf. Luke 2:34-35). The promised Child is a sign that the desolation is not to be complete. There is hope. But deliverance is not without its cost, and the ultimate victory does not cancel out the costly issue of wrong and godless decisions. Here already we begin to see Messiah rejected by a people who did not know the day of their visitation. God-with-us was to be the name and significance of the child soon to be born, and such a fact transformed the grim blackness of the dangerous situation facing Ahaz and Judah. But because of unbelief the man could not or would not wait, and by his premature action he blighted the future for himself and his people.

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7:17-25

Since Immanuel is rejected Judah's house is left desolate (Matt. 23:37-38). The picture is frightening because the desolation is portrayed as the deliberate action of God. Nothing is left to chance. God calls for the swarms of flies and bees (the Egyptian and Assyrian armies) to settle on the land. In verse 20 the shaved off beards are a visible sign of dishonour. Briars and thorns will replace the rich vineyards, and you can imagine what that would mean to Judah's economy. The prophet seems to be pressing home in deep irony the promise that Canaan would be a land flowing with milk and honey. In verses 21-22 flocks and herds have given place to animals counted in ones and twos, but even they will provide "abundance" for the shatteringly reduced remnant of the people. But would God do this to His own people? History testifies that He did. This was the fruit of the decision of both king and people, when they determined to put their trust in and pin their hopes on anyone and everyone except their God. This solemn lesson persuades us we should bring all our proposals and intentions into the blazing light of God's scrutiny *before* making up our minds. It is the only safe course.

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8:1-8

The prophet now covers the same ground as in the previous chapter, but addresses himself to the people not the king, for they are as guilty as their leaders. The influence of a people on their leaders is very great, whether in the secular or religious sphere, as is the influence of leaders upon the people. Let God be final judge, but recall the kind of threatening blackmail that appeared so often in Israel and Judah as both leaders and people sought to silence the voice of God, cf. Isaiah 30:8-11.; Amos 2:10-12. Here, in verses 1-4, the appeal to Assyria for help has not yet been made, but from verse 5 onwards the message of the prophet tells the people of the results of their disastrous choice. How often it is necessary for the prophetic voice to turn from deaf leaders and appeal to the people, but how often also the leaders, blinded by their own determination, succeed in carrying the people with them, contrary to God and against their best spiritual interests. Isaiah is commanded to make public advertisement of this sonorous symbolic name in v.1 which means "Speed the spoil. Hurry the prey", the name soon to be given to his newborn son. Two witnesses are taken with him so that when the event foretold came to

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pass Isaiah's word would be authenticated. Compare verse 4 with chapter 7:16. The king was warned of disaster, but the people are told it will come within a year, and it will be like the swirling waters of a great flood or the outspread wings of a bird of prey. But the land is still the Lord's. Neither man nor Devil can change that.

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8:9-10

The use of the word Immanuel in verse 8, whether it refers to the child now born or to the land, is sufficient to inspire Isaiah to a great utterance of faith. In spite of all the nation's faults, since she was in fact God's people, no enemy could ever finally triumph over her. Read v.9-10 as, "Take knowledge, ye peoples, and be dismayed; give ear all ye far off countries; gird yourselves and be dismayed. Take counsel together, and it shall come to nothing; speak a word and it shall not stand; for with us is God." This is the faith that is kindled deep in Isaiah's soul as he views affairs from the presence of the mighty God he has seen in the temple (chapter 6). "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom: 8:31). "God is our refuge and strength," no matter what comes to pass (Ps.46), and even though the tides of evil surge as far as the gates of the holy city of Jerusalem, there can never be entertained even the suggestion that God and His Holy work can be overthrown (Ps. 2). The good prophet sees already the dimension of this situation to be far vaster than immediate evidences suggest, and although at any given moment the collapse of all that is meant by "the work of God" seems possible or even inevitable, yet that which is of God will abide, prosper, advance and come to completeness. This is the patient confidence of faith, and it enables God's spokesman to go on undeterred in his proclamation of God's truth to the contemporary situation.

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8:11-15

Now God's word has the effect on Isaiah of a strong, steadying hand, and he is taught progressively the full significance of this elemental fact that God's work is always safe in God's hands. Isaiah is not to be caught up into the prevailing enthusiasm of the popular movement towards alliance with Assyria or any other earthly power. A confederacy or alliance built upon fear is a treacherous thing, and when once the people of God are set in panic they are so blinded by their sin of refusing to listen to God that they will join up with anyone to grasp at a semblance of security. "Now," says God to Isaiah, "don't fear the wrong things and wrong people, but stand back a bit from the situation and keep your sense of detachment and perspective. " Isaiah had to remember the throne he had seen in chapter 6 and the One who sat thereon, whose name was thrice holy. He was the One to be feared and revered and obeyed. "Fear Him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear. " Verse 14 seems to speak of the steps of the sanctuaries or altars that abounded in the land. To those who are looking for God's sanctuary, and what these entrance steps mean about approach to God and His faithful mercy, they will be a place of rest. But to the blinded, half-crazed people, panicking in their unbelief, these other altars will be but stones to stumble upon to bring them crashing down as they flee. People do not find the saving God as they blunder and thrash in the complications of their own unbelief. God is found when people seek Him with their whole heart.

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8:16-9:1

Isaiah has declared that *both* houses are to fall because of their sins, and even the holy city will ultimately fall, but a remnant from both houses will gather round the prophet and the word God has given him. It is to the remnant that the word, or revelation, of God is given, and they are commanded to seal it and wait for its fulfilment. There may be a suggestion that the public ministry is to cease because people have no desire to receive it (cf Amos 8:11-12). There comes a time when people cry for a word from God and need to be told that God has already spoken and they must go back to that first word which they so arrogantly rejected. As such circumstances develop the remnant must stand in and by and for the word of the Lord. The first half of verse 19 is very vivid; the second half emphasises: "Should not a people consult their God? Why should they call on the dead on behalf of the living?" "Back to the word of the Lord," says the prophet, for apart from such repentance unto God there is no light or morning and no lifting of the darkness, but ever deepening gloom. But what does the prophet see as he looks out on the strained society of his nation? He sees people blaming everyone but

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themselves. They curse their leaders for leading them astray; and they curse their God for abandoning them to their chosen way. Whether they look up or down, right or left, they see only darkness. BUT, the darkness is not final. Light *will* shine. The zeal of the Lord will do this (9:7). The prophet has learned to look "far ben". We must do the same.

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9:1-7

It is good that we should maintain a genuine forward look in our faith, for it keeps our values right, and this is what Isaiah does here. He looks beyond the dark gloom of impending judgment to the "after-days". The picture of the godless nation with its throne occupied by a spiritually degenerate king and its capital city threatened, with only a remnant of believing people standing firm in God, gives way to "the daring vision of a whole nation redeemed and established in peace under a Godlike King". This is the vision of faith that comes to the man who knows his God and by being in His presence has begun to realise the majesty of His Person and the dimension of His purposes. The exact process whereby the present chaos will become the future order is not yet evident to the prophet, but he has no doubts at all as to the efficient source of power. The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will perform this miracle. No one word expresses the full meaning of zeal. "It is that mixture of hot honour and affection to which 'jealousy' in its good sense comes near. It is that overflow of the love that cannot keep still, which, when men think God has surely done all He will or can do for an ungrateful race, visits them in their distress, and carries them forward into unconceived dispensations of grace and glory. It is the Spirit of God, which yearns after the lost, speaks to the self-despairing of hope, and surprises rebel and prophet alike with new revelations of love. We have our systems representing God's work up to the limits of our experience and we settle upon them; but the Almighty is ever greater than His promise or than His revelation of Himself." (G.A. Smith).

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9:1-7

In a few weeks time it will be Christmas and we do well to consider with fresh awe the person of Him who came down into human confusion and brokenness to work an everlasting peace and hope. It is as light shining in the valley of the shadow of death. It is like the harvest thanksgiving when every hazard is overcome and the harvest is safely gathered. The burdensome yoke, the heavy bar of slavery and the taskmaster's rod are all shattered in a victory to be compared with that over Midian in Judges 8. The boots and bloody garments of the warriors will be cast off to be burned and will never again be needed, for the King has come and is crowned over a Kingdom that will have no end. No unworthy usurper will ever again take the reins of government, and on the broad strength of His strong shoulders this King will carry the administration of His people in righteousness and justice. What a range of Gospel sermons could be preached on this passage and what a vivid, all-embracing picture of salvation they would give. But we think of the One who comes to be the Saviour of unworthy sinners. He is called the "Wonderful Counsellor" who leads us along in the secret wisdom of His perfect love. We can trust Him. He is "Mighty-God", or "God-the-Mighty-One". There is no doubt as to His identity, and He is given to us. He is the "Everlasting Father" or even better, the Father of Eternity: a true father, intensely human, yet abiding forever. He is the "Prince of Peace" and alone is able to make peace, as He did later, through the blood of His Cross. What a tragedy it is that we have become so accustomed to Christmas! May God teach us to wonder and worship.

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9:8-10:4

This whole section is linked with chapter 5:25 and lists the five great calamities that have befallen the nation: earthquake (5:25); loss of territory (9:8-12); defeat in war (9:13-17); internal anarchy (9:18-21); the near prospect of captivity (10:1-4). Sometimes the prophet seems to address the northern kingdom and sometimes Judah, but the principal burden of the message is not confused. God had spoken to the nations in calamity after calamity. They had refused the spoken word that warned and called to repentance, so they must listen now to the acted word. But they hardened their hearts, abused the opportunities of sorrow and ended in utter defiance of an angry Providence. They were a people who would not take a telling and the more seriously they were spoken

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to, the more impudently they cast aside the message. It was a display of bravado, such as we have all known in our experience and it was utter folly. What could God do now to bring this people to Himself in salvation before they destroyed themselves? He could warn of the final blow that would yet sweep both Israel and Judah off the map. Look at verses 12, 17, 21 and 10:4; and see in the final phrase each time what has been called the "booming of the storm bell". Compare Amos 4:6-12 for the same arrogant impenitence. There is a national and personal defiance in the face of evil that purges the soul of bitter things. But there is defiance against the instructions of Providence that destroys. Be sure of what you are doing and humble yourself under the mighty hand of God. This Israel and Judah refused to do.

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9:8-10:4

Follow the sections indicated in yesterday's reading. The earthquake had shaken the land suddenly but this "act of God" was shrugged off as "bad luck", or "one of those things" and forgotten. Next, in loss of territory the international status of the nation was reduced little by little, but they defiantly prophesied a "come-back". Next (13-17) bitter war slaughtered the cream of the nation's manhood, but still there was no suggestion of repentance (Jer. 5:3). Little wonder national anarchy ensued (18-21). It is marked by ruthless selfishness, burning indulgence *and* by fundamental frustration (20). The overall picture is of a prairie fire fanned by the wind. The noise and sight is frightening, just as the clamour of our own generation is alarming. But no one related those happenings to God, nor asked what He was saying in them. Why should it be so? Was it perversity, or the blindness of sin, or sheer fear of facing the facts? This is the escapism that marks our age. People will do anything rather than face facts. This is why they prefer to *discuss* the Bible rather than listen to it; discussion so often draws the barb of its convicting power. This is why people do not like authoritative preaching. It is too realistic. God is crying aloud in word and action, but all classes and conditions of people make coalition to resist and refuse the Word of the Lord.

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10:1-4

If Isaiah has been thinking mainly of the northern kingdom, he now turns very pointedly to Judah, for their complacent attitude was that "it couldn't happen here." How careless and stupid can people be? Even when they have the righteous judgments of God pointed out to them in the experience of others, they cannot apply the principle to themselves. They grant themselves exemption although they are guilty of the same sins, cf. Rom 2:1-6, 17-24. The same attitude is seen in Amos chapters 1-2, where Israel and Judah agreed with the necessity of judgment on the various nations for their sins, but were shattered when the righteous God turned the same indictment against them. The mistake men and nations made when judgment is delayed is that they misinterpret the forbearance of God and consider it weakness, cf. 2 Peter 3:7-15. But when opportunity for repentance is despised, the day of visitation comes. Bravado is the mark of the worldlings when all is going well, but when tragedy strikes they are pathetically weak, for they do not *know* a God to whom they can flee. It becomes clearer and clearer that the chastisements of God, even though very painful to the point of anguish, are in fact acts of mercy to awaken us to God and His salvation while opportunity remains to make readjustment. It is good to be startled by the question, "Are you presently living the kind of life that pleases God?" especially when today's verses tell of how accurately God is informed about the doings of men. There are no secrets. God knows. And at the end of the day He settles all accounts.

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10:5-19

Here we have Isaiah's philosophy or theology of history, in which the absolute sovereignty of God in the affairs of men and nations is seen. All must do His will, and even though at times God gives opportunity and power to evil to rise and smite His own chosen people yet, in due season, the evil nation will come to its hour of judgment. When situations baffle, as they often do, the mighty rock to fall back on is simply, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25). God lifted His restraints and allowed Assyria to be true to its own ravaging nature, and its military triumphs, cruel and ruthless, exposed the evil genius that impelled it. Read the passage very carefully. Assyria was the rod of God's anger and messenger of His rebuke, but Assyria did not

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look at it like that (7). In verses 9-11 where the fall of the northern kingdom seems to have taken place the names of the cities tell of the irresistible sweep southwards of the Assyrian armies, so that the enemy was now at the borders of Judah, a mere two days journey from Jerusalem. This was the answer to the facile optimists who said, "the crunch won't come". In the list of towns (9), in each pair the first mentioned is further south than the second. When Carchemish fell Calno said it would not come to them; but it did. Does Jerusalem say that the enemy now on the borders of the land will not advance to her? Woe to them at ease in Zion. Many a life and work that has withstood the frontal attacks of hell has fallen because of spiritual complacency.

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10:5-19

Read from verse 12 carefully, remembering that Ahaz, king of Judah, looked upon Assyria as a help, whereas they were the instrument of God's punishment. God's work of judgment is in the interest of His own people. When that purpose was complete all Assyria's pretensions to and expectations of world dominion would be shattered by God. Everything is perfectly controlled. In verses 13-14 atheism stalks the world in arrogance, but verse 15 declares who wields the power. The creature never controls the creator! In due time God would send a wasting sickness into the flourishing body of Assyria (16) and a fire or fever would reduce it to nothing. The great empire, likened to a forest, would be burned down until so few stumps remained even a child could count them. Can you visualise this happening to any of the present "great" powers? The God who spoke and brought order out of chaos in creation needs only a word from His own mouth to reduce to rubble the mightiest edifice men can make. Note in verse 17 that one day is sufficient. "Our little systems have their day; they have their day and cease to be: they are but broken lights of Thee, and Thou, O Lord, are more than they." (Tennyson). God's kingdom is everlasting (Dan. 4: 34; 7:14).

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10:20-34

In all our consideration of God's ways with men and nations, always contrast or compare "now" with "afterwards" (Heb. 12:5-11). This is the theme of verses 20-24, where the prophet speaks of "*only* a remnant" (22). Recall that earlier we spoke of Ahaz looking hopefully to Assyria, but now he fears (24) and the remnant must be assured that Assyria's days are numbered (25-27). But on no account must even the remnant be allowed to *assume* easy victory. They must watch and pray, and therefore Isaiah in vivid terms depicts a probable route along which the enemy would come to the very gates of the Holy City, and we must sense the surging, onward rush of this seemingly irresistible army. It seems in verse 32 as if Hell incarnate shakes its fist at the central citadel of the work of God prophesying that tomorrow it will be destroyed. It is sad that it often takes almost that kind of crisis to stir us up to urgent prayer. But in the very moment the enemy begins to celebrate his victory God strikes him down and humbles him to the dust. Do not be tempted to concede defeat however grim the appearances. *God has the final word, always.*

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11:1-9

Assyria is hewn down and Judah also is reduced to a mere remnant like the stump of a tree. But there is a deep difference. That which is of God cannot die and there is a sure future for the remnant who live by faith and see, behind and beyond the immediate circumstances, the working of a saving God. Out of this stump which is all that remains of the Davidic dynasty there shall come a shoot (rod), and from the root a strong sapling shall rise and grow. Here is the promise of God's Messiah who is to come. In chapter 7:14-16 Messiah is seen suffering with His people. In 9:6-7 He is the redeemer from bondage. Now He is the King who rules in righteousness, clothed with the sevenfold spirit of God. Isaiah describes the kind of Person He is and the nature of His rule. The spirit is the endowment for service so that His exercise of justice is not on the limited basis of human assessment by sight and hearing (3b). He is taught by the Spirit of God and fashioned in character by that same Spirit so that He is righteous in person and faithful in administration (5). Think of how Jesus said, "I and my Father are one." But Isaiah's picture of God's victorious redemption goes far beyond human society, for he visualises the whole of nature and creation blessed in the blessing of God. This is the theme of Romans 8:18-23, where "creature"(AV) should read "creation". Here is a picture in which all the venom, cruelty and suspicion

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are drained away from the whole order of creation. Both Paul and Isaiah insist that what man is in relation to God determines the well being or otherwise of the whole natural order. What responsibility! But think of the blessing. Without being sentimental, think of the thrill when a robin or a deer comes and feeds from your hand in winter. They trust you, tremblingly, and you are glad. But Isaiah sees the day when even the trembling is gone. Think of God's anticipation of that day! This is heaven.

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11:1-9

George Adam Smith makes verse 3a read, "He shall draw his breath in the fear of the Lord", and applies it as a definition of sinlessness which belongs only to Christ. He goes on to comment: "We, however purely intentioned we be, are compassed about by an atmosphere of sin. We cannot help breathing what now inflames our passions, now chills our warmest feelings, and makes our throats incapable of honest testimony or glorious praise. As oxygen to a dying fire, so the worldliness we breathe is to the sin within us. We cannot help it; it is the atmosphere into which we are born. But from this Christ alone was free. He was His own atmosphere, drawing breath in the fear of the Lord. Of Him alone is it recorded, that, although living in the world, He was never infected with the world's sin . . . Not even when He was led of the Devil into the atmosphere of temptation, did His heart throb with one rebellious ambition. Christ drew breath in the fear of the Lord . . . But draughts of this atmosphere are possible to us also, to whom the Holy Spirit is granted. We too, who sicken with the tainted breath of society, may, by Christ's grace, draw breath in the fear of the Lord." The commentary goes on to speak of going to the hills after being in a smoky room and points out that the steeper the slope the deeper you breathe. "In the most passion-haunted air, prayer will immediately bring this atmosphere about a man, and on the wings of praise the poorest soul may rise from the miasma of temptation and sing forth her song with as clear a throat as a lark's. And what else is heaven to be, if not this? God shall be its sun; but its atmosphere shall be His fear, which is clean and endureth forever. He that lives near to Christ, and by Christ often seeks God in prayer, may create for himself even on earth such a heaven, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." The trouble with most of us is that we are so much with people we have little or no time to be with God. Even Christ's nearest on earth had to stand aside when He went to the hillsides to be alone with God.

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11:10-16

In this difficult passage Isaiah seems to come down from the heights of pure spiritual vision to the plains of clashing political confusion and strife. The root of Jesse is likened to a standard, round which shall gather all the outcasts of Israel, and by the mighty delivering power of God all Israel's foes shall be overthrown. The language reminds us of the story of the Exodus. But what we are told here in nationalistic and territorial terms we must see in terms of spiritual reality. We are not afraid to look squarely in the face of the world's clashing strife, its jealousies and lusts for power and its political dynamism that so often forgets the good of the people it is supposed to serve. We do not believe that all the world's manifest wickedness must be made to cease before God can do His holy will and bring eternally permanent blessing. The broad highway Isaiah sees is the course of the sovereign victory of God advancing through and by means of the world's strife. We too are living in days of pressure and collapse, but we will not fear even though the earth be removed (Psalm 46), for the mighty hand of God, though not obviously visible, is nevertheless controlling the affairs of men and nations. The issue of victory is never for a moment in doubt. The future is God's, not the Devil's, and His mighty redemption pierces all history. The Cross must always tower over the wrecks of time.

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12:1-6

There are many days of victory and deliverance before the final end, and such a hymn of praise as this will often be on the lips of God's people. God's salvation is not only rescue from danger but life and joy. Think of the hymn, "Glorious things of Thee are spoken," and let your heart echo its praise. The word here looks forward to "that day" when things shall be seen as they really are and at last God's people shall realise to the full the wonder of God's ways with them. Think of Jesus' words, "You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand." In that day we shall say with astonished delight, "Lord, I see now why all that had to be. I see

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now what you were doing." The second verse here is wonderful. It was asked for by a dying loved one of the writer who said, "Give me my Bible and turn up my text." What a text! Look to the end of this short chapter. God in the midst of you making sense of all your circumstances and experiences. When will we learn to trust Him? Faith believes that God is, and is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6). Faith must be prepared to trust in the dark and sing songs in the night of evil's seeming triumph. The writer of these notes in a day of much trembling, verging on despair, was rebuked by his mother in the words she learned in the Salvation Army, "Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees, and looks to that alone; laughs at impossibilities and says, 'it shall be done'". When the day came the issue was success, and unbelief was rebuked.

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13:1-5

We begin here a section of Isaiah, comprising chapters 13-23, consisting of ten burdens, woes or oracles against the nations, and one such oracle against Jerusalem. Today's verses speak of God mustering His armies, chosen by Him and set apart to do His will. Without going into too much detail we must note carefully that Assyria, the great empire, has now passed away and Babylon is the significant factor in world politics. But the spirit of Assyria, that of contempt and antagonism toward God's Judah, remains, being manifested now in terms of Babylon's money and luxury, instead of Assyria's military might. But no matter the outward appearance, the essential atheism and pride and arrogance remain. If you look on to verse 17 you will see that yet another empire is rising under the direct control of God, and it will bring down Babylon. Every non-spiritual or anti-spiritual power that rises and seeks to stem the advance of God's holy purposes will ultimately fall. Even in its wickedness and temporary success it will *for a season* serve God and be His instrument for refining His people. But its day will come. Then yet another foe will arise to fight against God and His Christ, and so it will be until the end of time (cf. Rev. 17:5, 17-18). When we are reading in the prophets we must learn to see the application of the word first in terms of the prophet's own day and generation, then in successive applications right down through history to the end of the story which is the Day of the Lord (13:6). To stand in faith while the torrent of history is swirling round you is costly, but it is our calling and our witness. We shall never do it unless we have a real God to believe in, so that we are not staggered when He speaks of pagan emperors as His anointed servants (45:1).

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13:6-22

As you read these grim verses remember that they speak of the shattering of the power of Babylon; the oppressor of the Jews, which led to their return from captivity to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. Then, five hundred years later, after many more travails, there was born of the Jews, in the city of David, a Child who was the fulfilment of all Israel's hopes and all Isaiah's prophecies. It was indeed Immanuel. It was the Day of the Lord. But, there are many days rightly called "the day of the Lord." Consider here Joel 2:1-2, 28-32 (cf. Acts 2:16-21); Joel 3:13-14. The expression "Day of the Lord" suggests something specifically appointed beforehand, or something which must come round in its turn in the fulness of the time, and also a day of swift performance after a long delay. When the time comes God declares, "This is My day." Then the swiftness of His working is awesome to behold, and the perfection of His methods declares the infinite superiority of His intelligence. Babylon had reigned by virtue of the power of its wealth and the attraction of its luxury, but the Medes (17) were impervious to such appeals. From the different air of their highland existence they came down as a scourge on weak, decadent society and reduced it to shambles. Babylon could not understand this foe, and to face a power that is beyond your comprehension is indeed a frightening thing. It weakens you to the point of paralysis and the battle is lost almost before it is begun. If you look at verse 10 you will see a suggestion that the whole order of creation, fallen though it be, is ranged on the side of the righteous God of justice and is fighting on His side, not against Him. We begin to see more clearly why the gates of Hell cannot prevail against the advance of that which is of God.

14:1-2

If you have read the previous verses carefully you will see in them the fact of God's tender and faithful remembrance of His people. Through long struggles of history and disciplines of experience, through the battles

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and the failures, He never forgets them for a moment, nor does He ever swerve from His high and holy purpose of salvation, in which their final blessing is to be found. For generations, indeed for centuries, the Jews had clung to the hope of Messiah who was to come. Many a time the flame of hope flickered and hope deferred made the heart sick and irresolute. But always God renewed His promise and lifted up their eyes again to scan the horizons for signs of His coming. We have already heard Isaiah speak of the virgin and the child Immanuel; of the Prince of the wonderful names, of the light that would shine in the darkness of the people; and here we are told that God is faithful who has promised. His salvation will come and it will be both tender and powerful, for it brings not merely consolation and forgiveness but a mighty deliverance so great that the erstwhile captors shall be shattered and that which at one time tyrannised the life will become a servant of the Lord and His salvation. But at Christmas we do not simply look back to the wonder of His holy birth, but forward to the glory of His coming again. It is one thing to remember that He came, holy and wonderful recollection, but to think that our eyes shall yet see Him in all the fullness of His glory, this is indeed added thrill. When you think of Bethlehem, do not pity the Babe, for He is Mighty God. Worship Him with all your heart.

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14:3-23

In the day of Israel's salvation, when the Lord has turned again their captivity (Ps 126), they shall sing this song against Babylon and its king. The whole empire of evil is seen to centre on one person who is the inspirer of all its activity against the people of God. As the passage proceeds it seems to speak clearly of one who is more than mere man, and if we are dealing here with the fall of Satan, then we see the essence and pattern of all evil. It is a refusal to be subject to God, which proud rebellion inevitably leads to the setting up of a kingdom over against God, and the cultivation of that kingdom in order to overthrow God and take His place. Now, there is a very solemn lesson here for those with eyes to see it, and it should drive us all to examine very carefully the motives which cause us to pursue our particular pattern of activity. It may well be that we shall discover the inspiration of our activities to be from Satan rather than from God. Pride is the essence of Hell, and how frightening it is that we can so quickly become fascinated by the success of our private schemes and thrill at both their success and the discomfiture they bring to our competitors. How we all like to be "King of the Castle", or "a big fish in a little pool". But God watches and waits. While it serves His holy, long term purpose He will allow it, but the day of the Lord comes, and He makes a clean sweep (23). The only thing that has any abiding quality is the work that is wrought by God.

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14:3-23

"In order to render with dramatic force his particular theme of the vanity of human arrogance, the prophet employs the idea of Sheol (Hell in v 9,15, and grave in v.11; J.B. Phillips renders the word "underworld" each time), that state after death which swallows up all living. There dwell the shades of departed men, able to greet new arrivals in their dim abode (10,11) and with consciousness wonder at the fall of such a mighty one (12). He was one who had thought to climb the slopes of the immortals (13,14) and now he is, just like themselves, brought low in death (10,15). The very fact of his presence among them is supreme evidence of his downfall and overthrow. Nothing could be more absolute. On earth his lot is blood, slaughter, squalor and death (16,17); in Sheol a place among the community of shuddering ghosts (18-20)." (Wm Fitch in IVF Commentary). In verse 10 the powers that sought to bring God's people under bondage are described as weak. This is not surprising because power belongs to God alone, and we need to learn that in death of Christ even Satan's power was totally shattered (Col. 2:14-15). The time comes when we shall say with astonishment, "Is this what we lived in fear of even to the paralysis of our work for God?" (16). It is astonishing how quickly the resisters and persecutors of God's work and people perish from the remembrance of men. God's sweeping brush is wielded well (23).

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14:24-32

The oracle against Assyria is in verses 24-27. They are to be shattered and their dominion broken for ever. This is the Lord's word, and the Lord's hand will carry it out. What majesty and confidence are in these verses. This

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is the God of our salvation who has set His heart on us and incorporated us into His everlasting purposes. In verses 28-32 we have the oracle against Philistia (Palestina). The pagan Philistines are too quick to rejoice and assume too easily that they have escaped the retribution of God. At this very time representatives from the Philistines were in Judah seeking alliance with the Jews, but the prophet warns them not to think that because one Assyrian king is dead troubles are over. Verse 29 simply declares that worse is to come. There will be no stragglers in the ranks of the army from the north (31) when it comes to destroy the Philistines. Then when the messengers from Philistia challenge Judah and ask how she will hope to survive in such times, and why she refuses the offer of their help, there is a simple reply. Zion shall stand *because* God has founded it. "In vain the surge's angry shock, in vain the shifting sands, unharmed upon the eternal Rock, the eternal city stands." (Johnson). There is safety, and certainty, and enjoyment. It is solemn realism which brings both peace and rest. What is of human origin and inspiration goes down. What is of God stands for ever.

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15:1-16:4

This is the oracle against Moab, and it goes on down to the end of the chapter 16. It is best read in a modern translation although the tragic sense of desolation and doom is clear even in the Authorised Version. Read chapter 16:4, "Let the outcasts of Moab dwell with thee; be a refuge to them from the destroyer." Contrast this with 15:1-4 where Moab, the smitten nation, calls a national day of prayer to its false gods. Now look at 15:5. This is the sorrow of the true evangel and needs to be in the heart of every preacher when the theme is the message of judgment that overtakes the impenitent. This echoes the tears of Jesus as he wept over the cruel, hypocritical city that rejected Him and was soon to crucify Him. This grief and sorrow over people is not something that can be generated for the occasion when we want to appear spiritual. It comes only from close companionship with God which makes us think and feel as God does. In the midst of the dark chaos of judgment, the prophet speaks of a throne of mercy (16:5). This is the righteous refuge that God provides, and it is Judah, the people of God, who must testify to the presence of the throne and thus let light shine in the darkness. Think of it this way. In the time of distress and affliction God says to a remnant of penitent individuals within pagan society who are now seeking salvation, "Run to these Christians; put yourself under their care and they will help you". Now look at the charge in 16:3 :- "Don't betray the wanderer or the fugitive." God help us.

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16:5-14

The Moabites are the descendants of the incestuous son of Lot by his elder daughter (Gen. 19:37), and down through the generations they were always a thorn in Israel's side and a potential danger to the purity and separation of God's people. Now their day of reckoning had come, but it was not the final reckoning, for we find them spoken against in the later prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Why should this be so when such an emphasis is placed here on the throne of mercy (5) and the call to Moab to shelter in God's people (4) for safety? The barrier to hope was the pride of Moab, which had not changed one whit in spite of all God's stern words and dealings with her. God's forbearing mercy allowed Moab to rise again to a place of respect among the nations, but with the easing of difficulties, pride reasserted itself in all its arrogant contempt of God. How true this is to the pattern of individual lives, congregations and nations. But God resists the proud (Jas. 4:6). Therefore Moab would yet be left to wail for Moab's misery, but without hope of remedy. This is the day when all experience is reduced to fundamental realities and people are compelled to do business with God. Consider Jer. 9:1, 23-26; Zeph. 2:8-11; Zech. 7:11-14, and recall Jesus' words in John 5:40, noting that He makes a statement of fact not an appeal! God had spoken seriously to Moab for a long time (13), but now "even though Moab presents himself and wears himself on the high place; even when he come into his sanctuary to pray, it will be of no avail." (v. 12 J.B. Phillips). Moab had sinned away the day of grace and left his prayers too late.

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17:1-11

With only two weeks of the year left let us cast our minds back over twelve months and consider what value they have had in relation to God and the thing of eternity. Has it been a year of going back from God or of going

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on into fuller, more mature dealings with Him? In many ways it has been a year in which God has spoken loudly and clearly with grace as well as warning, making it a year of opportunity. Yesterday's reading closed with the story of Moab's lost opportunity, because of the pride of heart that would not humble itself in order to produce a change of life. We have listened to the prophet speaking Gods rebuke to pagan nations, but now the word is to compromised and backslidden Israel joined in federation with pagan Syria, or Damascus. God is not obliged to save or prosper a people who play false to their vows of loyalty as the ransomed people of God. If they join themselves to people or activities that cannot have the blessing of God, then they will share their downfall. It is as simple as that. We either walk with God and prosper in His blessing, or we walk contrary to God and flounder and perish in His rebuke and displeasure. Verses .1-3 speak of a departed glory. Damascus is reduced or demoted. Verses 4-6 speak of a wasting sickness, of bare and fruitless fields and trees with only a sparse crop left. What a decline from what it used to be. If that is how you feel about your spiritual life and service, it is time for you to read verses 7-8 and to speak to God in prayer.

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17:1-11.

In this passage, we are reading how God, by means of rebuke and chastisement, was bringing forth a remnant of people with a new outlook on life (6-8). There was to be no more preoccupation with former distracting idols, by which the heart had been enticed into forgetting God (10). Note that the passage returns to its starting theme of judgment. It speaks of the harvest day of life, when the unfaithful and careless will have nothing to show for all their days on earth, because their harvest "shall flee away and varnish" ('be a heap' v.11) in spite of all their careful efforts to make it a success. How easy it is to ignore and defy the merciful providence of God as He tries to make us see sense and order our lives aright. How easy it is to be at ease in Zion and careless of the responsibilities that spiritual privilege brings. We recall a sad Christian saying, "When I was able to go to church I would not go, and now that I long to go, I am not able." Remember that God has to bring down many a believer, remove him from the fellowship and lead him into barrenness of life, in order to restore him to true fellowship and fruitfulness. But while God is disciplining in love and hope, the years are slipping away. Let us learn to redeem the time.

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17:12-18:7

Here we have two oracles, each introduced by the word "woe" (17:12 and 18:1 AV). The prophet looked on the international scene and exclaimed, "Ah, noise" (17:12-14) and "Ah, quietness" (18:1-7). On the one hand there was the tumult of the nations; on the other the ominous silence, pictured as the dew and the hot lazy sunshine that brings the harvest nearer and nearer. Sometimes our experience is the clash of battle with every nerve straining to gain the victory, and the glorious intervention of God just when all seems lost. At other times it is required of us to go on through the stifling heat and weary waiting of inactivity, with not a sign of a working God at all. Now, both these experiences can be used by the Devil to seek to break or wear down our spiritual nerve and morale. We must therefore learn the discernment of faith that is able to see and identify the "person" who is at work in the circumstances that involve us. It is right here that we have to learn what God is like, and that comes by living with Him. This was the secret source of all Isaiah's strength and composure and sureness of his words and action. He had been in the presence of the Lord of Glory (Chap. 6 - read it again!) and what he had seen conditioned his whole life thereafter. We must still consider the details of this passage but the heart of it is simply the fact that Isaiah knew that in every set of circumstances God was in the midst as Master, not as impotent servant.

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17:12-18:7

For those who may not have the Church Hymnary conveniently at hand, we give for today's meditation the words of Faber's great hymn.

"Workman of God! O lose not heart,
But learn what God is like,

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And, in the darkest battlefield,
Thou shalt know where to strike.

"Thrice blest is he to whom is given
The instinct that can tell
That God is on the field when He
Is most invisible.

"He hides Himself so wondrously,
As though there were no God;
He is least seen when all the powers
Of ill are most abroad.

"Ah! God is other than we think;
His ways are far above,
Far beyond reason's height, and reached
Only by childlike love.

"Then learn to scorn the praise of men,
And learn to lose with God;
For Jesus won the world through shame,
And beckons thee His road.

"For right is right, since God is God,
And right the day must win;
To doubt would be disloyalty,
To falter would be sin."

If you need a word from Isaiah to follow that hymn, read chapter 55:8-13

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17:12-18:7

The historical circumstances of verses 12-14 seem to be the advance by Sennacherib against the city of Jerusalem in the time of Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:28, 32-36 and Isaiah 37:33-37).

The Assyrian strength was impressive and frightening to behold, as was his utter confidence in his victory and his contempt of the holy city of God. But God spoke in one short, sharp word and Assyria with all its might was confounded, shattered and made to turn about and go back to its own place without harming Jerusalem. This is the simple case of God's victory over evil. *He* is never in difficulties. In chapter 18.1-7 we have messengers from Ethiopia in the court of Judah, a sign of the complicated tangle of international treaties and counter-treaties. Would the confusion bring panic and uncertainty? Never! We have already heard Isaiah saying God shall rebuke every evil powers (17:13) and we have seen their power as nothing. Now we see God's perfect composure (4) as He waits in quiet confidence for the time to be ripe (5). But note the context of God's quietness and Isaiah's confidence. In verses 2 and 6 the nation "scattered and peeled"(AV) should read "tall and polished", or "fine-drawn and smooth". Verse 7 goes on referring to Ethiopia, which had conquered Egypt at this time, as "a people terrible, or, a terror, far and wide; a nation meting out and treading down, whose land is veined with rivers." But this seemingly irresistible nation would yet be compelled to bring tribute (gifts) to the place of the Lord of Hosts. Isaiah's God was a strong tower of peace and hope, and he was not slow to tell the nation so. Cf. 26:3-4; 30:7,15; 32:17; 33:17; 35:1,3,10; 40:1,28; 43:1-3. It is all so very practical, but faith must be the ground of our life when skies are blue, else it will not avail when the storms come.

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19:1-15

In all these oracles or "words" to the nations, Isaiah gives to us by the Holy Spirit an exposition and interpretation of world affairs, as seen and understood in the light of the established throne of God. But although his message concerns political and military factors, his main burden is spiritual, in relation to the purposes of God through His chosen and prepared and disciplined people. The kingdoms of this world are seen and evaluated in relation to the kingdom that is yet to come, which is the eternal kingdom of God. All powers and peoples are compelled to serve the purpose of God, and their activity must be seen in the light of God's dealings with His own people. But at the same time these powers and peoples are seen for what they actually are by choice and inclination, and are brought to judgment in relation to their own evil. Though God uses evil, He never justifies it. Sin is not necessary and its presence is always challenged. Here we see the Lord (v.1) interrupting the complacent evil of Egypt's power, throwing it into total confusion so that it might be brought low. How often in the Bible we find a kingdom of evil suddenly dividing and fighting against itself (2). In Egypt there would be civil strife (2), religious failure (3), economic collapse (5-10), intellectual confusion and exposure (11-13), and that perverse spirit which goes on in the way of destruction rather than admitting wrong (14). This is the Lord's doing. If you examine verse 3 you see that religion which was sufficient in days of peace fails under the strain of difficulty, so that people turn to trafficking with the occult to look for an escape. But escape from God is impossible, and to turn to Him is the last thing people will think of.

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19:16-25

Here is the fruit of God's strong words and action, and it is a great missionary word, picturing the people of God with hands of hope stretched out to east and west. Judgment is not the final word, just as judgment among the nations is not the final work. God is calling out a people who will answer His call with faith and obedience and the response will come from the most astonishing and unexpected places, even from Egypt. What a reassurance to those working in hard places. Is anything too hard for the Lord? Read verses 18-22 and be staggered to find such a work of grace in the heart of Egypt. How has this come about? In verses 16-17 we have the work of the mighty Spirit of the living God convicting of sin, righteousness and judgment to come. With what result? The nation takes notice of a small people who bear the name of God, a people hitherto considered as irrelevant in society and its life. But they are the people who have the Word of the Lord, which makes wise to salvation. Israel's God is God of all the earth, and the knowledge of God so gloriously granted to Israel was a privilege destined to become a service to all the nations. When a people really know their God and walk in obedience to Him, they cannot help going out with the message of His almighty salvation. This is the saving compulsion of the Holy Spirit, and we become aware of the whole order of creation groaning in its bondage and longing, waiting for the sons of God to enter in and possess their possessions, so that the day of final salvation may come (Rom. 8:18-27). What a Gospel!

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19:16-25

We stay with this passage because its message is of tremendous encouragement to every servant of Christ who is battling on, even in a small way, in the context of relentless indifference and incipient resistance and persecution. Egypt in the Bible so often symbolises the world in its deep anti-God worldliness. But Isaiah sees right at the heart of the world the creation of a colony of heaven, with its citizens speaking the language of Zion, and with their hearts turned to God in worship. Give real thought to verse 22 for it explains much of God's dealings with us. Then verses 23-25 speak of a broad highway of trade and co-operation running through Egypt, Judah and Assyria. This, in national terms, is the lion and the lamb lying down together. How are we to apply it? Some say Isaiah is already seeing the advent of the Persian empire which swallowed up both Egypt and Assyria, and whose king acknowledged Jehovah as God of heaven (Ezra 1:1-3). Some look for a political alliance, still in the future, which will carry out God's will on earth. Some see in this passage, expressed in nationalistic terms, a picture of the Israel of God, the Church, in the world, acting in the power and purpose of God as the agent and instrument of reconciliation. Whatever we say, there is clearly a picture of the unexpected outreach of God's power and purpose to all people of all kinds, and this is being spoken of while Judah is a

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small, uncertain nation. What will it be when God is truly sanctified among His people? There is no limit to what He can do!

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20:1-6

This oracle is also against Egypt and refers to a time before the blessing spoken of in the last half of the previous chapter. It takes the form of a narrative of how Isaiah walked barefoot and naked in the streets of Jerusalem, as a sign against Egypt and also against Judah's intention to seek help from Egypt against the Assyrian invasion. In v.1 Tartan (AV) is the commander, or Kaiser, of the Assyrian army. In v.6 the inhabitant of this coast (country) is Judah. The story is clear: what are the messages? Although salvation comes to *some* in the wicked nation, and even although the wicked nation is seen to be compelled to serve the purpose of God, the wickedness of the wicked abides under the judgment of God. Never idolise any one nation. God's dealings are according to righteousness which must always find its fulfilment in Christ. A Christless "righteousness" is not of God. Isaiah's action sermon lasted for three long years as he walked "unfrosted" through the nation in an attempt to reach the consciences of all. He was aiming at the people rather than the rulers; for public reaction is a powerful thing. It is the "laissez-faire" attitude of our day that allows so many atrocities to be perpetrated against the common good. The public and the church membership usually waken up too late! The prophet's message is simply that Egypt shall be shamed, so why put your trust in her? The arm of flesh will always fail. God's arm alone is salvation and hope. But think of what this spell of three years cost God's man, as he walked about a picture of shame and ridicule. He was unquestionably despised and rejected of men and made a laughing stock. But he did it so that God's message might be spelled out clearly to the people. They were to be left in no doubt as to the choice to be made. This is the courage of faith.

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21:1-10

The burden against Babylon (the Desert by the sea) is the first of three messages, each having the theme of the watchman scanning the horizon. The prophet pictures the terrible destruction of Babylon at the hands of the Assyrian forces, and this seems to refer to the overthrow of Babylon by Sargon of Assyria (20:1) in 710 B.C. This means there must have been a resurgence of Babylon's power later, because it was by Babylon's armies that Judah ultimately fell and was carried away captive in 587 B.C.. Space forbids a detailed discussion of the dates and circumstances of all these individual prophecies, but the spiritual, practical lesson is evident. The prophet watches the rising and falling of the tides of human and international affairs, and warns against assuming that the fall of any one tyrant necessarily means his end. Babylon will come again and do the work of the captivity and then will fall finally. But, as the Book of Revelation teaches, there will be a "Babylon" right to the end of the world's history. There will always be that anti-God empire militating against the people and work of God. But it will finally perish and the people of God are always being warned against putting their trust in a power that has no continuance. The prophet is speaking here of the judgments of God, but note carefully the way in which he describes the experience. It is agony and dismay to behold the utter destruction of a whole empire. He has seen the unmistakable signs of this coming doom, and has waited long for news of its accomplishment (6-9). He has seen unsuspecting Babylon taken utterly by surprise. Verse 5 describes a never had it so good attitude, everyone enjoying themselves, when suddenly disaster overtakes them (Cf. Matt. 24:36-42; 1 Thess 5:1-4) "Oh Judah." says Isaiah (v. 10), "beware."

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21:11-12

The message to Dumah (Edom) is uncertain and indefinite, and this brings a particular solemnity. No one likes to wait for the unknown. There is a great silence over the people and they know, perhaps even feel, that judgment is coming. But how and in what form, and when will it come? Twice over a voice cries, "Watchman, how much of the night is gone?" The people are anxious to know if there is any gleam of light appearing to herald a more hopeful dawn than they dared to think possible. But the watchman's answer does not immediately help them for he replies, "The morning comes, and the night too." Any lightening of the skies will soon be overshadowed again. But there seems to be a gleam of hope in the watchman's message, for he says, "If

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you want to know more, come back and ask again." Is there a suggestion here that what comes, be it morning or night, will depend on Edom's own attitude and choice? It may be there was an awakening of interest on the part of this people and the beginnings of a spirit of enquiring after the Lord. But mere enquiry is not enough. It must be persistent and sustained. Now look at Romans 13: 11-14 and consider whether you are travelling spiritually to sunrise or twilight.

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21:13-17

The prophet gives an ever-spreading picture of the misery and affliction that results from war. The travelling merchants of Arabia are forced to go off the main trading routes at night-time and camp for safety in the thickets. There they entertain fugitives from war torn nations, although it could mean the Arabians themselves are fugitives, for war dislocates a whole world and its repercussions continue to disturb even when formal peace is declared. How much our own nation knows this restless aftermath of war in the realm of morals and life, as well as in economics. "But" says the prophet, "this is not the end. There is more to come" (16-17) and he pictures the far land of Kedar diminished. Isaiah's vision seems to encompass a whole world, for the purposes of his God are no narrow, exclusive campaign. The kingdoms of the world are the kingdom of his God, and this is how we must understand these grim readings on disaster and judgment, relating them to present experience. All the prophet sees he catalogues as the beginning of sorrows (Matt. 24: 3-8), but he sees, beyond the harrowing complications of world affairs, the fact of the presently developing purpose of the God of salvation. His God is marching on and the day of His glorious victory is coming near, therefore Isaiah's eye is bright and clear, his heart sure, and his thoughts are free from the pettiness of uncertainty. God's will is being done and shall be established, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

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22:1-14

The background of this chapter is the invasion of Palestine by Sennacherib and the siege of Jerusalem by these armies from Assyria. The time was 701 B.C., about the fortieth year of Isaiah's ministry. We shall deal with the historical details when we study chapters 36-39. Here we observe that the Assyrian attack, of which Isaiah had given warning for years, had in fact come. This is the vindication of the prophet and the ultimate test for Judah. The prophet addressed Judah and Jerusalem as the "valley of vision", the people favoured, taught and blessed of God in the midst of the confused darkness of the world. This was the city of God, the people of God who bore His name. But what was their actual condition? Did they appear to be the people amongst whom was the living, prophetic word of the Lord? The city was under siege by the enemy whose camp fires could be seen at night. The politicians were busy talking and sending deputations to treat with the enemy, only to be spurned. The engineers were fortifying the walls and trying to secure a safe water supply. The rulers and leaders who had put their trust in Egypt had heard of Egypt's defeat and they fled for their lives. A sudden surge of religious feeling had for a short time resulted in a whole stream of sacrifices, which had been rebuked by Isaiah, and now even the pretence of formal religion had been abandoned. We need to read here Isa. 1:2-27 for a vivid description of the "holy city" in the day of its visitation. This is the city Jesus was to weep over. It did not change. This is where we end when we play a double game with God, and close our ears when He speaks.

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22:1-14

The city had gone to bits and was at the point of capitulation, which would have been a tragedy because God purposed deliverance, as we shall see in chapters 36-39. There is a lesson to learn. When we are out of harmony with God, we are very likely, after what we call full consideration, to do the worst possible thing. We cannot see clearly except in the near presence of God (Ps. 36:9b). In verses 1-2, 13, we find the revellings of the city described. They had no cause to rejoice. Their trust in the world (Egypt) had failed them in their need, and their formal religion (performance of sacrifices), that never captured their hearts nor brought them to trust their God, had been exposed as vain and false. What could they do but try to forget reality in revelry? But the Assyrian lion roared at the gates and could not be ignored, just as sickness and death break in upon the vain worldling and compel him to face reality, if he will perchance look to God. But no! They would not think serious thoughts.

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“Leave God out of it,” they cried. “Build the battlements; secure the supplies; refuse to be taken in by the prophet and his solemn words that make all our circumstances a sermon from the Almighty. This is not the voice and action of God, this is just one of those things that happen from time to time. It will pass. We’ll get through. Let’s have a night out and forget all this seriousness.” But they spoke truly in verse 13b. They were looking into the face of death. But they would not look into the face of God (11b). “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee.” (Luke 12:20) It is time to think deeply, for God may be preparing to meet you, although you may have no desire for the meeting.

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22:15-25

There is a perverse confidence and unbelief which become evident in the attitude of the people of God (the people of the valley of vision – v.1), when they have fallen away in heart from true devotion to their God. No matter how solemn a word is spoken by the prophet, they will not hear. They may accept the “principle” of the message, but are quite sure it will not *in fact* come near enough to touch them personally. But in v.14 God says the whole of Judah will die because of their sin of God-forgetfulness. G. A. Smith likens this to the unpardonable sin of which people are guilty when every word and every influence of God by the Holy Ghost is despised and refused. At the beginning of Isaiah's ministry God had spoken of the "failure" of the word to be preached (6:9-13), although there would be a tenth remaining. In 1:7-9 and 5:27-29 what Judah said would never happen is spoken of as happening: their land is overthrown. But there is a remnant. Yet in 22:14 it seems even the remnant will perish. Will God bring His own people to this extremity? He did! And it was the fruit of their unbelief and disobedience! But there is a believing as well as an unbelieving death, and today's passage goes on to speak of preparation for the future. How can there be a future if all are to die? Resurrection is God's part and when Judah has learned to die there will be hope of life from the dead. We found this principle demonstrated in our studies in the life of Samson, when that self-willed man, who never realised the full potential of his life, even though he was consecrated to God, finally cried out in his brokenness and bondage, "Lord, let me die!" (Judges 16:30). It is by dying that we live, but self dies very hard! That is why the Lord has such a struggle with us before He can bless us.

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22:15-25

How does God plan and prepare for the future of His people and work? First, through the prophet, there was a demand for the dismissal and replacement of Shebna the treasurer or deputy, a man of influence close to the king, and possibly the leader of the party advocating alliance with Egypt. This man was in fact an alien, with no family connection in Israel (there is no mention of his father's name as is customary) and no valid part in the life of the people of God. He did not belong, had no right to be there, and certainly no right to hold influential office in the Israel of God. He had to go; as many such must still go from the Church of God before there is hope for the future. This man Shebna hewed himself a sepulchre, a token of his permanence, but his whole influence in Judah was death. He was not of God and all his work was a hindrance to God. Verses 16-19 need to be read in a modern translation. God was going to roll him up in a ball and throw him away, big man though he be. God still removes such personalities. In his place God would provide another man, a true spiritual son of Israel, clothed upon with the sufficiency of God. God would trust this man and give him executive authority (keys) and he would be like a nail hammered securely into its place in a strong wall. But Eliakim was warned of the dangers and temptations of high office, for the peg so securely hammered in, works loose from the wall and falls along with all that was hung on it. In this man's case it seems to have been the weight of family entanglements that made him too heavy to hang fast in God's place. There were too many in his life who were nothing but weights. In v.24 read "offspring and offscouring". Was God's man weakened because overburdened or did he allow himself to be overburdened because he was weakened? The Bible says, "Bear ye one another's burdens!"

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23:1-14

Take right out of the context of this passage the first statement of v.9 and you have the text for a sermon on the whole section of chapters 13-23: "The Lord of Hosts has planned it." The nations of the world hear the

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Word of God and feel the hand of God. Isaiah faces all world powers and declares that they rise to their present station and in due season fall from it, because they are led captive by the power of God in order to contribute to His purpose as it centres on His chosen people. Let it never be forgotten that *power belongs to God alone* (Ps. 62:11AV) and the manifestation of power in any given nation is the direct result of the ordination of God (Rom. 13:1; Prov. 8:15; Jer. 27:5; Dan.2:21; 4:32; John 19:11). Those are references we should all know, for they become a strong tower in days of perplexity. The actual human situation may not develop as we would expect God-ordered circumstances to develop, but then God's ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8) and when we would expect a vivid demonstration of power, He hides Himself (Habakkuk 3:4; Isa. 45:15). But when we believe, as Isaiah believed, that God sits on the throne of His Glory, unmoved and unmoveable, in the midst of toppling thrones and governments, then we are able to endure *because by faith* we see Him who is invisible (Heb. 11:27). Through this section of chapters we have looked on the political and military situation, but now we are introduced to another great power at work in the earth, and exercising great influence. It is the materialistic, mercenary spirit of Tyre and Sidon, chief cities of the mighty trading nation of Phoenicia.

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23: 1-14

Phoenicia, on the eastern end of the Mediterranean, had established an empire of trade, commerce and gold, stretching as far as the shores of Britain in the west to the coasts of India in the east. G. A. Smith says the trade and influence of Phoenicia was never exceeded until two thousand years later when the Portuguese discovered America. The danger of such an empire to the people of God does not consist in threat of arms, but in the subtle, infiltrating spirit of materialism that reduces everything to terms of possessions and governs the whole of life on the basis of profitability. This is the abiding spirit of the world, which is anti-Christ. Isaiah describes this empire, sees its glories, marks its achievements, which possibly included the encouragement of art and letters. Yet when he relates it to the people of God, the glory of Tyre is seen to be evil and its judgment certain. Phoenicia was a nation of "middle-men" who trafficked in everything, so that their character was essentially a conglomerate of pieces picked up from a multitude of sources. They were a people with no fixed aim, other than trade. The whole philosophy of their life was "what is it worth to me?" They were the "financial gnomes" of their day, giving thrones stability by their wealth (8). Who then is great enough to bring down this tyrannical power? GOD! (9) Why did he? Because God is not in all their thoughts; there is no fear of God before their eyes; they are like Pharaoh saying, "Who is the Lord that I should obey Him?" We shall see further deep moral and spiritual reason tomorrow. It is enough now to divide the passage. The sea-traders put in at Cyprus and hear the news of the fate of Tyre (1-5). The city is no more; her long-standing history is over (6-11); the hand of the Lord has done this. The end is final. There is no more rejoicing or rest. They lived for the world of gold and that world is no more. They have nothing.

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23:15-18

In order to see more clearly the "spirit" which motivates the empire of Tyre or Phoenicia read Ezek. 28:2,6,11-26. Then, linking with the reference to the hire of the harlot in today's passage, learn the spiritual lesson. By living only for pleasure and profit in terms of this present material world, and with no regard for the care of the soul, man, made in the image of God, prostitutes himself. He makes himself a contradiction of all he is meant to be; parodies his manhood; and becomes his own judge and executioner. Think of the rich man Jesus spoke of in Luke 16:19-31. No shadow is cast on his business life, but his success made him utterly blind with selfishness and cost him his soul. We cannot help wondering who got his money when he left it. He certainly did very little good with it while he had the chance! How he loved his barns; he never even noticed the beggar, let alone the thousands whose few grains of self-respect caused them to conceal their poverty! Our passage seems to tell of seventy years of desolation upon Tyre then, in the providence of God, she rises again to power. With what result? She returns to her trade! She has neither desire nor intention of change. But note v.18 very carefully. Evil does not work for itself. God sees to that. In the process of self-exposure, evil is allowed to grow fat, yet, at the same time it serves the purpose of God as the handmaid of His people and works in terms of refining and furthering righteousness. Think of the relation of the tares to the wheat. To judge the tares too soon would *harm*

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the wheat (Matt. 13:28-30). Think of the world situation in this way. God prepared the world for the coming of Jesus. God prepares the world for the coming again of Jesus. That is the day of salvation *and* judgment.

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24:1-12

The whole of this chapter is crystallised in the opening verse, where the language is that used for cleaning out a dirty dish. The sin of man has made the vessel of the whole earth filthy and God will stand it no longer: judgment has begun. Note that the prophet does not speak of some far off day of judgment, although that must and will come. He speaks of the actual situation of the world as it then was, and he enunciates the principle that spiritual wrongdoing begets moral disorder and disaster, which in turn produce a harvest of evil effect on the physical and material level of the life of both man and creation. The whole chapter is really about God scouring the material universe as if it were a dirty pot, which in fact it is as a result of the curse brought by man's sin (5). Man is pictured staggering about, frightened and helpless as the hand of God shakes his world. It is a dramatic picture. What are we to learn from it? Be sure your sin will find you out! (Num. 32:23). But before it is uncovered for judgment it will have injected its poison into the life stream of the society of which you are a part; into the family whose life you share so intimately; and into your own personality. There is no escape. It cannot be otherwise. Sin is not an isolated act which is done and finished with in the moment of its commitment and enjoyment. It is a virus which poisons and leaves after-effects which have to be lived with, even within the sphere of the forgiveness of God. Sin, when it is *finished*, brings forth death (Jas.1:15); but all along its course the principle operates that with what measure we mete it shall be measured to us again (Matt.7:2). Isaiah's concern here is with the cosmic, rather than the personal application of the principle, and if we ponder well we shall begin to understand much of the world's present experience, even to the possession of a fear of nuclear destructive. power!

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24:1-12

In v.2-4 the prophet emphasises that not one area of the whole structure of society escapes this material harvest that comes as the result of spiritual, moral and commercial evil. We need always to have working knowledge of Rom. 1:18-32 if we are to understand world experience in a realistic way. To apply the message personally in a very literal way we must realise that each time we sin against God, we send a shudder of disharmony right through the whole physical order of God's world in a way that registers in the accurate recording room of God's throne of administration. It is all the more serious that we are unaware of such reverberations from our sins. We may think of the more local repercussions, but here the message concerns the cumulative effect of countless "earthquakes" resulting from human sin. God is stirred to wrath. But look at human experience! The laughter is gone and is replaced by a desolating, blank futility, so that even those who are "enjoying themselves" are marked by a miserable negativeness. This is man's achievement - nothing-ness. Every thing he has and does goes stale in the act of enjoyment. The world grows grey and darkens to black, not under the influence of the "pale Galilean" but as the result of man's own rejection of the salvation unto life that is found alone in God. It is in such a situation as this that sheer boredom drives people to the senseless vandalism, the destructive experimentation in drug-taking, the indiscriminate sexual indulgence and perversion, and the trafficking in spirits that marks so much of human life today. The grim note of judgment must return to our preaching so that the perishing may be awakened and snatched back from the burning pit. God has no pleasure in the sight of people destroying themselves. Let us not brand Him as a cruel God, but from our own experience of His grace let us give testimony in such words as Ps. 103:10 and Ezra 9:5-15.

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24:13- 23

The judgment spoken of here is the visitation of man's sins on his material surroundings (20). When all this is upon the earth there will be heard the voice of the redeemed lifted up in praise of the Lord. But after a season, the voice of praise will be drowned out by the wails of distress rising from suffering, disillusioned people. Verse 15 is a great text for a sermon on the sanctifying power of affliction, if the word east is translated as "fires" as in AV. In v.16 the meaning is "all honour (glory) to the truly righteous people of God." In the second half of v.16

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the prophet turns from the surviving remnant to the actual situation of desolation around him. "Oh misery, misery," he cries, "the treacherous evil goes on unabated." Then he speaks of the windows of heaven opened (18), but not in blessing as in Malachi 3:10. It seems rather to refer back to the flood (Gen. 7: 11) and the rising tide of the waters of judgment. Verse 19 speaks in terms of the threefold development of an earthquake: first the cracking of the surface of the ground.; then the gaping chasm; then the final shattering convulsion. The earth, profane, delinquent and abandoned, totters under the weight of moral and spiritual evil, and staggers drunkenly to its destruction. In v.21 the "powers in the heavens" may be the spirit powers behind earthly powers, but in the context it seems to refer more to stars and planets. This convulsion is indeed cosmic! The last verse brings the breath of salvation and hope. The Lord shall reign in righteousness. This, and not annihilation, is the issue of all the travail of the world and the throes of judgment. The chapter ends having turned our eyes upon the Lord.

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25:1-12

This is a wonderful chapter of devotion intended to draw out the hearts of the people of God, who are spoken of as the poor and needy. Knowing their need and hunger, they have turned in faith to God and have been blessed more than they thought possible (Matt. 5:1-12). The faithful man looks back over his pilgrimage and sings of the great faithfulness of his God, who has been a rock of refuge and a tower of strength. We need Psalm 90 here, and the paraphrase of it in the words:

"O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come.

"Under the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure."

This faithful, unchanging God is indeed our shelter from the stormy blast, our guard while troubles last, and our eternal home. Here it is as if all the shadows of life were dispelled in a moment by the dawning of the Day of the Lord. Countless experiences that had baffled the saints and made the days of their pilgrimage full of bondage and conflict are now seen to have been wisely ordered in the providence of God. In fact, these experiences begin to be seen not merely as consequences of sin but in fact as answers to prayer. Yet when God begins to answer our cries and work out our salvation, the initial stages can seem to be thoroughly undesirable. When God's perfect work has been carried through to fulfilment and the "finished article" is completed with swift sureness, then comes the rejoicing. Let your heart teach you the thrill and the theology of v.6-9.

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25:1-12

In chapters 25-27 there is great emphasis on "that day" and "this mountain". It is the Day of the Lord; the "day for which creation and all its tribes were made"; and it marks the consummation and victorious completion of all God's purposes of grace and salvation in the establishment of His eternal kingdom (or mountain). What will it mean for brash unbelieving people, and for those whose testimony is that they hunger and thirst for God? In v.5b the song of the terrible ones (there is a sinister feeling about the phrase) is hushed. The screaming discordant song of the arrogant, materialistic, sin-crazed nations is silenced for ever, except in Hell where it guarantees that there will never be peace or rest. In the same movement of victory there is a great feast of joy prepared for God's ransomed ones. The aged wine (6) speaks of pleasures that have been matured by waiting and saved up for the crowning of the feast. The best wine is kept to the last! The removal of the covering in v.7 may refer to the taking away of the mourner's veil which links with verse 8, but more possibly it refers to the taking away of the dimness of our souls, the removing of the veil (2 Cor. 3:15-18 and 1 Cor.13:12) so that we can with open and unclouded faces look into the face of God. In Rev. 22:4 and 1 John 3:2 we are told that we shall see His face. The verb "swallow up" in v.8 is the same as "destroy" in v.7. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" Both are gone, and even though the process of dying remains the last experience of

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life, casting a very gloomy shadow, we will not fear, for the simple reason that the man of faith has nothing to fear. The world may taunt (v.8) the Christian because of the strength of his simple faith, but in that day, when time gives place to eternity, the *facts* of faith will be confirmed along with the folly of unbelief.

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26:1-4

These verses breathe a spirit of confidence grounded in the certainty of the coming of "that day". It is the peace of God which not only garrisons the heart in the present, but guarantees the future and brings into focus the "sure and certain hope" that is an essential part of Christian life and service. We are saved "in hope" (Rom. 8:24) and a great many explanations, satisfactions and joys are necessarily postponed until "that day" breaks and all shadows flee away. But, throughout the entire interim stage of the development of God's saving purposes, which encompass the final sweeping away of the total kingdom of evil in every form, there is never any need for doubt or fear. That which is of God has God for its security, its progress and its completion. There is an eternity of changelessness in v.4 which could better read, "The Lord Jehovah is the Rock of Ages." It is in this God, who knows neither "variation nor shadow due to change" that our trust is. We change, but He changes not. This is our confidence. We lose heart, but He is determined in His gracious purposes. This is our confidence, whether we apply it personally, to the local fellowship, or to the wider, universal Church of the redeemed. Consider some of the many Scriptures which emphasise this message of assurance: Gen. 28:15; Zech. 2:5, 8, 10; Phil 1:6; Rom. 8:28-31. God is our salvation and our sure bulwark against every assailing foe. But note the emphasis on moral righteousness in v.2, and remember that the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of "holiness without which no man shall see the Lord." (Heb. 12:14). It is our sins which breach the defences and give Satan his opportunity.

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26:5-11

It is only the peaceful mind, stayed upon Jehovah, and utterly persuaded of His everlasting righteousness, that can face the fact of inevitable judgment on evil, which is an integral part of the Christian message and hope. What is more, we have a reminder here that "the saints shall judge the world." (1 Cor. 6: 2-3) It is the steps of the poor and needy (v.6), God's people, progressing in obedience to God, which accomplish the overthrow of evil. Such a thought delivers us from becoming preoccupied with the well being of our own souls. God is at one and the same time warring against evil within us and beyond us. We are His outposts of attack against the kingdom of darkness, and that is why Christian life can at times be a hellish battle. It is just that. A battle against the ramparts of darkness. But do not tremble. Remember the first four verses of the chapter and then read v.7, "The path of the righteous is level; you make smooth the way of the righteous." It is little wonder that v.8-9 speak of the prayers of the people of God and remind us of the twofold element of waiting and desire. G.A. Smith speaks of "prayers that trail like wounded animals to the feet of their Master, and look up into His face with large eyes of pain." Part of the pain arises from the words of v.10-11 which speak of the intransigence of the unbelieving. Neither favour, nor manifestation of the majesty of God, nor the plain tokens of God's blessing on His Church will make them believe. What grief to God! What sin in man!

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26:12-21

Here is the testimony of Israel, the confession and hope of God's people, and it contains some astonishing verses which are an Old Testament declaration of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. It is suggested that Israel, in spite of the return from captivity and all the pardon and peace of God, was still conscious of all those they had laid in the dust of death in the land of captivity, and conscious too that they also must go that way from which there is no return. Is then the mighty salvation of God to be thought of only in terms of this life? Paul says, "If in this life only we have hope, we are of all men most to be pitied." (1Cor.15:19). Israel seems also to think of temporary, limited service in the purpose of God, service brought to an incomplete end by the intervention of death. She cries that nothing is accomplished, no deliverance has been worked for the world, and people have not been born into the life of faith. Shall the grave have the last word? Is v.14 the final desolating truth, a funeral bell tolling out its message of frustration? NO! "Your dead shall live; their dead bodies shall rise." (v.19). The second half of that verse seems addressed to the dead in their graves as if they

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could hear the voice of God. Is it not so? Jesus said, "Lazarus, come forth!" and he that was dead responded. Think also of John 5:25, 28. Think of Job: "Though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God." (Job 19:26). We once heard a mighty sermon on Rom. 8:11 that spoke of God standing guard over the dust of His saints in every burial place known or unknown to men. What a thought! O death, where is thy sting? Think of the words of Philip Doddridge:

"When death shall interrupt these songs,
And seal in silence mortal tongues,
Our Helper God, in whom we trust,
Shall keep our souls and guard our dust."

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26:12-21

We must still note in these verses the painful confession of God's people and God's mighty care for His broken ones. In v.13 they confess they have yielded allegiance to other lords. They have played a double game and it is only by the mercy of the Lord they are restored to praise His name. They had been unfaithful to love. Verse 16 describes how in their distress when disciplined they turned to their God. Only when crisis made their need pressing did they realise how very far they had wandered, and it was then they began to whisper their prayers. In v.17-18 they admitted that away from God and apart from Him their lives had been marked by promise but with no fulfilment, no fruit. They had nothing to show for their long privileged experience. God did not contradict them for it was all only too true, but inasmuch as they had begun to pray, they had reached the place of hope. The last two verses emphasise the need for prayer and close walking with God. The language is reminiscent of Israel safely in their homes on the night of the Passover while the angel of death passed over the nation of Egypt. Here we see the attitude of the people of God as God comes forth to work temporal judgments on the earth. They are called into the secret place and as the storm rages outside, they speak their prayers to God. Come, my people, these are big days, fraught with destiny. But how often in Israel's history they were a people who knew not the time of their visitation. In a very real sense, they missed God. What a tragedy! He had come, worked, and gone on and they were left behind.

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27:1-13

We are still dealing with "that day", the "day of the Lord" when God by His sovereign power intervenes finally in the affairs of the earth. Always remember however, that there are many such days before the final day, and many partial fulfilments of the prophetic word, gradually culminating in the final crisis. The interpretation of v.1 is interesting. Some say leviathan, the swift (piercing) serpent, refers to the rapid flowing river Tigris and the empire of Assyria on its banks; and leviathan, the tortuous (coiling) serpent, refers to the winding river Euphrates with the empire of Babylon on its banks. The sea dragon in the west is made to refer to Egypt. These are the three empires encircling Israel and they signify that the prophet is thinking of a truly universal manifestation of God's power and victory. Some say, however, that the terms speaking of monsters, serpents and the abyss (sea) indicate an empire of spiritual evil which lies behind the operations of visible and earthly kingdoms. This puts a very sobering emphasis on all our reading of contemporary world history. There is far more involved than is at first evident. Much time could be spent in profitable study of this theme, taking texts such as Dan. 10: 12-13, where there is a suggestion of a spiritual power behind the territorial power of Persia; and 1 Cor. 10: 19-20, where reference is made to evil, spiritual personalities of power behind the idols and rites of paganism. We do well to hesitate before we laugh at the strange, supra-natural, occult powers that people claim to communicate with. But our first verse today makes it clear that these powers in their united might are no match for the strong arm of the Lord. Having declared this truth in *one verse* the prophet goes on to speak of another kingdom, that of His own people, likened to a "fruitful vineyard" (2).

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27:1-13

Read this chapter in a modern version and see that its message is all about God's dealings in love with His own people for their good and their abiding blessing. God is more concerned with our sin than with our suffering and

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He is prepared to hide His pity from us until grief and suffering have done their gracious work in us. God's people are His vineyard, and in the wisdom of the gardener He wields the pruning knife because He purposes a fuller and richer crop of fruit. The early verses emphasise the personal dealings of God with His own, and all is in love unto salvation, as opposed to the working of Satan which is to destroy. What God longs to hear from His children is the cry, "What have I to do any more with idols?" (Hos. 14:8). In v.8 the meaning is that in limited measure God chastised His own people and in that way pleaded with them to come back to Him. Of course, God always limits the rebuke lest the loved one be overcome with too much sorrow (cf. 1Cor. 5:1-5 with 2 Cor. 2:6-11). The verse could also refer to the sighing of the wind that speaks of the sorrow of God in the rebuke of His children. Again, it could refer to the sifting by the wind as His own are swept into exile to be purified. Now look to v.12 which speaks of the day of God's harvest, when all His pain and our pain will have its fruit as the ripe grain is gathered in. But look, the gathering is one by one. Each is separate, precious, numbered and gathered. Not one shall be missing. The trumpet shall sound, and in spite of all opposition they shall come from all corners, and the Lord and His people will be together in holy joy. Yes, holy joy, for the curse of sin is gone forever.

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28:1-6

The prophet now addresses himself to the immediate situation in the nation, and his words are a warning from God to decadent society. The message is spoken before the fall of Samaria to the armies of Assyria, but it is already becoming obvious that a nation living as the Northern Kingdom was doing could not long survive. Samaria "had never had it so good" and they lived in luxury and indulgence, but a storm was building up that was going to strip this pleasure-mad and drunken nation of all its glory. In v.1 the people and in v.4 the nation are described as fading. They are withering, drying up, beginning to disintegrate and soon will be scattered by the winds of judgment, leaving nothing behind. The prophet's words are powerful shafts to reveal to men and women how squalid is this life of debauched indulgence they call pleasure. If people could but see what their sins are doing to them, their shame could be the beginning of their salvation. But it is not enough to engender a sense of sin, shame and revulsion. There must be positive hope, and this Isaiah gives in v.5-6 where he speaks of a remnant on whom there rests the glory of God. They are the ones who "turn back the battle at the gate" (6). God is with the remnant who are righteous through faith, and the remnant alone is the hope of the nation. The whole passage could well be summed up in one text: "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life."

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28:7-13

The prophet now addresses Jerusalem with the same message of judgment. The people of the South said their "Amen" to the castigation of the Samaritans, but Isaiah now charges them with doing the very same things. G.A. Smith has this to say of the whole passage from the beginning of the chapter: "The truths are relevant to every day in which luxury and intemperance abound, in which there are eyes too fevered by sin to see beauty in simple purity, and minds so surfeited with knowledge or intoxicated with their own cleverness, that they call the maxims of moral reason commonplace and scorn religious instruction as food for babes No prophet ever threatened judgment more inexorable and complete than Isaiah. Yet he never failed to tell the sinner how possible it was for him to be different. ... The sixth verse sounds like a trumpet in the ears of enervated and despairing men ... But Isaiah has cast his pearls before swine Even priest and prophet stagger through strong drink and the class that should have been the conscience of the city, responding immediately to the Word of God, reel in vision and stumble in judgment. They (all the people) turn upon Isaiah's earnest message with tipsy men's insolence. Whom is he going to teach? Are we children, that he treats us with his endless platitudes and repetitions? So did these bibulous prophets, priests, and politicians mock Isaiah's messages of judgment, wagging their heads in mimicry of his simple earnest tones." Is this not the same arrogant and blasphemous cynicism that we find in our own generation?

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28:7-13

Isaiah's generation and congregations found this ministry rather a trial, feeling it both dull and burdensome. (People said the same about Paul (2 Cor.10:10) and made similar comments on Jesus.) What they resented most was Isaiah's constant reiteration of the message of inevitable judgment because of their blind impenitence. But in spite of the gross evidences of v.8, neither priests nor people believed they had backslidden from God. It seems incredible until you try in this generation to persuade riotous worldlings that there is no evidence in their lives that they are Christians. They will mock you as they did Isaiah! They will say with real asperity, "Who do you think you are, you young ministers? We have been in church all our days and were teaching in Sunday School while you were still in your pram. We know as well as you." This is the dullness of spirit that is unaware of the living speech of God, and though Isaiah is grieved by it he does not stop his preaching. It takes more than scorn to silence a true prophet of God! The Word of God was uttered precept upon precept, speaking out God's message and all the time it was being ratified by the events taking place. In v.11 Isaiah tells of a foreign tongue which would sound stammering and staccato to the Hebrews, and says that when this people had over-run the land, perhaps then Israel would learn to hear what God the Lord was saying. You say that would be too late? Indeed, it will be too late in Hell to be finally persuaded that all your minister has said about conversion, forgiveness, discipleship and judgment was the true word of God. Listen to the preached word with urgency. Listen to the speech of circumstances with care. If you are deaf to both there is nothing more God can do to turn you to salvation.

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28:14-22

The burden of this passage is to lash the political intrigue of Jerusalem. The people countered Isaiah's warning of national disaster at the hands of its enemies by pointing to the treaties made with *both* Assyria and Egypt, although this double diplomacy was no doubt kept secret from the major empires concerned. But unhallowed and underhand intrigue will always in time bring disaster to those engaged in it, whether on a personal or national level. Nothing false can ever stand as God's exposing providence moves relentlessly forward. There is only one sure ground of confidence and hope, and it is the stone or rock which God lays. It is both the foundation and the cornerstone. It cannot be moved or overthrown, but it can be a stone of stumbling to all who act in unbelief. It is a stone of proof (tried stone) which itself stands every test and tests all who come in contact with it. In the New Testament this reference is taken up and applied to Christ and His work. Here Isaiah refers it to God who alone is Israel's salvation. He that puts his trust in God the Rock will not panic or rush around as if evil had undisputed sway in the affairs of men. He will find his trust well-founded. "Now," says Isaiah, "when all I have warned you of comes to pass, remember that I told you it would be so (18-19). But remember also that justice ordains that you will lie in the bed you make for yourself, no matter how uncomfortable it proves to be." (20). This is one reason why our modern generation is so restless and resentful. It has made its bed but does not want to lie in it. There is a play entitled, "Stop the world, I want to get off." It cannot be. God is at work and part of His "strange" work is to overthrow His own people because of their sin and unbelief.

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28:23-29

Never forget that there is careful and accurate method in all God's workings. Nothing is left to chance; nothing is indiscriminate; nothing is either incidental or accidental. Just as the farmer takes great pains and exercises intelligence as he plans his ploughing and the rotation and siting of his crops, all with an eye to the ultimate harvest, so in like manner God has His reasons and takes His time. The plough tears open the earth, but it is not destructive, for by exposing the soil to frost and wind it is made fertile. The seed is sown with great discrimination, for the wise farmer knows where it will grow best. Never envy another's field! The harvest is carried out with great care and different methods with different instruments. The caraway is threshed with a staff, it is delicate; the cummin with a heavier rod; bread corn needs the heavy roller, but it is not crushed to dust. When all the chaff is gone there remain the basic elements of bread which is life. "All corn must go through the mill before it can become the bread of life to others," said a wise missionary. This is a word that comes from the God who is wonderful in counsel, excellent in wisdom and most sure in all His ways. With His

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eye on the harvest God is prepared to deny us the pleasures of the present in the interest of the more enduring delights of the future.

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29:1-14

The whole section comprising chapters 28-33 is addressed to Judah and Jerusalem and consists of six “woes” or messages of judgment. God is speaking in actions to a people who will not listen to words, and the picture is of the Almighty God using sharp and painful tools to fashion His people so that they may be integrated into His holy and eternal purposes. Many a time in this strange work of overthrowing His own people it seems that God is on the side of the ungodly, but we must remember they are but his tools which will be laid aside, not the finished articles of fine workmanship. But the end is not yet. This chapter is said to date from about 705 B C., after thirty years of Isaiah’s ministry and with the people as obtuse and unbelieving as ever. Sennacherib was king of Assyria and while he was occupied with troubles arising from Babylon and Egypt, some of the smaller states sought to strengthen their own position, amongst them Judah. It was a time of crisis, and treaties were made with Egypt, but with Babylon proving more difficult to subdue than Assyria (and the other nations had anticipated this), the crisis receded. There arose a false ease and shallow confidence that all was well and that the “crunch” would not come. Imagine then the reaction to Isaiah’s word that within a year from that year God would bring straitness on Jerusalem itself. The name Ariel seems to mean either “Lion of God” or “Hearth of God”, but Jerusalem, with its ritual of sacrifices grown meaningless because mechanical, was no home where God could dwell in holy communion with His people. Yet God’s desire was towards her and though He would distress her sorely, she was still His city. This is love which seeks through pain to bring us closer to the God of love. When will we learn to see it so?

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29:1-14

Begin at verse 3 and hear Isaiah foretelling how the city would be besieged and brought to miserable fear and pathetic impotence before her enemies. Jerusalem, like a sick lion, would whimper in the dust. Then suddenly, swift as the passing of a dream, almost as unreal and insubstantial as a hallucination, yet absolutely real, the hosts of the enemy would be blown away from the gates of the city like dust carried off in the wind. This actually happened as we shall read in chapter 37. How did the prophet know all this? He was taught of God and enlightened by the Spirit of God. This man, who had seen the Lord high and lifted up (Chap. 6), so lived out his life in the presence of that same God that as he read the signs of the times in the developing political and social circumstances, he heard the voice of God telling His secrets. Isaiah could see the inevitable disaster that would come as a result of the nation’s sinful apostasy. He knew God well enough to know He would not stand aside and see His holy people destroy themselves. God would smite, but it would be the intervention of judgment in order to accomplish mercy. He spoke out of the burning of his heart, grieved but not astonished at the unbelieving reception his message got from the people. Remember chapter 6:9-12. This is judicial blindness. Look at Judah. The people did not know what to make of this sermon. It dazed and baffled them. Spiritual sleep made their eyes incapable of focusing enough to read God’s message. Why should this be so? Verse 13 tells that inner departure from God is the cause of their lack of understanding of God’s word. Their religion had become a mechanical routine of services and their prayers mere formulae of words. The Word of God was as a book sealed, and even when a man tried to read he could make nothing of it. When this is so, it is time to seek the Lord as if nothing else in life matters.

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29:15-24

The immediate situation here is the making of a *secret* treaty with Egypt, while on the surface it appeared that no such thing had been done. It is a pattern copied by many Christians in secret, when, while still performing the accepted spiritual exercises, they sell their souls to the Egypt of this world and its ways. What we forget is that by turning away from God we do not and cannot exclude Him or His working in our lives. Who sees and who knows? GOD! Why do we call these words a children’s hymn? Make them your meditation for today and consider your life as a Christian in the light of them:

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“God is always near me;
Hearing what I say,
Knowing all my thoughts and deeds,
All my work and play.

“God is always near me;
In the darkest night.
He can see me just the same
As by mid-day light.

“God is always near me,
Though so young and small;
Not a look or word or thought,
But God knows it all.” (P.Bliss)

That can be exquisite comfort or desolating discomfort, depending on how we are dealing with God in personal relationship and in terms of holy discipleship.

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29:15-24

Read verse 16, “O your perversity. You turn things the wrong way round. Is the potter to be counted as so much clay? Is the thing made saying to its maker that he did not make it? Can the pot say of the potter that he has no sense?” But in the disdainful way that we go on ordering our lives without reference to God or His will, we are doing just this. We treat God as if He were too lacking in understanding to enter into discussion with us about the problems of life. What justification God would have if He cast us all out of His sight and refused to have anything more to do with us, in spite of all our profession of His name. But amazingly, Isaiah’s message does not even suggest this possibility. His words are full of grace, hope and blessing to a people finally restored *through* tribulation. Verses 18-19 bring to mind the words of Jesus, “I am come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly.” Verse 21 begins, “Those who destroyed a man with a single word,” and refers to the persecution of the prophet because of his words. Verses 22-24 suggest a great sweep of history with Jacob watching over his descendants, sometimes with sorrow and sometimes with joy, but seeing them finally a people bearing unmistakably the stamp of God and walking with Him in fellowship and service.

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29:15-24

The translation of verses 22-24 by J. B. Phillips is so beautiful we use it for today’s meditation, with the prayer that we may ponder the goodness of the Lord over against our own past unworthiness.

“Therefore the Lord, who rescued Abraham, says this concerning Jacob’s house:

‘Never again shall Jacob be disgraced,
Never shall his face grow pale in fear
For when his children have seen
All that I have done for them,
They will honour my name,
They will honour the Holy One of Jacob,
And will stand in awe of the God of Israel.
Those who have been faithless will understand the truth
And the obstinate will be willing to be taught.’ ”

Does that not remind you of the father of the prodigal? Parents who have been bitterly disappointed in their children and have grown white-haired with grief and worry as they have watched the course of sin and shame making its mark can best understand the longing heart of God. They can best understand the stern rebukes that

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are so necessary and even the withdrawal of family privileges. They know too the long waiting of grief until discipline has done its gracious work and they understand finally the joy of restoration. “This my son was lost and is found.” Do some of you who read these words need to say, “I will arise and go to my Father”? If so, do it now.

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30:1-14

This passage speaks of bad politics and bad religion, making it clear that the latter is the cause of the former. Judah’s leaders, awakened by fear at the approaching crisis, burst into a flurry of activity and went to Egypt for help. Verses 1-7 are addressed to the politicians and culminate in a plain declaration that Egypt’s help is worthless. The last part of verse 7 should read, “Therefore I have called her, Rehab who sits still,” (RSV) or “That is why I call her the Spent Whirlwind,” (J.B. Phillips). As we have it in the Authorised Version (their strength is to sit still) it is a great text for a sermon on faith and trust that waits upon the Lord. Judah’s only hope was to stand still and wait upon her God. Verses 8-11 are addressed to the people, making it plain they are held responsible for the ruler’s policy, as indeed is always the case. Think of any government of our land trying to outlaw sport, or stop gambling, or reaffirm the full sanctity of the Sabbath. Popular opinion would prevent legislation and cause “acceptable” laws to be passed. But what can public opinion be when the people have rejected the Word of the Lord, when congregations have bullied and blackmailed the prophets until they preach only smooth and acceptable words? Verses 12-14 speak of a bulging wall about to collapse. It will be ignored until the disintegration has begun, and it is important to see that the cause of the collapse is in the internal life of the people and not in the actions of an outward enemy. But look ahead to v16. What did the people say when God spoke so earnestly to them? What have you said?

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30:15-17

These verses speak of a very practical conversion, and God contrasts two attitudes to life. On the one hand there is trust in men with its impressive bustle and restless excitement; on the other there is the simple calm of trust in God. Why is it that we are always under the impression that God is significantly at work when we and our associates are busy creating earthquakes and trying to imitate the sound of rushing mighty wind? In Elijah’s case (1 Kings 19:9-13) the urgent and passionate prophet had to learn that God’s workings were not confined to the visible and obvious victories of Mount Carmel. While the prophet panicked in the depression of seeming defeat, God was pressing on with his glorious work. In the case of the apostles (Acts 2:1-6) the servants of Christ were waiting upon God and preparing themselves in practical terms to carry out their commission as witnesses. They were not praying in a frenzy of emotional intensity for the extraordinary manifestations of wind and fire and strange tongues. These were not the essentials of Pentecost; nor is God now bound to give these identical signs in order to give assurance to people who have grown confused because they have lost sight of the main moral and spiritual issues of the battle. When you know your God and know that He is ordering your life as well as His own work, you can be at peace, no matter the immediate evidences. (7:2,4,7). Think well of these things and recall the reluctance of our Lord to give “signs” because the hunger for them was a sign of unbelief, not faith (Matt. 12:38-40; 16:1-4).

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30: 18

The previous verses make plain that Israel was determined to have its demonstrative trust in the horses of Egypt because the people felt a quiet God was not to be relied upon. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating of it, and God warned them what would happen. This that they had put all their trust in would prove to be the vehicle of their rout. The picture is one of shameful panic that all the nations would see. God compared what they say would happen with what would in fact happen, and so total would the demoralisation and demolition be that Israel would be left like a solitary withered tree on the brow of a hill standing starkly against the sky. What a picture of spiritual and emotional exhaustion and the witheredness of ill-placed confidence. But this desolation would be the result of Israel’s kicking against the pricks. They would not wait upon a God they felt was being too slow and inactive. If God would not work, they would soon work *up* something themselves. The very word

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signified the infernal origin of the scheme! What would God do? Here is the startling thing. He waits, refusing to be panicked into a demonstration of loving blessing by a people who will not trust Him. And He stands aloof (exalted) in loving agony until His people are reprovved by their own folly. They have to learn not merely that God is a God of judgment and justice, but also a God of method, design and order, as this word “judgment” really means. The things that fall upon Israel are not sudden and arbitrary, but the fruit of long developing principles. God’s delays are significant and if we long for blessing and it does not come, we must reckon that God considers it is not yet safe for us to have it. Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

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30:19-26

The delays of God are in no sense a denial of His purpose of blessing, and the fruit of God’s aloofness is now spoken of in very wonderful terms. In verse 20 “teachers” would be in the singular and spelt with a capital: “Teacher”. The rations of adversity and siege, real and concrete sorrows and afflictions lead to clearer sight. Having been reduced to painful helplessness and public shame, the people sit in quietness, and behold, they now hear the voice of their God as He watches over them, guiding them in straight paths and instantly counselling restraint when they are tempted to turn aside. It is the sense of this tremendous care of God that constrains them to cast away their idols, for now they see them as loathsome things that robbed them of their inheritance of love in the God of their salvation. When the heart is thus sick of its sins and turns afresh to its God, there is fresh blessing. In verses 23-26 in the picture of agricultural abundance (earthly terms being used to speak of spiritual realities) there is indication of necessary labour rather than indolence, but the overall picture is of the expansive goodness of God to His people. It is a situation brilliant with light and it is all the Lord’s doing (26b). This is the God who binds up and heals. It is a sign of our spiritual degeneration that we are so unaware of His desire towards us; so quick to misinterpret His dealings with us; and so slow to trust Him. Why does He bear with us in patient longsuffering? That is the mystery of the love of God which will cause us amazement even to the endless ages of eternity.

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30:27-33

The prophet returns again to the actual situation facing Judah and Jerusalem, and the solemn notes of the warning trumpet are heard. The time of blessing is not yet come. The thunder of verse 27 and the overflowing waters of verse 28 are spoken of as the controlling bridge that is determining the present experience of the nation. Undoubtedly the prophet is speaking of the tide of the Assyrian invasion, but this movement of such solemn import carries the name of the Lord. God is in it, as God is in everything to overrule and to use it for His purposes. That is what the prophet learned in chapter 6, and he never forgot it. That is why he can face the rigours of reality and still speak of songs in the night. There is a suggestion in verse 29 of the solemn awe and holy expectation of the children of Israel in Egypt on the night of the Passover, when the activity of the angel of death meant, for them, salvation. Their safety lay in sheltering with unquestioning trust under the blood mark of God’s saving love. From verse 30 onwards the picture is of the intervention of God and the confounding of His enemies. This actually happened when Jerusalem was quite persuaded she was finished and no hope remained. As she cringed before the final stroke of execution at the hand of the enemy, God scattered His foes and became once again the lifter up of the heads of His people. In the light of this planned intention of God, we see more clearly the sin and folly of Judah in running to Egypt for help because she felt God was inactive. All the time, God was wanting to work such wonders for His people, but in their blind unbelief they said, “No.” Little wonder in later generations the wise man warned, “Take heed, lest you be found fighting against God” (Acts 5: 34-39).

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31:1-9

Chapters 31-32 form one message or woe addressed to a people who had forgotten God, left Him out of their reckoning and gone down to Egypt for help. By now, in spite of all the protestations of God through the prophets, a political alliance had been effected with Egypt and this was what Judah trusted in to save her from the Assyrian attacks. Their trust was placed in visible, measurable resources that were human in origin (v.1) and

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partook of the essential temporality of all that is of this world. That which is human can never be relied upon. Just because it is human it is limited and fallible and that is why, amongst other reasons, we must learn never to expect or demand too much from each other. All people have their limitations in one realm of life and personality or another, and that is why the Lord brings us together in fellowships where we complement each other and so make one cohesive whole or body or building for the Lord's use. But even a God-created fellowship or nation such as Judah is not sufficient in itself, and must learn ever more constantly to lean upon its God, who is wise, and has His policies (v2), just as the politicians have. People are always congratulating themselves on "making history" by their clever statesmanship, but in the end it is God alone who makes history, and it is this that highlights the folly of these who leave God out of their reckoning.

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31:1-9

The overall message of this chapter is quite clear. To a people who, in spite of their profession of faith, had relegated God to the sidelines of life and confined His activity and interest to the temple, there came this word declaring two things: God is at work, though you refuse to see it; and the arm of flesh will fail you. Then in verses 4-5 we have two pictures of God. He is likened to the king of the beasts, the lion, grimly resolute in defending what is His own and refusing to be frightened off by the mob. That the shepherds here are depicted in opposition to the lion seems to suggest a shaft of accusation against them, showing them to be false keepers of the flock and indeed the worst enemy. We may not like to think of God as the strong lion, although we must remember that the Lion and the Lamb are one in the Book of Revelation. But the strong mercy of God is always better than the weak pity of men. The second picture reveals the care of God. Some say the word means "little mother birds" fluttering in parental care over the nest of young when a marauder is near. This links with our Lord's words in Matt. 23: 37. But others say it refers rather to the mighty eagle hovering over her nest and guaranteeing safety for her brood. Look up the references in Deut. 32: 9-12; Ps. 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 63:7; 91:1-4; Isa. 63:7-9. Now, if God is like this, turn to Him, cast away the sins and idols which have become a snare to your feet and prove the good salvation He is able to give (v.6-9). There is a suggestion that "fire" in verse 9 indicates the "fireside" of a home and the "furnace" is more the incinerator for rubbish. The near presence of the God of glory can make life either of these, depending on the heart and desire of the people involved.

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32:1-8

These studies in Isaiah are teaching us to reckon with a real God who is present and active in every generation, calling out a people who will be righteous and holy and a testimony to His name. It is to this end God speaks and works, and some of His sternest words are to His own people. Having spoken of the immediate situation of peril because of apostasy, and the ultimate dispersal of the enemy by the sovereign intervention of God, the prophet now raises his eyes to look to the future. What he sees is an order of life founded upon righteousness. In measure Isaiah saw this taking place in the reign of Hezekiah (2 Chron. 30: 6-9, 12; 31: 20-21) but the passage undoubtedly points to a greater king than any mere man. We have already heard Isaiah speak of the One to come, who is Immanuel (7:14), the Prince of the Four Names (9:6) and the Rod of Jesse (11:1). Now it is the Righteous Governor. He is to be a man, partaking of human life with all its trials and frailties (Heb. 2:17-18; 4:15). Yet the influence of His character and the effect of His personal presence is to provide a shelter from the storm, a well of living water, and a solid rock halting the drift of shifting sand. What a picture of Christ and of what we should become in Christ! One man or woman of sufficient moral and spiritual calibre can stand against the tides of evil in a whole community and save it from disaster. This is done, not by specific activity, but by *being* a rock, unmoving and unmoveable in faith, principle and life. But such is the declension of the human race that a time can come when even the righteous remnant can do no more than save their own lives (Ezek. 14: 12-14, 19-20; Jer. 15: 1-6). How awful, when there is no hope of remedy.

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32:1-8

The effect of a testimony of righteousness in a society is to provide a shelter of safety and refreshing for the weak and needy. That is a saving work in itself. What greater joy is there than to know that your reality of life,

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with all its cost, has kept another from yielding to temptation, or encouraged another to struggle back from defeat! But there is another significant result of living righteousness (as opposed to icy cold legal rectitude) and it is the affirmation of standards and the recognition of things as they really are. In the presence of holiness sin will never be excused as weakness, or habit, nor will it be condoned as “the spirit of the age” or “modern self expression”. The worthless or vile person will be labelled according to his character and activity. There will be no idolising of the dissolute and reprobate, nor will there be the acceptance of “gutter language” on the part of those who ought to know better. Unbelief will no longer be cloaked in plausible language of “modern theology”, nor will godless idolatry and practical atheism be excused as “up-to-date ideas” about religion. They that are of God and His Christ will be known by their fruits, and they that are not of God will proclaim their identity by the manner of their life. When the King reigns in righteousness there is nothing left hidden. Do such thoughts disturb? Is it because we fear the light?

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32:9-20

The prophets have always been clear about the part women play in the community, and their influence for good or ill. Here they were careless, thoughtless and unconcerned about the state of the nation. Their interest was their comfort and their human fulfilment, and in consequence their influence was deadening. They had ceased to be creative helpmeets and sources of inspiration to the men. Let us be honest! It is all too easy to be absorbed by home, love, family and career to the extent that God is given a secondary place. We do not abandon our faith. Indeed, we still practice its activities. But our enthusiasm and vital livingness depart. What God has given us as a blessing becomes a hindrance. Now, since God knows our hearts, could this not be at least part of the reason why He sometimes sets restraints upon romances amongst Christians? You may not agree that such restraints exist. Would you then agree that there appears along with many romances among young Christians the beginnings of spiritual decline? On the other hand, where there is a spirit of dynamic determination in both women and men, the whole range of human relationships is sanctified and the personal is never allowed to obtrude. It is in pleasing God that human pleasure finds its true fulfilment. 1 Cor 7: 32-35 is worthy of much consideration, but will not benefit those who will be made to feel spiritually superior!

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32:9-20

However we consider fruitful Christian service, it is clear there is always a death to be died to self as well as to sin. Here the prophet speaks of the day when frivolities and obscenities of life will be swept away in an outpouring of the Spirit of God. This baptism of righteousness will have the effect of peace, quietness and confidence (17), and the picture is crowned by the universal fruitfulness described in v 20. But preceding the blessing there is hail (19) coming down, and the general tenor of the whole passage is of the desolation and death to which God has to bring Jerusalem *before* He can bless with this full salvation. If you consider John 7: 39 you will see that the outpouring of the Spirit is linked with the glorifying of Jesus. How and when was Christ glorified? It was in and through His dying and death, and so it is with us. God will hedge us in with severe strictures to bring us to an end of self; to break our self-preoccupation; to end our self-indulgence; to shatter our self-will; to demolish our self-importance; then in the penitent bankruptcy of true humility, which casts itself utterly upon God, we begin to taste the power of God that works salvation and life in us and others. “Death works in us,” cries the apostle (2 Cor. 4:7-12), and our experience is that of dying. But behold, we live. The treasure of the riches of the Gospel of grace is indeed committed to us and we hold it in earthen, unworthy vessels. It is as the vessels are broken that the savour of life is diffused abroad.

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33:1-12

The background of this chapter is found in 2 Kings 18: 13-16. Assyria then broke the treaty and attacked Jerusalem (2 Kings 18: 17), the details being recorded in Isaiah 36-37. It was this treachery on the part of Assyria, in whom Judah had trusted for safety, that brought the people of God to repentance. It is often our collapses that startle us into spiritual recovery! We must assume some sermon had been preached by Isaiah, such as the one contained in chapter 1. But it is only when repentance is proved real that God can ratify it with

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blessing. The heart is deceitful, and we must remember that even the glorious forgiveness of God still leaves the constitutional effects of sin, and in order to overcome them, the salvation God has planted within us has to be worked out in the disciplines of life. In spite of the shock which brought the prophet and people together in a movement of penitence, which here became an affirmation of faith and hope, God still allowed the Assyrians to come to the very gates of Jerusalem, and the gold was stripped from the temple to buy them off. The city and the temple were still inviolate but they were reduced to bare essentials. This was crisis indeed and is a message of wise counsel to those who too easily stand by what they call “the confidence of faith”. If Judah had recognised the true situation and its danger earlier, the work might not have had to go so far down before recovery. Faith as well as repentance is tried by fire!

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33:1-12

The woe is addressed to Assyria which had had all its own way *so far*. Then from the ground of faith which recognised in a new way that God was in fact their refuge and strength (Ps. 46), the people prayed. But the prayer is not mere petition for deliverance, for it focuses now on the person of God, then on His sovereign power, or on His present providence active in righteousness. The tumult in verse 3 refers to God rising up to intervene on behalf of His own. It is an awe-inspiring thought! The second half of verse 5 was not yet fulfilled in their actual experience, but faith had already given substance to the hope, and confidence to the expectation. Look at the threefold “now” in v.10. It is as if the Lord had been waiting impatiently to do this mighty work for His own people, but had been restrained by their indolent confidence and prayerless worldliness. At last, the people knew the need and depth of the crisis. They cast themselves upon their God and were willing in the day of His power (Ps. 110:3 AV). But it was no easy victory, for years of unbelief had sapped their spiritual vitality and they found themselves looking to God and being confident, and then looking to the (v7) of Assyria and the whole complex of confusion and problem, and being dejected. This is the fight of faith; the fight to believe in face of mountains of desolating evidence. God has His perfect times of working (v.10) and will not move one moment before them. But when he moves, the swiftness of His working will startle all save those who have learned to trust their God in the dark.

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33:13-16

For nearly forty years Isaiah had been preaching the word of the Lord to a people who refused to take him seriously. He had called the people to repentance in recognition of their spiritual backsliding, but they would not receive his assessment of the situation. Now their sore experiences and miraculous deliverance had persuaded them of the truth and applicability of Isaiah’s message, “God with us”. They had seen it with their own eyes. They felt it in their souls. God was in fact among them and had been, with the searching of His eye and the sifting of His Spirit, all these years, and the thought frightened them. The careless sinners in Zion trembled because of the presence of the God with whom they had dealt so superficially. Their God, who is the Holy One of Israel, is indeed a consuming fire that tries every man’s work of what sort it is (1 Cor. 3: 11-15). This is not an exercise of God relegated to the final judgment, for the fires of God are constantly burning away the outer casing of life and revealing the true nature of what is there. The fires of God’s judgment are seen in the crumbling fabric of society. But when the God of holy fire visits His own church, who shall stand? The answer in verse 15 echoes Psalm 15; Psalm 24:1-6 and Micah 6:8. To such a man the holiness of God is a strong tower of defence and a sure source of life.

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33:17-24

In conjunction with this passage we do well to read Psalm 126, although it refers to a different deliverance. Verse 17, from which many wonderful sermons have been preached on the theme of Heaven, has its primary application in reference to Hezekiah who could then cast aside his garments of sorrow and mourning and appear before his people in dignity of royal dress. “The land of far distances” spreading out before their eyes is open for them to travel and to enjoy. What a difference there is between life in the liberating fellowship of the nearness of God, and that life, Christian though it be, which is hemmed in and straitened because our sins have

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grieved away the God of life and love from our midst. Jerusalem is counselled to ponder how so recently the enemy had snarled at the gates but now were swept clean away and out of sight. The city is at peace. But there is a richer blessing by far. The God of peace is there in the midst of them, and they know it. What is more, their demoralising and debilitating spiritual sickness has been healed and their iniquity is forgiven. The prodigal people are back in the Father's house, and they are glad. But have they learned their lesson? Time will tell. Consider well the words of Psalm 130 and "Thou knowest the way to bring me back, my fallen spirit to restore....the ruins of my soul repair, and make my heart a house of prayer" (Wesley RCH 409).

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34:1-17

Chapters 34-35 bring to an end the first half of Isaiah; chapters 36-39 which are a narrative of the Assyrian attack on Jerusalem form the bridge over the second half of the prophecy which is wonderfully Messianic and points forward clearly to the coming of Christ. In God's overthrow of the Assyrian enemy, Isaiah sees the sign of the downfall of all God's enemies. The scope of this chapter is universal, and Edom (5) is but an example of all anti-God empires. The language and message are like the Book of Revelation and the prophet Joel. This is the Day of the Lord and we need only note certain verses in detail. Verses 1-4 speak of universal judgment which seems to involve creation as well as nations. The executive sword of God's justice is tempered ("bathed" v.5) in heaven and is balanced and effective. Verse 8 speaks of the long delayed settling of accounts, and teaches us never to worry in a fretful way about the contemptuous opposition of worldlings and the arrogant rejection of all that is holy by profane unbelievers. "Their foot shall slide in due time," (Deut. 32: 29, 35; and the whole of Ps. 73). Take the Book of the Lord and learn the principles of His working. Then, when it comes to pass you will find that events confirm rather than contradict the Word of God (v.16). Destiny is at stake and an eternity is involved, and God has spoken the verdict (v.17). There comes a time when God has no more to say and impenitent men and nations who have sinned away their day of grace can only wait for the day of judgment. Whenever you are tempted to trifle with holy things recall how in the life of Herod there came a day when he was disposed to listen to Jesus and Jesus spoke not a single word to him (Lk.23:8-9). How shall *we* escape if we neglect so great salvation? We won't!

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35:1-10

Here is the other side of yesterday's grim story. Salvation, not judgment, is God's final word to His people. What hope is found in these words. That which has been made desolate and barren by man's sin shall blossom with the new life of God in answer to the rain of His blessing. Isaiah spoke in chapter 6 of the whole earth being filled with the glory of God and that is always true even though it does not yet appear. It is faith which gives substance to the unseen reality and persuades us to go on, for the simple but basic reason that our labour is not vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58). But that reference is at the end of the great resurrection chapter, and that is what we are dealing with here. The salvation of God is nothing less than life from the dead. And what salvation it is! It has the rejoicing of song; the dignity of Lebanon; the fruitfulness of Carmel; and the glory of the Lord shining around and within it. Can this be the portion of such failures as Judah? Yes, for our God restores the wasted years of the locusts of sin and unbelief (Joel 2:24). Who knew this better than Isaiah, who taught King Hezekiah so that he was able to make the glorious statement in 2 Chron. 32: 7-8? This is salvation. If God be for us, who can be against us?

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35:1-10

We begin today at verse 5, where we see something of the extent of the saving work of God encompassing many that we, in our human assessment, would write off as hopeless cases beyond all help. But with God, nothing is impossible. And wherever He is at work the unmistakable evidences must become apparent. Consider the question asked by John the Baptist in Matt. 11: 2-6. Blessed are the servants of God, individuals and fellowships, who can thus point to the testimonials of mercy in the lives of men and women. However we reassure ourselves by faith in the calling of God and in the blessings of the past, and however we rest our hopes in the Word of God that cannot return to Him void, we must constantly look for the evidence of the blessing of

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the Lord in the land of the living, and if no such evidences of saving transformation are there, we must ask searching questions. Is the Lord's hand shortened that it can no longer save (Isa. 59: 1-2)? But God is always seeking to kindle hope (7) and hinting even at the dismissal of the demons that assail and torment lives. But what of our many fears of going wrong again and straying? God makes a high-road where the lions are banished and the company of the redeemed journey in fellowship with one another and with God Himself. Isaiah looks right to the end of the road and speaks of those who have been ransomed and released from bondage overtaking (obtaining) joy and gladness, which hope we have as an anchor of the soul both sure and steadfast. The next words of the prophet are really in chapter 40 – “Comfort ye *my people*,” says God. He is not ashamed to own us as His (Heb.11:16), even after all we have failed to be and do. This is indeed salvation.

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36:1-10

Chapters 36-39, which record the circumstances of the advance of the Assyrian armies through Judah to the gates of Jerusalem, should be read in conjunction with 2 Kings 18: 3–20:19 and 2 Chron. 29-32. Some say that the repetition of details in the story suggests two separate Assyrian advances, separated by as much as ten years, or a single campaign with two distinct phases. Our concern is not primarily with the details of history but with the spiritual lessons to be learned from the experiences of the people of God. We can see very clearly the techniques constantly being used by Satan against those who name the name of God, especially when they are at a low ebb because of their sins. All along, Isaiah had prophesied this would happen and he was not believed. The people thought him too solemn and inclined to pessimism, but his words came to pass. This can have given him no carnal satisfaction but he must have waited anxiously to see if the people would awaken to God at last. The prophet does not speak until chapter 37: 6, and in the bustle and panic of Jerusalem he seems at first to have been so quiet he was forgotten. God's word had been spoken over a long period but had not been received in faith. Now the words of Satan assail the ears of the people through the lips of the Rabshakeh, the political officer attached to the Assyrian army commanded by the Tartan or commander-in-chief. This was a critical confrontation and brilliant psychological warfare, not least because the enemy stood by the viaduct carrying the strategic water supply for the city. We confine our comment to a reminder of the “well laid stratagems of the Devil.” (Eph. 6:11).

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36:11-22

The devil is no fool. He prepares his ammunition well before engaging in battle and uses it with the help of psychological techniques such as blustering arrogance and contemptuous denigration. But with what subtlety he campaigns! Judah's official spokesmen are on the battlements, as are the people who are commanded not to speak a word (21). The attack begins against the person of the King (4), slandering his basic leadership, and, of course, Isaiah had spoken similar words against the king's alliances with Egypt! But there was this difference: Isaiah spoke to heal whereas the Devil's man speaks to destroy and to gloat over his victim's discomfiture. The attack goes on with reference to Hezekiah's spiritual policy (7), possibly a reference to 2 Kings 18:4. The suggestion is being made that the king's spiritual leadership has been unbalanced and has led to the displeasure of God. Note how much this accuser knows about the details of Judah's life. He has made it his business to find out! Again, of course, the many defects of the king and the people open the way for the darts of the Devil to reach the tender conscience. But, in all this, there is no healing intention! In verses 8-9 Judah's military strength is mocked and in v.10 a spiritual truth is twisted very craftily. God had raised up Assyria but not in the way they thought. Their hellish cruelty was going to work blessing for Judah in the long run, and in the long run Assyria was to pay the price for its taunting attacks on God's holy work and people. You will always find that the Devil's agents attack when you are down. Call them liars and get up on your feet and defy them.

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36:11-22

The cowardice of unbelief is seen in verse 11, when the officials of Judah try to keep the truth from the people on the grounds that they would not understand. “Tell the people,” is safe policy, and if there is any faith at all it will rise with danger. In verse 14 Satanic determination goes on seeking to scorn and slander the spiritual

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leadership of the king, and in the process (15) trying to undermine the people's spiritual confidence in God. What a hellish weapon criticism is, so secretive in its working and so selective in its targets. Always there is an element of self in its policy (16), appealing to a desire for advancement, as in the temptation in Eden, and seeking to gather a company of deceived and discontented souls to an alternative loyalty. The persistence of the enemy is truly amazing. In verse 18 the accusation is open and pointed, to the effect that the king is leading the people astray to their hurt. The final word is a straightforward assertion of superiority. Perhaps the Rabshakeh was a little annoyed that the people were so slow to acknowledge what he felt was his undisputed right to leadership. This is the speech of Hell. It never changes. It always gives itself away. How do we deal with it in the intensity of its utterance? The answer is in verse 21. Wordy bickering will accomplish little or nothing when the heart, mind and spirit are inflamed. Let the temperature drop and opportunity will come for plain, factual speaking that will carry the unction of God's authority. In the interim period, leave it to God (1 Tim. 6:4; 1 Peter 3:9; 2 Peter 2:9-11; and Jude 8-9).

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37:1-8

The last chapter ended with a significant silence. There is a time for defiance as there is a time to rise up and speak in defence of a work and to contradict publicly the slanderous accusations against it. But there is a time to wait silently in faith, for this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith. Here the king sends his messengers to the one man in Judah who was manifestly in communion with God, and they request Isaiah to pray for them. We do not concentrate on the aloneness of Isaiah's praying although he must have felt it. It is a grief and quite significant that so few men gather for prayer and also that not a few Christians are beginning to confess how little they pray in private apart from routine devotions. But we emphasise that it is when the people of God resort to prayer that the deliverances of God are known. It had taken all this desperate crisis to bring Judah to an end of her plausible self-confidence and to turn her in new earnestness of seeking towards her God. Isaiah's word is tremendous. There was to be miraculous and victorious intervention. How long had he known this? Had it gradually gripped his spirit as he prayed in obscurity while these great events were working up to a climax? We cannot tell. All we know is that God's man was alive to God's purpose and power, and when the breakers of disaster were rolling in on Judah, this man was the anchor of the people. Isaiah's day of vindication had come

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37:9-20

The second attack was now launched and concentrated on the person of the king, assailing his mind with the accusation, "God is not with you in the way you imagine"(9-13). In the first attack the king strengthened and counselled the people to stand, but who now strengthened the king? Just think of the burden on Hezekiah's heart. The people trusted him in their desperate crisis (2 Chron. 32:7-8). If he was right, all was well; if he was wrong in his assessment and leadership, think of how many would suffer. Perhaps here we should consider the possible bond of fellowship that now existed between the king and the prophet. Be that as it may, Hezekiah was aware that the time was not convenient for long discussion to persuade people that God was about to work salvation, and he gave himself to prayer. All his earlier compromise and involvement seem to have been cast away and he saw the issue clearly. The conflict was not with men alone. It was a spiritual battle with those who stood against the living God (17). But Hezekiah's God is not hemmed in, He rules alone in all the kingdoms of the earth (16), and the king prayed not merely nor primarily for Judah's deliverance, but that the kingdoms of the earth might know the name of the lord (20). Lord, teach us to pray like this, and use whatever means necessary for our instruction! Compare the prayer in Acts 4:23-30. God can still shake the world. Do you believe He will?

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37:21-29

The king's strong cry to God is answered by the word of the prophet, and you cannot but be amazed by the extent to which Isaiah is incorporated into the deep purposes of God. Hezekiah wants to know what God's thoughts and intentions are towards Judah and he is given an astonishing answer. God speaks of His sinning

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people as the pure virgin of Zion (22), true and faithful. That is how God speaks of His own in the face of the enemy. God chastises His own, but He does not allow anyone else to malign them, for even the poorest, most imperfect believer is a treasure to God, whereas the arrogant unbeliever is an offence to Him. Let the worldling and backslider end their criticisms of the saints who are battling on against odds the others know nothing of. In verses 23-24, 28, God identifies Himself with His own people and charges Assyria with savage cruelty against *Him*. There are two ways of quoting, "In as much as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it to me." Trace the pride of Assyria in the repetition of "I" in verses 24-26. It seems so often that evil is carrying all before it and that the faithful can only submit and suffer, but it is not so. Read verse 29 and tremble. The Bible speaks much of the power of the mighty hand of God. It is time we believed in its reality.

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37:30-38

The passage is in three sections. God speaks a word of reassuring hope to His people for the future and confirms their expectation by declaring that He, their God, will bring this to pass (30-33). Then in most resolute terms we are shown the thorough overruling and control of evil by the God of our salvation (33-35). We see the essential weakness of the Devil and all his emissaries, both human and spirits. God says, "This far and no further;" (Job. 38: 11) and when God speaks in this way there is no possibility of thwarting His intentions. If we compare verse 35 with Psalm 121 we see something of God's pride in and care for that which is His own. The closing verses tell the facts of the dispersal of the Assyrians. But consider deeply the picture given in verses 30-31 of the restoration to blessing and fruitfulness of the penitent remnant. The rooting downward and bearing fruit upward is a gradual process, the two halves of which are dependent on each other. It takes time! This is the emphasis also in verse 30. During the Assyrian invasion agricultural life was impossible and in the year of restoration all that Judah could hope to harvest was the corn that had seeded itself at the previous harvest, a sparse crop. The next year, it being already too late for sowing grain, harvest would again be sparse, there being nothing but the wild corn to gather. But the third year, after ploughing, sowing and waiting, there would be a full crop to gather. There is no easy way back to blessing and fruitfulness after the barrenness of backsliding. It takes time for the soil of the soul to be ploughed again, weeded and fertilised. But in the mercy of God, in time, there will be fruit again.

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38:1-3

Can we not link our thought with Him who said, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone," (John 12:23-25)? When God speaks to us as He did to Hezekiah, it is only the Cross of Jesus Christ that can bring us hope, and only faith in His atoning death for sinners that can enable us to die safely. Hezekiah the king was brought face to face with death, and the prophet had to confirm to him that it was not God's will that he should be healed. "Set your house in order." He had been a good king, as Scripture testifies, and in spite of all his blunders he had done that which was right in the sight of the Lord. But he grieved sorely when he thought the end was near and he wept before the Lord. In these days there was spiritual revival and reformation begun in Judah and it needed to be confirmed to face the future. Already a new power was rising in Babylon. And its threat had to be faced. So far, no heir was born to the king and a strong ruler with strong succession was needed to guide the nation. So we see in the king's prayer a sense of responsibility as well as a selfish desire for longer life. Why then this crisis of death? A reading of 2 Chron. 32:22-31 will help. We will see more of its significance in chapter 39 of Isaiah. There was still a spiritual work to be done in the king's last days and it had to be done, *not* in the nation, *nor* in the work of God, but in the king himself. There are deep lessons in chapters 38- 39.

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38:4-8

Right through the Scripture record we are told of "signs" from God given for specific purposes. We have one such sign given to Hezekiah to confirm that God had granted him a reprieve from death for a strictly limited season. From 2 Kings 20: 8-12 it is clear Hezekiah was given a choice of signs, whether the sun should go forward or backward, and the story of the whole incident travelled as far as Babylon. In 2 Chron. 32:31 we are

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told that this wonder concerning the sun's rays was not actually seen in any place other than Judah. Do we try to "explain" the miracle? G.A. Smith in his commentary says there is no need to think of the earth being thrown back on its axis (Babylon would have known of that and seen the sign) but rather to think of atmospheric disturbance resulting in refraction, or deflection of the sun's rays from their natural course. This was no fortuitous happening but came in answer to the prophet's prayer. The sundial is perhaps better thought of as a series of steps on which the sun cast a shadow and marked out the hours of the day. This the king would see through the window as he lay in bed, and the lengthening shadow would be like the finger of death coming nearer and nearer. You see why he asked that the sun should go back rather than forward. Then, when he saw the finger of shadow receding he knew, in this sign from God, that he had been reprieved from death. This is the story of a man who heard the voice of God as he looked into the face of death. Time would tell how deeply the lesson was received and learned.

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38:9-22

This is like an Easter Day and we find Hezekiah singing the song of a man who feels he has been delivered from the jaws of the grave and raised from the dead to a new dispensation of life and hope. His heart thrills to the glory of the message of pardon and peace (v.17) and rejoices in a new start. He looks back over his days and senses the rebuke of his God as he speaks of the residue of his years being cut off. The same thought of an unfinished task is present in v.12, where he speaks of being like a piece of cloth cut off from the loom before the pattern is completed. The thought is of a man once used by God now being removed from office or laid aside as of no further use, a "castaway" (1 Cor. 9:24-27). Have you ever felt you were on the brink of losing your future? When God retrieved you, how long did your solemn spiritual seriousness and devotion last? Love lifted Hezekiah out of death itself and he vowed (v.15) that he had learned his lesson and that the rest of his days he would live a life marked by a sense of eternity. But it did not last, as we shall see in the next chapter. "The hardest duty of life is to remain true to our psalms of deliverance, as it is certainly life's greatest temptation to fall away from the sanctity of sorrow." (G.A. Smith)

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39:1-8

When you see the king in his effusive welcome of the "important" men from Babylon, and consider his childish display of his own magnificence you realise that this man is preoccupied with making an impression on men. You cannot help asking what has happened to his spiritual awakening that we read of yesterday! Has he forgotten how low he was, how God relented and took him back to give him another chance of holy service, how he vowed to walk with the dignity and caution of a man living for eternity (38:15)? We need to read 1 Cor. 10:1-12, and how often we *do* need to read it, lest the lessons of gracious providence be forgotten. Consider also Heb. 3:7-15, where it speaks of Christian men provoking God, that is, putting God to the test to see how much they could get off with without being smitten in rebuke! How terrible! And what a shame that we should adopt this policy not once, but many times in our lives. We forget so very, very soon, and our gratitude to God, as to others, evaporates like the morning dew. When we get proud of our attainments, it is a good thing to recall how many helped us to get to where we are. It should make us humble. "My God, suffer me not to forget my bonds and bitterness. In my hours of wealth and ease, health and peace, by the memory of Thy judgments, deliver me good Lord." Amen!

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39:1-8

We must think of the enemy of souls waiting to have opportunity against Hezekiah and finding it in the shallow pride that rejoices in the favour of men. There is a wealth of exposure in verse 3 in the words, "to *me*, from *Babylon*." Hezekiah was conscious of being courted by the up-and-coming empire. There is also a conscious slighting of the prophet here, as if the king rather resented the interference of the man of God now that there was no immediate spiritual crisis. It is one thing to have a praying minister when you face death, but you don't want him interfering in the pleasurable course of your life! Isaiah speaks a solemn word of disaster, only to be met with a pious phrase, "the word of the Lord is good."(8) It seems to be a word of resignation, but is rather a

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bored reaction to the whole thing for, says Hezekiah, that will be after my time. Can this be the same man who prayed in chapter 38? It is a story confirmed again and again from every minister's pastoral experience. In the fifteen years granted to Hezekiah, this man lost the spiritual gains of his whole life. What is more, in these fifteen years a son and heir was born to the king. His name was Manasseh, and he became such a scourge to the nation that it would have been better for all concerned if Hezekiah had kept his vows and walked the remainder of his days with a sense of eternity guiding and controlling his steps. That was how Isaiah lived.

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40:1-2

Those who wish to study the scholastic questions concerning the unity and authorship of this prophecy are directed to the summaries given in the relevant sections of the IVP Commentary and the IVP Dictionary. Apart from these questions, in order to understand the messages of Isaiah now before us, we need to sketch the historical background. The prophet's public ministry seems to have ended in the reign of Hezekiah (1:1; 39:1-8). The next king, Manasseh, was evil and brought national judgment nearer, although his late repentance delayed the final fall of Judah (2 Chron. 33:1-13). The succeeding king, Amon, was also evil and lasted two years.

He was followed on the throne by Josiah, in whose reign there was a measure of revival and reformation which again delayed the final collapse of the nation (2 Chron. 34). The revival was not deep enough to save the nation, and the following kings, one after the other, did evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Chron. 36:1-14 and 2 Kings 23:31 - 24:21), each one bringing the day of collapse nearer and nearer. When the fall came, it was made clear that it was a direct result of spiritual folly, and had to be understood as the judgment of God (2 Chron. 36:15-21). The next verses of the Chronicler, who is the spiritual commentator on the history of the nation, speak of the rising of Cyrus, King of Persia, after the seventy years of captivity, and it is this Cyrus who features so significantly in the second half of Isaiah. When Cyrus was being raised up by God to be the instrument of bringing the Jews back to their own land, the word of the Lord flamed into relevant, dynamic significance: "Comfort ye my people" for there is new hope.

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40:1-2

Throughout the prophecy of Isaiah we see empires rising to power and falling again, but always being pictured as the instruments of the Holy One of Israel to bring His purposes to pass. Assyria, that we read of in Isa. 36-39 as the scourge of Judah, was put to flight and eventually fell to the rising power of Babylon, who also carried the Jews into captivity, leaving Jerusalem a ruined testimony to the failure and sin of the people of God. In due season the Persian empire rose to power and swallowed up Babylon and the strong discipline of captivity, having done its sanctifying work, the Jews were allowed to return to their land and rebuild the ruined city, as is recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah. In the outworking of this massive purpose of God it is suggested that Isaiah, after the death of Hezekiah, was not able to exercise a public ministry because of the intensity of the evil that was rampant in the nation. But he saw the situation clearly, not only in terms of inevitable judgment on the nation's sins, but also in terms of the fruit that would emerge from the season of judgment. This man who had seen the Lord high and lifted up on His throne (Chap. 6) knew that the ark of God's holy purposes could not be submerged in the sea of iniquity, and therefore he looked beyond the immediate situation far into the future. He spoke messages of hope with an interpretation of God's ways, which were given to his disciples and written down. When the time came these words of Isaiah flamed into life and the people heard again the Word of the God of their salvation speaking to their hearts. Between the death of Isaiah during Manasseh's reign and the return of the Jews from exile at the time of Cyrus, God did not leave His people without a prophet. Jeremiah, whose ministry began in Josiah's reign, spoke the same message as Isaiah (Jer. 25:8-14 and 29:10-14). Ezekiel seems to have ministered both in Jerusalem and in Babylon and Daniel's ministry was in Babylon. God does not leave Himself without a witness. He is always speaking, if we have ears to hear.

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40:1-2

Isaiah's word bursts into the experience of the captive people with a peal of hope that is almost too good to be true (Ps. 126). But there has been preparation for it. In 1:27 Isaiah spelled out the message that God's strong

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ways were for the blessing and deliverance of His people and the consequent advancing of His purposes. But think of what their experience had been these fifty to seventy years in captivity. They had been taken away from their places of worship; everything that they loved had been swept into chaos by the invaders. There was every evidence to believe that God had finally cast them off from being His people, and they saw now that He had every justification for so doing. Years had gone past in which their regret and repentance had brought no visible sign of God's intervention on their behalf. Now, God was speaking and He was ready and eager to move forward into a new era of fruitful service, but He found the hearts of His own people slow and sluggish. His word took on a note of urgency and insistence, but it was the voice of love. It seems the voice of God was urging the prophets to speak to the people, or the people to speak to each other in mutual encouragement, so that they might grasp in a new way that God was with them to bless and use them. But what of all their failures and the past years of spiritual dereliction? They could scarcely believe God would take them back again! But He spoke home to their hearts and addressed them as "*my* people." They were not disowned. What grace! They had served their time (warfare accomplished); their iniquity was paid off (pardoned); sufficiently expiated (received double) were all their sins; and the hand of the Lord had seen to it. To look back over painful days and realise you have been in the hand of the Lord is indeed comfort which encourages.

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40:3-5

Heart reconciliation between God and His people must become public in obedience. This is the message taken up by John the Baptist when he challenged the crowds of religiously excited people saying, "Bring forth fruits to prove your repentance!" God has come back amongst His purified people, and if this secret act of grace is responded to, there will be a broad road levelled through the mountainous terrain of the world, along which the revived people of God will walk with the message of salvation. There is a definite suggestion here of God going out before His people. He is on the move and the challenge is, "Who will go?" (6:8) But where will He lead this captive people who have been so long spiritually moribund? He will lead them home to where they belong; to hope that is even now beginning to kindle in their spirits; and to service greater and more glorious than that which they knew before the days of their backsliding. God is always moving forward and His purposes are always enlarging. But do we really enjoy restoration such as the prophet describes? Yes! This is the astonishing grace of God, but it does not hide the scars of sin. We heard quoted recently a poem which spoke of the bird whose wing had been broken never being able to fly quite so high again. We need to compare the temporary pleasures of worldly sin with the price to be paid in hindrance to service. Could any sin be worth losing the companionship of this God of grace and purpose?

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40:6-8

Despair inspired by the Devil always makes it difficult to believe the gracious intentions of God. The barren years had taken their toll on the people of God and the spirit of faith was weak and debilitated. How could all this glorious blessing happen to them? Look at the circumstances of the situation. Numbers were paltry compared to the high days of Israel's blessing. Where were the men of stature and significance to take the lead and make the world take notice? How could such an unpromising situation herald a mighty revival? God confirms these protestations of human insufficiency, incapacity and hopelessness. There is no hope in man or anything man can do! No man can start a revival. No man can do the work of God. But over against this there stands the dynamic and operative word of the Lord, and our hope must be in His word alone. Consider well the great passage in Ezek. 37:1-10, where the word of God and the Spirit of God transform a valley of death into life. So it is with us. God has spoken and we have proved in the past that His word is with power. Therefore at His word we move forward, by His word we live, and in His word we prove the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith.

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40:9-11

This song of good tidings, so full of thrill to the heart, is in picturesque language and recalls the Jewish custom of the choirs of women folk going out from the gates of the city to meet the warriors returning from victory (Ex.

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15:1-6, 17-21; 1 Sam. 18:6-7). It is a song which published a victory accomplished (Ps. 68:1-11). But what kind of God are the people called to behold? He is the omnipotent warrior and the tender shepherd. The Great King is also the Good Shepherd and He leads His people home. Compare this with the merciless rigour of the march to slavery. That was the yoke of relentless and heartless power. The yoke of the God of salvation is easy and light and ministers rest (Matt. 11:28-30). Yesterday we spoke of the faith that looks in confidence to the Word of God, when all else seems hopeless. Now the people are on the march, and with the way long and costly before them they might well become disheartened. To counter this, they are shown the Good Shepherd, who knows His sheep by name and who limits the demand to their capacities. The truth is that when weariness overtakes them, the right arm of God's power will lift them and carry them close to His heart until, by grace, their energy is renewed. What a God!

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40:12-26

The passage from 40:12-41:29 is really a unity, declaring throughout its different parts the omnipotence of God.

We have been commanded to behold our God and this is the heart of Isaiah's message, for if we once grasp how big our God really is, all our thinking and feeling will be transformed. Think of Horatius Bonar's great hymn, "Not what I am, O Lord, but what Thou art! That, that alone can be my soul's true rest." What is God? Let the Shorter Catechism answer: "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." He is the self-sufficient, all-wise, powerful Creator God (v 12-17) in whose presence all human wisdom and power pale into insignificance. God does not need the poor devices of men to help Him to accomplish His purposes, although He delights to call the faithful to serve Him. Far less does God need the craft and skill of man to reinterpret Him to an unbelieving generation. Such a human device usually ends up in recreating and refashioning "God" into something quite different from what He is in His sovereign grace and purpose. Verses 18-25 are biting and scornful, and are addressed to the Jews who have succumbed to the "spirit of the age" through the enticements of Babylon. An adjustable God is no rock of salvation; neither is a God made in our own image a refuge in need. We must have the proper God, and He is the One revealed to us in the Scriptures where He speaks so that men may know Him. It is here that "aids to devotion", of whatever art form they may be, are a possible danger, for they emerge from the creative imagination of man, and if that imagination is not governed and purified by the Word of God, it results in the "aid" becoming more important than the God whose worship it is supposed to serve. Puritanism may be stern but it is safe.

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40:27-31

Doubt and unbelief are as grievous to the heart of God as idolatry, for they generate unwillingness and disobedience. In the end unbelief is idolatry, for it makes "self", with its moods and feelings, the ground of life. Look up, says God in verse 26, and consider the multitude of stars, each called by name and set in its place by God. This same God looks down on the multitudes of men and women and each of them is known to Him. Why then say that your ways are hid from God? It cannot be. He sees, He knows, He understands and He orders everything concerning you. Above all the strong crying and tears of human experience, there reigns the unchanging God of salvation. It is this God, who never wearies of His people and whose energies never fail, who keeps their going out and coming in (Ps. 121). God gives strength to the weary and lavishes His power upon the weak, so that they are able to defy the pressures of their situation and, with their eyes upon their God, they refuse to sink in the sea of difficulty. God quickens their hope and they rise in answer to His call with eagerness, and run, mustering their reserves and setting their sights on the target of this great crusade of restoration. Because they now have the capacity to discern the glory of the ordinary, they set themselves for the long trek over the desert back to Jerusalem and, believing that God is truly their God and His purposes are sure, they walk and do not faint. Jesus said, "He that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved" (Matt. 24:12-13).

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41:1-7

In chapter 40 Israel is called on to behold her God. With world politics in a state of flux so that all the nations are trembling as they consider possibilities and developments, the people of God are told that all the crossing tides of human affairs are safely ordered in the hand of their God. The slow developments and the meteoric transformations alike belong to God alone. But now the nations are called to behold what is happening around them and amongst them. What is the explanation of world affairs? Listen to the daily news bulletins and the prophesyings of the politicians. Is this simply the operating of the principle of the balancing of power between nations? Is it simply the outworking of political and economic theories? Is all fortuitous, sheer chance? NO! This is the work of God, the first and the last, from beginning to end. It is no vain hope or wistful longing when we pray, "Thy will be done"; it is a declaration of unchallengeable fact. God's will is done, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end! Hallelujah! To be persuaded of this fact, even when you cannot at any given stage fathom what God is actually doing or why His methods are so bafflingly obscure, gives both power and courage to faith. But to the unbelieving it has a different result. In verses 5-7 we see the people afraid but ignoring the facts, bolstering up their courage and polishing their gods. Being afraid to face the truth, they pretend it is not there at all. They just don't think about it. You either ignore God, or take Him seriously, or fabricate a new "god" more to your liking. You judge yourself and the verdict stands.

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41:8-20

What a picture is here of God who is the protector, provider and power of His own people and work. There is scarcely any need for comment. Underline the personal pronoun "I" through the passage and see what God thinks of you and plans for you. In verse 8 "chosen" speaks volumes concerning sovereign grace. In verse 9 "took" could read "grasped" and speaks of security. God is a God who speaks to His people and tells them that the discipline of captivity had been necessary, but that does not mean they are rejected (9). The last phrase in verse 10 speaking of God's right hand means that God will see through to the end the gracious purpose of His will concerning them. In verses 13, 14 God speaks wonderfully to those who are cast down by a sense of unworthiness, and disheartened by their numerical ("little") weakness. Both these attitudes are grounded in fact. We are worthless worms deserving nothing of God, and we are pitifully weak statistically in terms of personnel and talent. But God's work never is dependent on men, nor is it done by the gifts of men. God alone is the worker and He is right there in the midst. When shall we learn the truth? GOD IS WITH US! That is His name and His heart is towards His people to bless them and make them a blessing to all others.

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41:21-29

There are many voices in the world deriding the message of the God of salvation and scorning it as puerile and irrelevant. They must be challenged on the basis of verses 21-24 to state their cases in plain terms, to explain history if they can, to do or say something clear and constructive, and to give people a word to live by, a word which can be tested by the facts of experience. When much of human declamation is sifted, it is seen that there is no word of explanation or hope. There is nothing, and people are left the helpless victims of blind fate. Little wonder human life is degenerating to the level of animal appetites. God is the God of history, and only God can interpret it and make it plain so that you know what is happening. Scan all the philosophies of the humanists who banish God from His world and deny His existence. Is there a word of life there? There is none (26). They and their works are vanity and irrelevance (29). When the new and significant power (Cyrus, in this case) rises on the stage of history and people cry, "What does this mean?" the answer is quite clear. It is God at work, and if you would understand His ways, ponder carefully the life and experience of the people redeemed by His power (27). In spite of all their glaring defects and repeated failures, God is to be found among His people and that is a startling message for believers and unbelievers alike, for God is in earnest and is determined to go on.

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42:1-7

We do well to summarise our theme. In the story of the return of the Jews from Babylon we see the glorious purposes of God becoming evident in and through the movements of world politics. We are told to behold our God (40:9) and over against Him the nations of unbelieving idolaters who are worse than nothing, however much they boast in their confidence (41:24). It is the Lord Himself who is dynamically energising the affairs of men and nations (41:4), and when we read of God saying, "I will", fifteen times in ch. 41:10-20, we become aware we are dealing with power. Now, power is frightening and becomes a corrupting thing when in the possession of men. But here we have a word picture of the means by which God's power operates amongst men, and we begin to see that we must never confuse noise with power, or gentleness with weakness. We see the Servant of the Lord. If we look at 41:8; 44:1; 45:4 it seems that Israel is the servant. In 45:1 it is Cyrus who is the anointed servant. If the truth be told, God has many servants who are raised and fashioned to do His will. Israel, the righteous remnant, Cyrus, Isaiah, and the Devil Himself are all the servants of the Lord. A servant is one who is at the disposal of another to do his will and represent his interests. However we apply the picture of the servant, in all his submission and suffering, there is only one person who fits the description fully. Isaiah speaks of Christ. Compare Matt. 12:15-21 and Luke 4:16-21.

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42:1-7

The Servant is portrayed as being neither loud and noisy nor demonstrative. He is God's servant and then by being so He is the servant of men. He is seen as the teacher of the law, the liberator of the captives and the compassionate healer of the broken. We cannot help thinking of Him who girded Himself with a towel. How does our service compare with His? In verse 1 the servant is chosen, blessed and privileged and is a delight to the heart of God. We do not err in applying this to Israel, then to the Remnant, then to Messiah, and then to Messiah's ransomed people, whether individuals or fellowships. Link this with 1 Peter 2:9-12 and you see the privilege of service for a people whose survival is miraculous, and who, having been developed by discipline, now emerge to be a testimony to God and an instrument of His power. Consider also Heb. 5:5-9. When we feel service is too costly for too little visible results, consider Jesus, lest we be weary and faint in our minds. This Servant, clothed with the Spirit of God, has nothing brash or hysterical about Him. He is held by the mighty hand of God's power and His work is to teach (4) and to bring life and liberty to needy people (7). The infinite gentleness of God, that we see so clearly in Jesus' dealings with the broken, is pictured in verse 3. The crushed reeds and the flickering wicks, which on the face of it are so useless and past repair, He will not cast off. This is how He has dealt with us; go and do thou likewise (Lk.10:330-37).

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42:8-17

Having spoken of the commissioning of the servant, the prophet now speaks of God who has just heralded a new thing. This evokes a new song in praise of God and speaks of Him in intensely human terms. Although He is the great God who speaks and it is done, His work is spoken of in terms of the unshareable work of travail by which a new life is born. It is comparatively easy to think of God as a man of war leading His armies to victory in battle, but here we are compelled to think of the lonely agony and yearning effort of love out of which salvation comes. God is always a God who comes down to save His people, and in so doing "in all their affliction He is afflicted." (Isa. 63:9AV) Love always costs a great price as it strives for the loyalty and blessing of the loved one, bearing and forbearing with weakness, stubbornness and wilful rebellion. Love always travails for new birth and growth in grace (Gal. 4:19). The cry of God here is the anguish of love that bestirs itself to deliver the loved ones from sin and bring them into new life, hope and service. God takes our sins into His tender heart and we take God into our sins. God help us!

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42:18-25

These last verses are difficult and seem to refer to Israel as the servant who is not what he should be, both blind and captive because of sins. God seems to complain that His people, who should be the first to see His workings

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and hear the voice of His grace, are more blind and deaf and irresponsive than any others. This is a very serious condition. They are the Lord's servants, but insensitive to His near approach. They desire His quickening power, but when His word is spoken amongst them they seem indifferent and even unwilling to bestir themselves. They are like Jerusalem in Jesus' day, knowing not the time of their visitation. Why should this be so? Is it the long-lasting legacy of their turning aside from the path of high and holy service, or the result of their tampering with forbidden things both moral and spiritual? Let there be no doubt about this. Sin leaves the spirit dull and jaded to the extent that even the glorious messages from the lips of the Lord Himself fail to produce a living response of faith. The descriptions in v.22 are vivid and tell of people whose lives are in a mess. If that is a picture of your spiritual life then take the word of God to heart.

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43:1-7

If this chapter does not thrill the heart, nothing will. In the economy of God the time has come for a significant move forward, and He wants His people to know and feel not only that His word is spoken to them, but that His heart is amongst them. Israel had been disgraced, led captive and demoralised by her sins. God had not only permitted this collapse of what we can rightly call His people or His church, but He organised it and waited until the discipline of failure had worked a new spirit of repentance and desire. Now, to that people who had so signally failed, God speaks these words of reassurance to fan the fires of rekindled hope. This people who had blundered so much and turned aside so far from their high and holy calling had to be persuaded, almost in spite of themselves, that they were not cast off. You are mine, says God, and I am your God. This people, made, redeemed and fashioned over long years of preparation, was being named with the name of God and claimed proudly as His personal possession. He was not ashamed to be called their God. We can grasp that statement from Heb. 11:16 in relation to the heroes of faith in whose lives faith worked obedience. But can it be true of those who have been demonstrated as failures? God says it here! The people had no doubts about God's intentions and God's capacities. What they doubted was their own spiritual capacity, now debilitated by years of wrong. God says, "Fear not," for in every situation of demand, He would be there to hold, to help and to bring them through. What a God!

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43:8-13

In spite of all their past defects and present sense of inferiority, God's people are still His chosen servants. They may be the weak things of the world and may be learning increasingly their natural weakness, but they are still the vessels and channels of the mighty power of God. Link the first half of v.4 with the first half of v.10 and read it, "Because you are precious in my eyes, and honoured, and I love you, you are my witnesses." There is no mention of the people's worthiness (Deut. 7:6-8; 9:1-6) for it does not exist. This is the choice and persistence of sovereign grace. I will work, says God, and who will hinder or turn it back (13)? If God's gracious purpose reigns supreme, why is He a stranger in the land? Does not v.12 (which hints at strange gods being tolerated) indicate the answer? God does not share with other gods! Now link v.8 with ch. 42:18-20, where Israel, who should have been the first to respond to God, is spoken of as blind. Now, they see. They may be broken down but they have capacity by the grace of God to emerge in their true spiritual function as His witnesses, and their witness will be by the testimony of their lives to the gracious, redeeming work of God who saved them out of all their distresses. Consider very deeply Ezek. 36:23 (especially AV).

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43:14-21

What a throb of grace and power is found in these verses as God speaks of what He is going to do: a work which He has in fact begun to do in the upturning of the political power of Babylon. Now He appeals to His people not to be hindered by continually harking back to the past, because anything they knew then of God's grace and power will pale into insignificance compared with what He is going to do in the future. The arm of His power is going to carve a way through what may seem to be an impossible situation and the whole attitude of His people must be in terms of "from now onward". We look back to the mighty acts of God, as the Psalmist does in Psalm 77, only so that we may look forward to the greater works that are yet to come. Let us go on with

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God. Press toward the mark for the prize, for the best is yet to be. Our thoughts of God are too small and our sanctified imagination needs to be quickened in terms of 1 Cor. 2:9. But we must not have preconceived ideas as to how this new work of God will manifest itself nor by what human processes it will move towards its fulfilment. For the Jews here spoken to, it meant the rigour, discipline and conflict of the times of Ezra and Nehemiah, as they rebuilt the holy city and the temple in the face of opposition at every step. Does such a picture deter you? Your eyes must be upon God, not upon circumstances.

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43:22-28

God is calling to His people, as He has in fact been doing all through their experiences, but they have not called upon Him. Whether the verses refer to the past, revealing the source of all their bitter experience, or to the present, challenging their listless, unbelieving attitude, or to the future, as predicting their recurrent ingratitude and unfaithfulness to God, the message is clear. It speaks of the prayerlessness, the superficiality and spiritual adultery of the people of God. They got tired of One they considered to be a dull, serious God. But God complains that *they* have wearied Him, because all they have brought into His presence have been their sins. Taking verse 24b as it stands in the A.V., there is a suggestion that we yoke God to our lives when we go sinning, and drag Him into that which is altogether anathema to Him. This is true of our religious sins as well as our fleshly ones. If, as we believe, the emphasis here is on prayerlessness (22), then God is challenging His people with offering Him service of certain kinds as an alternative to prayer. But this is unacceptable. Justify yourselves, He seems to say in v.26, and lay your unwillingness to call upon God alongside the free grace that forgives all your sins (25). Can spiritual reluctance ever be justified?

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44:1-8

Yesterday's reading closed with two verses that spoke of God's rebuke of His sinful people in their being carried into exile. The burden of His heart is to persuade them that mere adjustments of procedure and practice of worship will not rectify the situation. The only way to revival is to lay aside their sins and answer with fresh obedience the call of their God. To this end God gives yet another mighty encouragement in today's passage. In v.2 Jacob (and what history is in that name) is called Jeshurun, which name literally means "the upright one". Can God really be referring to His broken-down disheartened people in that name? Yes. God is always seeking to lift up the heads of His people (Ps. 3:3) and to restore them to dignity. The revival blessing spoken of here is seen to be the sovereign work of God, owing nothing at all to man or his ingenuity, and its manifestation seems to be more in the form of one-by-one conversions rather than in a mass movement of stereotyped experience (5). Some see in v.5 a progress in the work of conversion. First a man declares himself to belong to God; then he begins to call upon God, that is to pray; then he writes on his hand the ownership mark of God, so that his identity as one of God's people is unmistakable wherever he goes; and lastly he takes the name of Israel, as we would take the name of Christ. However we regard conversion and by whatever path it becomes a person's experience, we are left in no doubt that the gracious work of regeneration, by which a sinner is raised from the dead to newness of life, is the work of God alone by His Holy Spirit. Real conversions have an unmistakable mark of certainty about them!

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44:9-20

The passage speaks of idolatry and scorns those who make their own gods. If there be a mighty God of salvation, as Israel's God has proved Himself to be, then it is sheerest folly to give the mind, heart and life to follow gods that are good for nothing. The last phrase of verse 10 should read, "that is good for nothing." The satire is biting. In verses 14-17 there is the picture of a man hewing down a tree and using some of the wood to cook with, some to burn for household warmth, and *with what is left* he makes a god. We do not as a rule carve little gods of wood nowadays, although we wear crosses and lucky charms to which we get attached to a fantastic degree. We do not bow down to idols of stone and wood, although a church building and a certain seat in it come to be far more important than the God we are supposed to be worshipping there. We do not sacrifice our children to the fire god, but we make the young and our activities among them a substitute for

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and an escape from the worship of the living God who speaks His word so clearly in Holy Scripture. But gods of our own making are of no use in the crises of life. We have indulged in the deliberate policy of self-deception in matters of religion: God has spoken clearly but we have chosen not to hear. That is dangerous as well as foolish. When God is making Himself known there is no excuse for those who choose to remain in darkness.

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44:21-28

The first part of the passage, comprising verses 21-23, is a call from God to return to Him from all that has fascinated you and allured you away from Him and from the glory of His salvation, in which alone there is found forgiveness. Do not be misled by the wording of verse 22 into thinking that God has simply put a thick cloud between you and your sins, or between your sins and His face. That would mean that at any time He could produce them again to confront you. That is not the forgiveness of God. The picture is of even thick dark clouds being dispersed by the shining of the sun. The clouds of sin are gone, therefore return to me, says God. The second half of the passage introduces us to Cyrus, king of Persia, God's instrument in the deliverance of His people from captivity. This is really a song of praise to the God whose ways are past finding out. He frustrates evil, vindicates His servants and performs His will (25-26). Do not be shocked at God calling a heathen man His shepherd or king to do His pleasure (28). When God needs an empire of power among men He raises it up, and when that same empire begins to take glory to itself, He brings it down. It is as simple as that, and if, believing this truth, we begin to fear the Lord, then we are at the starting point of wisdom.

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45:1-8

God addresses Himself here to Cyrus whom He has raised to power in order to be the servant of God's people and purpose. Earlier references to Cyrus as God's chosen instrument are found in chapter 41:2, 25; 44:28; and beyond this chapter in 46:11 and 48:14-15. He is described as God's shepherd or king, or anointed, or Messiah, or Christ! His rising to power is explained only in the sovereignty of God, but in the history of human experience it must be linked with the prayers of the people of God, such as are found in Dan. 9. "The prayers of the saints are the decrees of God beginning to work." But the rise of Cyrus was viewed with considerable suspicion by the Jews in captivity in Babylon, for they had accepted their circumstances and adjusted to them. They saw no connection between the rise of this new power and the promises of the new thing God was going to do (43:19). Perhaps the more impulsive of them began to pray that God would not allow this new regime to grow strong, for it would upset the balance of power and disrupt the status quo which, though far from ideal, was at least tolerable. Secular history speaks of Cyrus as an admirable man, even a pious man, but there is no such commendation in Scripture. Secular history tells that Cyrus proclaimed himself a worshipper of Marduk and other Babylonian gods and attributed his military success to them. But here he is described completely from beginning to end as a man God raised up for a specific task.

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45:1-8

The first three verses tell how God promises that there will be no hindrances allowed to impede Cyrus in his march to world power. The beginning of verse 4 tells Cyrus never to forget that of himself he is nothing at all; he is the servant not only of God, but of God's people. This is a wide principle, for the present world order exists for the church, and not the other way round, as is so often proclaimed. When, in the fulness of the time, God's elect are all gathered and the Church is complete, the world as we now know it will no longer be required and will give way to a completely new order of existence. This will help some to envisage the territorial problem of finding place for all the people of all ages who have died in faith and will be "in heaven". Take verse 5 and apply the principle to your own life and ponder the wonderful mystery of God who watched over us in all our ways before we ever knew Him. In verse 7 we are not being given a solution to what we call "the problem of evil", but are being told that there is not a single situation in history, however we evaluate it, that is outwith the sovereign control of the living God of salvation. Right through the Bible, and here in Isaiah in particular, we are shown very clearly that suffering (in its widest sense) is both the consequence and the corrective of evil. The

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God we have to deal with is a real God, or as He has been described, "an interfering God." He is constantly invading the human situation and His purpose is salvation.

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45:9-10

This provides a great text for a sermon on those who profess the name of God but maintain an attitude which is at cross-purposes with God. Israel, even in captivity, was proud, and although their resentment was directed against the prophet for the kind of thing he was preaching about Cyrus, their real quarrel was with God. They did not like the way He was doing things. They did not like Cyrus being hailed as Messiah. They agreed that their plight was real and of long standing, but their pride could not swallow the idea of being delivered by the instrumentality of an outsider. Salvation had to arise from within their own favoured nation or by a direct, miraculous intervention. Cyrus was not one of themselves and they would fain forbid his actions (Mk. 9:38). It is tantamount to saying that because we have no spiritual power to meet the situation, we refuse to allow anyone else to have such power. It is saying that if God will not work through us, then He must not work. But then God can turn and challenge us as to our competence. What had Israel accomplished? They were in captivity. Even when God spoke of doing a new work, He could scarcely get their interest awakened. It was only when Cyrus' name came to the fore that the Jews reacted. To them it was more important to preserve the exclusive integrity of Jewry than to know and do God's will in the might of His power. But it is sore to have to be told that God must go to an outsider to do His work. We would not take kindly to someone who held neither our doctrinal nor our political position being hailed as a Messiah. But God's ways are not our ways and we must be careful lest we set ourselves against his emergent schemes.

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45:11-13

The two apparent commands in the AV rendering of verse 11 should actually be questions as in NIV. God is challenging His people and asking if they dare to question Him or presume to give Him orders as to the methods of His working. Let God be God! This does not mean we are never to have holy converse or discussion with God. He is only too pleased to have His children come to Him to lay their cares and concern before Him. He wants us to seek guidance, enlightenment and instruction. That is why He has provided, amongst other things, prophets and teachers to spell out His word to the people. But a great deal depends on the spirit in which we ask God concerning the affairs of life and experience. Remember how Peter *took* Jesus (a very strong word in the original). and rebuked Him for speaking about the necessity of the Cross. Peter was doing Satanic work that day. God knows best how to do His own work, and a spirit of humble submission is the most hopeful basis for our beginning to understand His ways with us and with the work to which we are called by His grace. This is not counsel to fly off after every bright or extravagant idea that is suggested to alleviate the dull routine of Christian work. Nor is it permissive of that dull, boring attitude that is content to jog along in progressive spiritual stagnation, assuming that God will not do anything anyhow. It is a call to wait upon the Lord and be alive to every whisper of His will.

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45:14-17

It will help us to get the true feeling of these chapters if we try to recall how often there occurs the phrase, "this is what the Lord says." In this chapter alone it comes in verses 1, 11, 14 and 18 and brings to mind such hymns as "Onward march all conquering Jesus" and "Glory, glory, Hallelujah, our God is marching on." The remnant of faith needs to be reminded often that they are not the broken down remains of a forgotten army but part of the mighty host of the living God. We, in our situation, forget this because we are so tied in our thinking to the idea of power always being demonstrative. But God hides Himself (cf. Habakkuk 3:1-6). Did not Jesus confirm that the kingdom does not come with outward show (Lk. 17:20-21)? Who would have thought at the Cross that they were viewing a triumph of God over every power of evil? At the Resurrection the great event took place so quietly and unexpectedly that even the disciples found it hard to believe. Who would think that in little companies of faithful believers gathered for worship or prayer the living God of eternity in all His glory is there in the midst? But it is true. God is present but hidden everywhere, especially amongst His own people, and that

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is why they shall never be confounded. Yes, our God is indeed marching on and He leads His people along in His triumphal procession (2 Cor.2:14). It may not yet appear to be so, but in due time every eye shall see it.

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45:18-25

This chapter, which is set in the context of the rise of Cyrus to power, and which is understood in relation to his sweeping military conquests, has nevertheless as its essential message not Cyrus but God. The message is one with the New Testament declaring that "there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved," (Acts 4:12). Again in verse 22 we have the call, "Turn unto me," and we find ourselves thinking of Him who said, "Come unto Me," (Matt. 11:28). In v.21 the phrase, "a righteous God and a Saviour," can be understood only in looking at the Cross. Sin is never merely overlooked or forgotten. Its price is justly paid (Rom.3:23-26). That phrase could also read, "a faithful God and a Saviour". What thoughts are here! What response of worship and rejoicing they should awaken when we gather in church! This word or message from God is for "all the ends of the earth", and envisages the day of total victory when every knee shall bow.

Remember Paul's use of this theme in Philippians 2:5-13, where he declares that even things under the earth shall confess the Lordship of Christ. They can do no other, for it is a fact. But they do not make their confession willingly. Faith bows but unbelief is broken, and God goes marching on.

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46:1-13

This whole chapter is about the different attitudes people have to their religion. It is either something *they* support and carry around with them as they go from place to place, or it is something which supports and carries *them*. It is because the former is true for many that they find the whole business of church, prayer, Bible reading and service such a burden and a bore. The first two verses here picture people loading their gods on to animals to carry them away to safety before the invading armies of Cyrus. It is the picture of a man's god having to be rescued and salvaged from the crisis of life. Verses 3-4. on the other hand tell of the God whose saving power carries His people from the cradle to the grave and beyond. Think of the great words of Ps. 121 and the God who keeps our going out and our coming in *from this time forth and even for evermore*. "God is our refuge," says Psalm 46. "The everlasting God is our Shepherd," says Psalm 23 and Isaiah 40. "The 'tender-hearted' God of understanding compassion is our Saviour," says Isaiah 63:7-9. He is the God who goes before us marking out the way and signifying His presence by signs of His own choosing (Deut. 1:30-33). The whole of verse 4 in today's passage is wonderful, speaking of the God who takes full responsibility. The deliverance He speaks of is not merely victory on the field of battle but includes being brought home. In the end, religion is not a matter of spiritual mechanics: it is love. God awakens love and He Himself answers and satisfies it. Our hearts are pained until they find rest in Him.

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46:1-13

Begin today at verse 5 and see the dead gods of solid man-made religion that are the cause of empty churches. These are gods who do not speak. This is the religion in which the voices are all human. The people dress up their gods, because in bare simplicity they are not attractive to the senses and emotions. Religion then becomes a pageant and procession in which the god is set on his pedestal, and from a position of detachment which guarantees that religion will never interfere with personal or public life, the people bow down, pay their respects and go home, leaving their god sitting in cold, stony silence. Even when trouble comes, this god remains silent. He has no help to offer; no interpretation of circumstances; no hope for the future. He is a god to be carried. Give good thought to this, counsels the prophet, for events shall prove there is but one God of salvation whose counsel shall stand. G.A. Smith comments on the whole chapter that God bears us in this way. He *gives us ground* to stand on: the ground of His inviolable righteousness. To enable us to stand thereon God *lifts our guilt*, for He Himself bears our sins. But not only is there forgiveness, God *leads us to victory*, setting us free from bondage to become in God's power all He intended we should be. And all God does is *from within*, awakening to the music of life the chords that were broken or muffled. Far from overbearing our personalities

and making us dull creatures of mass production, God makes us, in our uniqueness, testimonies to His glorious grace. What a God! Do you know Him?

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47:1-15

The whole chapter deals with the judgment of God on Babylon. That nation had been the necessary scourge of God's people, but now that it had served its purpose, the day of its own reckoning had come. The reasons for her judgment are given as the unnecessarily harsh treatment of the Jews, especially the old, together with the overweening pride which so often goes hand in hand with harshness. Is it not amazing how harsh nations and individuals can become if once they taste power? It is as if they regarded people as existing simply to gratify their desires, and to provide a demonstration platform for their assumed superiority. If you look at verse 6 carefully you will see a distinction made between God's chastisement of those He loves dearly, and the ruthless smiting carried out by Babylon, a smiting devoid of humanity, let alone love. All hard disciplinary words must be put to the test, and a guard must be set lest at any time we take to ourselves the function of God. No one has ever the *right* to smite another, even if it is meant to minister good, and if we administer rebuke, remember from this chapter that all who delight in power come to their own day of accounting. In verse 1 Babylon is unviolated; in verse 5 she is called the queen of kingdoms; in verses 8, 10 she is careless and comfortable in her affluence; but all that will swiftly come to an end. What she has built is not of God and it will fall, and great will be the fall of it.

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47:1-15

The history of Babylon runs right through the Bible from the story of the tower of Babel in Gen. 11:1-9 to the final downfall of all that is symbolised by Babylon as recorded in Rev. 17: 1-8, 15-18; 18:1-8. Babylon is a city which is the focus of enmity to God, and it appears in some form in every age. Down through history Babylon is always being brought to judgment after a season of apparently invincible power, and in the final day of judgment, when evil has reached its zenith, Babylon will finally be destroyed. We have already noted its significant manifestations of arrogance, pride, unfeeling harshness and ultimate alone-ness. Babylon never has real friends, only parasitical attachments, and one feeds on the other until either satiated or repelled, and so the association disrupts. It must be so for Babylon never gives; she only takes, and so aware is she of her (supposed) excellencies that she assumes the attitude of a god to be worshipped. That all this can be true of individuals is very frightening, not least when you see in verse 12 that Babylon runs counter to God from youth to old age. She never changes. The passing of the days of grace simply bring her judgment nearer.

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48:1-11

God is speaking again to His own people, concerned that they should take the right message from what is happening and from what is being preached. The rampant arrogance of evil is not the only barrier to God's working. Indeed it is easier to deal with than the perverse obstinacy of God's own people (4). In this passage the people have forgotten how much they owe to the longsuffering grace of God, and they have to be reminded of the past. Their natural name was Jacob (v.1) and their dealings with God, as well as with men, had conformed to their nature all along the line (v.8). That they ever came to be called Israel (Prince with God, or ruled by God) was a miracle of God's sovereign grace. He made them a people. He gave them an identity. He gave them a high and glorious calling as the light to lighten the nations. But what did they do? They called themselves by the name of God but not in truth or sincerity. They called themselves saints and lived like reprobates, presuming on the patience of God and assuming the forgiveness of God. In this light, the stern discipline of the exile is seen to be far from harsh. Rather than cast off His chosen people, God refined them. In verses 8-10 it seems to suggest that God had to withhold things from His people because at that time He could not trust them. In v.11 God makes plain to His people that His honour is at stake because of their behaviour. Now, He has begun to do a new thing and He is explaining His ways to His own. What a God, to take back the failures and trust them again with holy service and with the honour of His name.

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48:12-22

The passage speaks of God's sovereignty (12-16); God's sorrow (17-19); and God's command (20-22). The doctrines are majestic in their confidence and comfort. God's will and work are done by people of His choice whom He raises up for this specific purpose. But look at v. 14 where God's *love* (RSV) for Cyrus his chosen ally is declared. It must have shattered the people to hear God speaking thus of one so far removed from the commonwealth of Israel. Ellicott suggests there is an allusion here to David, the "beloved of God", and marking out Cyrus to be, as it were, a second David to do mighty works and to serve his generation by the will of God. Even if that is reading into the text, the use of the word 'love' bespeaks a definite degree of intimate, personal association between God and His chosen servant Cyrus. Verse 16b seems to suggest both human and divine operators at work in the situation involving the Jews. It may be in this difficult verse (16) that the words are all spoken personally by the prophet, in which case he is vindicating his ministry by reference to facts, an exercise that is often necessary. Ellicott paraphrases the verse, "I have not from the beginning of my prophetic work spoken in dark, ambiguous speeches like the oracles of the heathen. From the time that the great work began to unfold itself, I was present, contemplating it. Now the time of revelation has come. The Lord God hath sent me, and His spirit." Now think of Isaiah seeing the situation so clearly, grasping its significance and challenge, and trying to bring it home to the people's hearts, only to be met with easy unbelief and refusal to take the message seriously. But the prophet was right!

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48:12-22

From verse 17 to the end of the passage scarcely needs comment. The people refuse the strong stirring word of God who desires to pour out His blessing upon them. This is God's sorrow (Ps. 81:10-16) and comes very near in the Person of Christ as He wept over Jerusalem. When will we learn that the God of salvation, who is seeking to lead us in the right way, and who to that end often has to hedge us in with thorns, is set upon our profit not our loss? From our untrusting attitude you would think God was a robber and a thief, instead of the great giver of all grace. The theme here is the blessings of obedience, and the command in verse 20 is addressed to those who are arguing like Lot and looking wistfully and lustfully back like Lot's wife. Can there be blessing for such? The wording refers to the glorious deliverance from Egypt at the Exodus, and the return from Babylon is likened to that wondrous act of God. But think, at the time of the Exodus if there were laggards in Israel they would have found themselves swamped when the waters of the Red Sea returned. God has a timetable to keep, and He will keep it. It will be our own fault if we are left on the platform when the train has gone. Have you ever had that experience? It is desolation indeed.

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48:22

Take this one verse and link it with chapter 57:20-21. The wicked may be open transgressors or religious formalists, but they have this in common "they do not like to retain God in their knowledge" (Rom. 1:28-32).

The lives people live when they do not take God and His word seriously are under the wrath of God and there can be no peace. It may seem that the wicked flourish (Ps. 73) but their "foot; shall slide in due time," (Deut. 32:35). Their sin shall find them out (Num. 32:23) and whatever people have sown, they must of necessity reap the harvest, together with its inevitable increase (Gal. 6:7). Many rest themselves in a false peace because they have ignored the truth and listened to false prophets who say there is no need to fear a God of love (Jer. 6: 13-16). Sinners can find peace only through the blood of the Cross of Jesus Christ (Col. 1:20-23), and on the ground of Christ's death, "being justified by faith we have peace with God," (Rom. 5:1) for God is at peace with us. This is the Gospel. But, there is no peace, says the Lord, to the wicked.

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49:1-6

With this chapter we enter into a new section of the prophecy. Preceding chapters have declared the sovereignty of God over Israel and over the nations. Babylon has been seen as the servant of God to chastise Israel for her sins. Cyrus has been seen as the servant of God to fulfil a double task: to bring Israel back from captivity to her

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own land, and to bring Babylon to judgment for her sins. But now we are to see that all the past and present workings of God are for a purpose yet to be fulfilled in the future. In all God's dealings with us we need to grasp firmly the thought of *plan, purpose, progress and perfection*. This is the framework of our lives, no matter how chaotic circumstances appear. In the broad outworking of God's redemptive purpose the "Servant" is the significant figure. In chapter 42:1-4 we were called to consider the person and graces of the Servant, and now we are to think of His word and work, which in the mercy of God reach far beyond the confines of the nation (48:20; 49:6b; cf. Lk. 2:25-32). In verse 3 the servant is called Israel and yet in verse 5 the servant is to bring the nation (Jacob) back to God. The A.V. reads ... "though Israel be not gathered". It is here we need the help of Romans 9:6-8; 11:1.-5 in order to see the remnant of faith within the nation; the church within the church; the effective instrument or servant of the gracious purpose of God. But the servant who bears the name "Israel", which means "ruled by God", is ultimately Christ, and we are God's servants only in Him and only as we become like Him.

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49:1-6

The Servant is the elect, chosen by God (v.1) and it is by speech or word that His victories are accomplished (v.2). That second verse speaks of preparation by which the servant has become a sharp, balanced weapon in the armoury of God, ready for instant use. Here is a deep lesson. The more thorough and far-reaching a work is destined to be in the will of God, the more there must be the preparation of both servant and people. Think of it in relation to our Sunday evening studies in Hebrews 11 and the story of Moses. Think of Israel's years of stern slavery necessary to sicken them of Egypt, and the two spells of forty years each in which Moses had to learn the creative capacity of a spiritual statesman and the patient, individual caring of the shepherd. Think of it in relation to our Lord in Hebrews 2:9-10; 5:7-9. To be saved by God is one thing, but to be mastered is another! Look ahead to chapter 50:4-6. Where is this sharpness and livingness of word learned and acquired? We shall find the answer to that question in coming chapters as the suffering servant comes more and more into view. In v.3 we see the description of service. It is the bursting forth of the glory of God, and in verses 5-6 it is the bringing of a people to God so that they might dwell with Him and He with them. This is mighty and eternal work and quick results are not of the essence of it. But what can we make of verse 4, where the first fruits of the work seem to be evidences of failure, even though the second half of the verse declares by faith that the work is not in vain in the Lord? Recall how Jesus, who began with mighty impact and vast throngs of people, came to the stage when many went back, and Jesus asked the few remaining if they too would go. In the Garden of Gethsemane He was utterly alone, and the king's procession to the throne of His Cross bore out the fact that, through the whole of His life, "Jesus won the world through shame." (Faber) This is what people see; even believing people. But the scope of the work remains as vast as God Himself.

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49:7-13

We anticipated yesterday the theme of service through suffering, and in our first verse today there is both rejection and vindication. It is the way the Master went and there is no other way of fruitful service. A death must be died if people are to know the resurrection power of God. Consider well such passages as 2 Cor. 4:8-12; 6:1-10; Heb. 13: 12-15. But God gives a secret confidence to the heart of His servant (8). The following verses are a picture of God the Shepherd of His people and their work. There are echoes here of chapter 40:10-11, 28-31, and the whole picture is one of a journey through desert places. The way is long and far from easy, but He who leads knows the way and all we need to do is to read Psalm 23. The Lord Jehovah, in whom is everlasting strength, is the great Shepherd who leads us on. As the ransomed company go on they give testimony to the power of their God, and from the four corners of the earth people will come to share in this thing that God is doing. Note how right through today's passage the emphasis is on God and the magnitude of His gracious thoughts and intentions towards His own folk. He hears, helps, preserves, feeds, leads and uses. Little wonder the last verse commands us to sing of His mercy and grace. It is because our human hearts know so little of what it is to give, that we find it hard to believe God really wants to pour out on us the abundance of His blessing.

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49:14-17

This desolating unbelief and depression of the people in the face of God's desire to bless is a work of the Devil. God is already on the march towards Jerusalem; not a Jerusalem in ruins (as it then was) but a Jerusalem with a glory greater than formerly (as it was going to be Haggai 2:9). But the Jews were miserable simply because their eyes were focused on themselves and not on God. Of course they had failed miserably. Of course there was a long and costly uphill road facing them, and when they finally reached the holy city they would find much rubbish and a monumental task of clearing away as well as rebuilding from foundation level in the face of relentless opposition from men and devils. They felt they had a right to be depressed. They were being realistic, or so they thought. But reality is what God sees, not what we think we see! The people were behaving as if God had forgotten and forsaken them, even though there were many signs of a stirring of the Holy Spirit amongst them. This unbelief is sinful, especially in the light of what God says in v.15-16. God measures His love as far exceeding that of a mother. How can He forget? As a Jewish father and son parting from each other to journey on necessary business might tattoo each other's names on their hands as a sacrament of remembrance, so God has written our names on His hand. He cannot forget! We are *always* in His thoughts and His heart. Verse 17 should read, "Your builders outstrip your destroyers, and those who laid you waste clear out from you." (RSV) Can we still doubt with a God like this?

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49:18-26

There is nothing stinted in beauty or measurement in the work that is blessed of God. The opening verse speaks of Zion putting on her restored children as a bride decking herself with jewels for her wedding. Then the prophet says the cities of Judah will be too small to contain all the returning exiles. This is blessing there will not be room enough to contain (Mal. 3:10), and we must not allow rigid logic to deprive us of the thrill of the spiritual facts thus portrayed. We need to think like this because God is no spiritual Scrooge, grudging every crumb of blessing He has to part with. Words pile upon words to portray abundance of blessing, until the people, astonished by the overflowing grace of God that has transformed their situation, give testimony that this is the Lord's doing. In verses 22-23 God beckons to the heathen nations and they are conscripted as servants of the restored exiles. On the journey the babes are carried inside the shawls of the women for safety and comfort. The youngsters are carried astride the shoulders of the men. Kings and queens become guardians and foster mothers. Oh, the extravagance of grace! But what of the strong tyrant who has held them captive? Will he give up his prey easily? What of the deep ramifications of evil in this world standing strong against the people and work of God? Can their prey be taken from the "strong man" (warrior or mighty)? God says with glorious finality, "I will contend with him." God did this ultimately in the Cross and we must never forget it. God means business, and the demons tremble.

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50:1-3

When God speaks of the wonders of His grace and the glories of His coming work as He did in yesterday's passage, there are always those who, although they recognise the truth and believe it, still feel that they have been so bad and so great failures that they can never have a part in this glorious work. They reckon they are too bad for God to do anything with them. That is nonsense, and if we insist on taking that attitude it is nothing but pride. How can we say our sins are too great for God to deal with? But God answers here in a wonderful way. Zion is the mother and the Jews her children. What is the reason for their plight? Are the children cast off because God has divorced their mother? Where is the divorce decree? There is none. The marriage stands and the children remain family. Have the children been sold by the Father to pay off the claims of angry creditors? Has God any creditors? No! The family remains intact. Granted there has been separation and strain in family relationships, but that was the result of the people's sins not the drying up of the Father's love. If the children want to come back there is nothing to stop them except their own lack of faith. God has heralded His message of pardoning and restoring grace through the prophet; why then is there no response? You say you are penitent; why then do you not come back? You say you want to be right and do right by God; why then do you not answer His call?

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50:4-11

These verses speak of the Servant of the Lord and although they may well be a picture of the experience of the prophet, it is impossible to read the verses without being moved by the description they give of the experience of Jesus. There is no true service without cost, and it is in the midst of such travail for the work's sake that faith of the quality spoken of in verses 7-10 is forged. It is the people who know what it is to suffer for Christ's sake and for the truth that are able to throw out the challenge to the adversary: "If God be for us, who can be against us?" But there is no trace of carnal arrogance in all this. Think well of v.4 where it speaks of those being taught. No one will ever preach or witness with power and authority if he is not a submissive learner. To speak you must first listen (Mk. 7:35), and the listening is that of a disciple or a scholar who presses on through the whole course of instruction. Linking this passage with 49:2, there is the suggestion of solitude and aloneness playing a part in the instruction of the servant, giving his speech both inspiration and edge. But the solitude is not the vacuum of escapism or indolence. It is all too easy to lapse into a state of mental and spiritual torpor which is dangerous and destructive. This man's "aloneness" was with God, morning by morning, as he "tuned in" to the speech of God and the fresh instruction for the new day. Think of how Jesus so often dismissed the crowds and went to be alone with God. Then look at what it cost Him (5-6) for He was misunderstood by His friends and scorned by His enemies. But none of these things move the Servant, for He knows He is with God. He has meat to eat that others know not of (John 4:31-34).

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50:10-11

These two difficult verses should be read in conjunction with Romans 8:31-39, so that we may be persuaded that the trusting soul can lean with absolute safety upon God. This is what it is to be "stayed upon Jehovah", and it recognises the fact that those who trust God are often required to walk in the dark without being given light or explanation. But even then, although faith may cry in perplexity, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" it will go on to say, "Father, into Thy hand I commit my spirit." Over against this rugged and realistic trust is placed the last verse which seems to be addressed to the unbelieving in Israel. It speaks of the contrast between the fire of God and the fireworks of men. Some suggest it contrasts the dull service of God, involving discipline and death, with the exciting, fleshly counterfeit works of men. The point is that men are left with their works in this world and the next (1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). Fireworks are a brilliant and exciting show for a fleeting moment. But if we are to have the fire of God, we must remember that its first action will be to begin to burn up sin, first in us, and then when we are set ablaze with holy fire, in the world.

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51:1-3

God is still seeking to demolish the doubts that are dogging His people. It seems to be doubts about themselves rather than doubts about God's willingness and capacity. They appear and feel so small and insignificant in the face of world empires of power and personalities. Who are they, and what right have they to think of themselves as world-changing people? Look to your heritage, says God, and consider the quarry from which you were hewn by the mighty hand of God. You count yourselves small and insignificant, but God started with one man, Abraham, and through the generations He has moved irresistibly forward to the present time. Now He still moves on like the relentless tide. Just think of it: the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the prophets and martyrs down through the ages, is your God. You are in association with all the best people who have ever lived, if you only knew it. Why be desolated by a sense of hopelessness because of numerical smallness? Abraham was alone and childless at his call, and in the course of time when the birth of Isaac had seemed to be a sign of hope for the future, God asked him to sacrifice that son. Could anything be more devastating? But Abraham believed God would see through to fruition what He had initiated, and his faith was counted as righteousness, which is salvation. Remember these things, and no more give way to fear.

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51:4-8

How powerful is the call of God when He calls His people to listen to Him, instead of listening to the voice of circumstances and inward doubts. The law and the justice (judgment) of God go forth as a word from His mouth and will not return void (55:11). However permanent the barriers and oppositions to the work of salvation may seem, they all partake of the essential transience of this world and will pass away, while the word of the Lord endures for ever. It is for this reason the people are called in verses 7-8 to fear God and nothing else, for in fact there is nothing else to fear. The reference to the activity of the moth and worm indicates the secret but fatal process of destruction already at work within the kingdom of evil, guaranteeing its downfall. But the work of God's righteous salvation moves onward from generation to generation. Is not the antidote to depressive doubts simply to sit down and remember the effective grace of God which has brought you through battles and crises beyond number? Are you afraid that God's power is growing weary or in short supply? We need Psalms 43 and 46, and if time permit, the whole of Psalms 34 and 37.

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51:9-16

Such reassurances as the people have received from God awaken them to the possibilities of their situation and they cry, albeit with a degree of emotion that needs to be harnessed, for God to make bare His arm so that they may see mighty works on the scale of the past. God is not bound to act in the same visible manner as He has done on past occasions, yet He remains the One who rules all the waves and storms of the sea of life, in order that they may do His will for the good of His people. When we seek to prescribe for God the methods of His working we are on dangerous ground, and when we cry for "signs and wonders" as the unbelieving Jews did when Jesus was here on earth, we are asking for what He does not often give. The reason is not far to seek. Miracles and manifestations can give a temporary boost to drooping faith, but the return of normal circumstances usually brings a deeper dejection, which of course cries for another miracle of reassurance. This is spiritual drug addiction and does not establish faith. When the people look back to the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea (Rahab is Egypt) they are apt to forget the fear and dread they felt. Faith is not easily come by and needs the eye and heart constantly re-focused upon God. It is in this kind of life that gladness and joy overtake us, whereas if we set out to grasp the blessings instead of the Giver, they are apt to elude us. "Look unto *Me* and be ye saved," is the word of the Lord (Isa. 45:22). "Come unto *Me*," is the word of Jesus (Matt. 11:28-30). Now look at verse 16 where God says He has placed us in the shadow of His hand because we are His people. Could any thought be safer or more comforting?

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51:17-23

The words "Awake, Awake," in this passage are, according to the scholars, much more forcible than in verse 9 and 52:1, and suggest that Zion can only rouse herself from her stupor by a very determined effort. The prophet's word seems to speed on ahead of the returning exiles to the city of Jerusalem still prostrate and ruined. The scene is one of desolation, and he interprets it to their consciences by declaring their shame to be the result of the cup of the Lord's wrath, which He made them drink because of their sins. It is quite frightening to behold both the desolation and shame of this city that belonged to God, and to recognise that God is no respecter of persons or institutions. The city, nation or church that sins against Him and refuses His gracious calls to repentance, and His strong warnings through speech and circumstances, will be brought low in His righteous judgments. God will not spare even though His name be dishonoured and maligned in the process. If we look at the last verse we see a picture of profane men trampling over the holy work and people of God, wiping their feet with coarse contempt on the trembling bodies of the Jews in the hour of their weakness and brokenness. But the righteous God does not forget such cruel sin. The tables are about to be turned and the cup of rebuke that produced such staggering in Jerusalem is to be put into the hands of Jerusalem's persecutors and they will have to drink it to the dregs. It is strong doctrine like this which underlies Romans 12:18-19. Shall not the judge of all the earth do right? (Gen.18:25)

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52:1-6

The people of God have gone through deep waters and long sustained trials, but now the sky brightens with glorious hope, for their God addresses them in terms almost too good to be true. Perhaps the key to the passage is in v.6, where the words "my people" could be rendered "my folk". There is something tenderly possessive about the phrase, and its wealth of grace is expounded in a passage such as Eph. 5:25-27. We need to be persuaded that God wants us to be with Him, not clothed in the tattered rags of carnal and compromised religion, but in garments of beauty and glory. The people of God, spoken of as the daughter of Sion (perhaps the picture is of a bride), have soiled their garments by their sinning and as a result have been cast down into the dust of humiliation by their enemies. But godly sorrow has worked repentance (2 Cor. 7:8-11) and the God whose disciplinary judgments had caused such hurt is now seen as the God who has never ceased to love His people. Verse 4 should read my people were sold into Egypt, and it is true both that they sold themselves and that the Lord has sold them. But there was no cash price paid and no final transfer of ownership, and their rightful owner would now take them back. God seems to be calling them to put on garments of beauty, or robes of state, and, rising from the dust of humiliation, to take their place seated at the King's right hand. In v.5 God is looking on His people's present condition and saying, "This is no place for you or Me." But though the call is for the people to arise and come back to their God, if you read v.6 carefully you see that it is God who has come back to His people. "Here am I," He says. What a Gospel!

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52:7-12

This passage is so full of God it is difficult to single out any specific message. There is a word for all people and all situations in the declaration that God is on the throne (7) and that all our foes are vanquished. This is peace. The messengers are pictured as coming to Sion to tell the facts of victory. God has redeemed His people. This is joy. But look at v.8. The watchmen shout the message and all the people join with them in song, because they see eye to eye, or clear-eyed, or face to face, instead of at long distance, the coming of the Lord to Sion. Moffat translates the verse, "They see the Eternal face to face as He returns to Sion." This is salvation. Now not even the ruins and debris of the city can keep them from the assurance of victory. Here is a people beginning to say, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" But if this be so, why is Israel so slow to move that the word returns yet again to an exhortation to bestir themselves and depart from Babylon? There is a spiritual slowness, almost a creeping paralysis, that lays hold on a life that has not been living close to God. When spiritual faculties are not exercised, they quickly become atrophied and many a Christian has become aware that what he once was able to do in Christ's name he can do no longer. If God has been speaking to you in all these wonderful passages of restoration, grasp at His gracious promise, and take again your rightful place in holy service.

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52:11-12

Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord. This is a word to every Christian, not only to those engaged in specific tasks of teaching or administration in the House of God. The picture, of course, is that of the march of the Jews back to their own land bearing the sacred vessels of the temple. Each man to whom was given the privilege and responsibility of carrying this treasure had a solemn obligation laid upon him to be as holy and separated unto God in his person as these vessels were. But a far more precious deposit is placed in our hands, for we are stewards of the Gospel by which people are to hear and be saved, and we are stewards of a precious life given us from God to be a vehicle of His glory. This then is a great appeal to have done with anything that would stain us or the treasure we bear. This separation, call it Puritanical if you will, is an inevitable part of the Christian life. People will no doubt charge us with "narrowness", as if that were the ultimate sin, but better than being a Christian whose life is so much in complicity with the spirit and ways of the world that our testimony no longer exists. Granted we must always be *in* the world, but we must never be *of* the world. There is a fundamental distinction between the believer and unbeliever which must never be hidden. That kind of Christianity which knows no separation or self-denial but feels at home in every situation is a parody of Biblical truth and a denial of Him who was ever "outside the camp." You cannot hold the gold of the Gospel in dirty hands. Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord. If you would have this in New Testament terms, together with the gracious promise of God, as in these verses in Isaiah, turn to 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1.

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52:13-15

These verses together with the whole of chapter 53 constitute the last of the passages on the Servant of the Lord and portray Him as the Suffering Servant. Such a passage can speak only of Christ, and the introduction of the theme here, immediately following the stirring message of the glorious victory of God and the restoration of His people, tells us that at the heart of every word that speaks of redemption there is found the word of the Cross.

In 52:9 the note is joy and in 54:1 it is the song of gladness. But there is no such resurrection life without death, and this whole section speaks of the death of One who did not die for Himself. This is the word that reaches the hearts of seeking men and women, as in Acts 8:27-35. It tells of a work that begins in exaltation, descends to suffering and rises to triumph (cf. Phil. 2:5-11). These sufferings are not tragic but triumphant, for they are practical and effective in accomplishing the salvation of the people of God. Read the whole section (52:13-53:12) over and over again as we study its detail day by day. Try to get hold of a modern translation and ponder well what the Word says. This is holy ground: see that we approach it with reverence!

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52:13-15

The whole Servant Song divides into five sections, the first phrase of each section indicating the theme. Here our thoughts concentrate on the statement "My Servant shall prosper" or "act wisely". He shall be exalted, and lifted up, and be very high. Then the first phrase of v.14 should be linked with v.15 and be read, "Just as many were astonished at him, so shall he startle". The spectacle of the Cross was and is an offence and embarrassment to people, for pain is something they do not understand, and they avoid all thought of it. To their way of thinking, suffering is negative and profitless and to be abolished even in the case of criminals convicted of gross crimes against humanity. But just as the world was astonished by the death of Him who claimed to be the Son of God, so they were shattered in amazement by His triumphal resurrection from the dead, and this is how it has been down through history. The Church of Christ is indestructible, but its testimony must always be "dying, behold we live" Consider 2 Cor. 4:7-12; 6:4-10; Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:24; 1 Peter 2:21-23; Heb. 13:12-13. The testimony at the Cross of the enemies of the Servant remains true: "He saved others, Himself He cannot save." Now consider the cost of redemption in the second half of v.14: "So marred from the form of man was his aspect that his appearance was not that of a man".

"We may not know, we cannot tell,
What pains He had to bear:
But we believe it was for us
He hung and suffered there." (C.F.Alexander)

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53:1-3

The theme of this section is, "Who has believed what we have heard?" and it pinpoints the unbelief that made so wrong a valuation that it rejected the Lord of Glory. This passage is quoted in John 12: 37-41 and Romans 10:16. In Christ, the right arm of the God of salvation was made bare, but because people judged on the basis of appearances they failed to see anything but weakness. Why is it that we equate power and purpose with earthquakes and great commotion? What indifference there was to the Servant's sufferings as "sitting down, they watched Him there" as the Gospel narrative records. But to the eye of the Father, He was as a precious plant full of promise. To people, beguiled by appearances and fascinated by the tawdry, He was a dry desert root not worth a second glance. He was despised as of no value and rejected as of no use. The hearts of the crowd recoiled from One so acquainted with the burden of human sorrow and grief, and as people hide their faces from the leper lest they be tainted, so they averted their gaze from the Servant. They had no desire to be associated with such an One. They were ill at ease in His presence. They were ashamed of Jesus!! Note that it says "we" esteemed Him not. Are these believing men looking back on how they had once dealt with the Man of Sorrows? In the garden of the High Priest's house, "The Lord turned and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered."

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53:4-6

Here the Servant is the Substitute, because the pains He bore were not His own punishment, as people thought from superficial observation. This is stated here not as a doctrine but as a confession from the hearts of those who now knew that they were involved in this holy suffering. This is the agony of revelation when the light shines into the darkened soul and it sees how terribly wrong it has been in relation to God and to His Christ. People saw the hand of God in the Cross but concluded it was for judgment. That is why they cried, "Let God deliver him, if He will have him," (Matt. 27: 43). It *was* judgment; but it was ours not His. We reckoned He was smitten by God for His own sins, cry the now penitent hearts. But here is the truth: He has borne *our* sickness and loaded Himself (a strong, grievous word) with the burden of *our* pains (v.4). He was pierced for our transgressions, rebellions and crimes. He was crushed for the guilt of our deeds (iniquities). The discipline which secures our peace was upon Him (a thought which refers not only to conversion but to growth in grace - in every pain of life, the Man of Sorrows has a part) and by His stripes we are healed. It was all for us. It is a message aimed at the heart and tells us that when we sin, another bears its curse. We had all gone astray; we had all turned to our own way; and God made the iniquity of us all to meet on Him: He died our Substitute to be our Saviour.

"Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood,
Hallelujah, what a Saviour." (P. Bliss)

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53:7-9

What a statement of the shameful death that He died. He who was without sin submitted Himself to all the accusation and injustice heaped on Him. His silence contrasts not only with the loud shrieks of His accusers and tormentors, but with the voices of all others who suffer. They cry either in guilt or protest, seeking to resolve their predicament, but the Servant knows His suffering to be the will of God, the cup He must drink and the service He and He alone can render. In reading the Gospel narratives you cannot but be impressed by Jesus' calm and poise and His utter command of the situation. It was truly His hour. But the willingness of His self-surrender to the will of God must never be allowed to obscure the fact that it was by perversion of justice that He was condemned. It needed false witnesses and the machinations of political-cum-ecclesiastical intrigue to accomplish His death. Who gave a thought to His fate? He was cut off like a common criminal (He was God's criminal), and who can see in this a sacrifice for sins? But in every move and step in the whole terrible drama God was at work and the issue was victory. Yet the emphasis is on the humility of the Servant, even to the death of the Cross (Phil. 2: 5-11).

"Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit."

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53:10-12

Here we come to the heart of the Cross and see that behind the evil scheming of wicked and blasphemous men, there lies the sovereign purpose of God (Acts 2:22-23). The innocent dies for the guilty and, on the face of it, it is not merely a travesty of justice, but a triumph of all that is dark and devilish, leaving men at the mercy of a grim and hideous fate. In our swift superficiality we ask why God allowed such a deed. GOD DID IT! The soul of the Servant is made a guilt-offering, whereby the "dead weight" that lies on men's consciences may be lifted and a full satisfaction made in relation to the ever lasting law of righteousness. It is one thing to come from the presence of God with the message of His power and grace, but another thing to stoop down and take the burden of human sin and guilt upon yourself and bear it to its eternal conclusion of judgment. When we gather at the Lord's Table we handle broken bread and poured out wine and hear these awe-ful but wonderful words "For you, for you". When the sinner's heart responds to such dying love, the Servant sees His seed and the saving purpose of God moves on into the future.

53:1-12

Read the whole of this chapter we have studied in such detail, and meditate on these words of Dr. G.C. Morgan. "We have joy in our forgiveness, and in all the riches of our inheritance in our Lord; we have even greater joy in all the victories of our Lord, in the glories which are His, resulting from His passion. But the joy of knowing He will be satisfied is still greater. In this great chapter we are introduced to the mystery of the suffering of the Servant of God, in a way which can only make the lips dumb, and bow the soul to the most complete prostration of wonder and amazement. So great is the revelation that pity is impertinent; and sympathy is irreverent. We can only watch, and wonder, and adore as we see Him; of men, despised and rejected; of God, bruised, and put to grief; in Himself, a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; at last, cut off out of the world of the living, His grave with the wicked. And all this because, 'All we like sheep have gone astray and Jehovah hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.' With necessary self-abnegation and complete abasement and shame, I am constrained to say: Was it worth while? That is, was man worth it? Am I worth it? The answer is in these words: 'He shall be satisfied:' Then I have but one thing to say, and it is this:

'Love so amazing, so Divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all!'"

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54:1-10

The previous chapter spoke of his "offspring" (seed AV) and of "many" issuing from the agonising work of the Servant, and the command to sing which opens this chapter is given in relation to the abundance of blessing which is about to issue among the people of God. Note that in Scripture no one is asked to *enjoy* suffering, but always to accept it because of its fruit (Heb. 12:2). Primarily and historically the reference here is to the return of the Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem, but what is expressed in earthly and territorial terms in the Old Testament is to be understood in spiritual terms in the New Testament. As Calvin says, "Having spoken of the death of Christ, the prophet goes on with good reason to the Church: that we may feel more deeply in ourselves what is the value and efficacy of His death." The emphasis in the passage is not so much on the return *to* Jerusalem as on fruitful issue and increase *in* Jerusalem. The people of God are pictured here as a bride and told "your Maker, Himself, is your husband" (v.5). With a wonderful reflection of the story of the love of God in the Book of Hosea, the passage tells of the tenderness of affection and loyalty of love *on God's side* that recalls the wife of earlier days (v.6). In her youth she had been faithless and her life was barren because it was soiled and compromised and choked. But now, the purified and restored wife will be fruitful and have issue more than was ever possible in earlier days (1-3). Can anything be more wonderful than the grace which restores the failures and makes them fruitful again in the service of their God?

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54:1-10

It is astonishing how reluctant we are to believe and accept the forgiving grace of God for ourselves. We can imagine it being true for others but not for us who have made so many mistakes. The remembrance of our failures and sins makes us hang our heads in shame. Now look at v.4 where "humiliated" could read "confounded" or "made to blush". Here is the wonder of the grace that brings us back to God. Israel is enabled to forget the shame of her youth in Egypt and her widowhood in Babylon, and God will not bring it up to accuse her. This is forgiveness indeed and it springs from love almost beyond our understanding. God seems to be saying, "Can the wife of one's youth be rejected when marriage bonds were made with such unsullied hearts?" (v.6) He does not hide the fact or necessity for chastisement, but with great compassion God now gathers them back (v.7). Verse 8 could read, "In a spate or burst of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting devotion I yearn over you, says the Lord your Redeemer." In v.9-10 God reminds them that through all the clouds of His anger there shines the rainbow of His mercy which shall never be removed. In v.10 the word "kindness" (AV) could better be read as "steadfast love" or "devotion". This is a God to be trusted, loved and obeyed.

"O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to Thee:
I trace the rainbow through the rain,

George Philip Bible Reading In Isaiah

And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be." (Matheson)

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54:11-17

The figure of the Bride now gives place to that of the City which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Heb. 11:10). It emerges out of the season of conflict and suffering, a city marked by beauty, peace and tranquility, all of which issue from righteousness. Verse 14 recalls the wonderful promises of Psalm 121 and also the picture in Ps. 23 of a table prepared in the presence of our enemies. It seems too much to expect that we could sit and feast in calm serenity, while the hosts of the enemy circle us, but not when you take v.17 at its face value. There is no need to expound such a verse. It speaks for itself. The person who is set upon obedience to the God of grace and glory has nothing to fear. Even when the accuser, be he man or devil, picks on the obvious flaws and undeniable sins and failures, he is put to silence, for the servants of the Lord have a righteousness that is not their own, a perfect righteousness given to them by God. Who shall bring any charge against God's chosen ones seeing it is God Himself who declares them righteous in Christ? Who dares to lift the hand or the tongue against the person whose defence is the living God? The quarrel would be with God.

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55:1-5

The background is that of Israel immediately prior to the return from exile, when persecution, as such, no longer obtained in Babylon, and many Jews were settling down comfortably in the material affluence of the life they had made for themselves. But the material can never satisfy the heart, nor can it quench the deep longing for home in the heart of the exile. When the exiled one is "far from home" spiritually it is also true that, though he may still call himself a child of God, he has lost his influence for good. It is to such persons that this clear Gospel call comes. God has so dealt with these His own people that the ache of their hearts has become a bridge across which He can reach them with the call of His Word. God does not discuss whether or not the wordling and the backslider have a satisfying and happy life. They would claim they have. But God speaks to the deep places of the heart. The picture seems to be of the water-seller in the street. A man of grace buys up the supply and causes it to be distributed free to all whose thirst bids them come. To hear and to obey is to live again. Think of Jesus' words in John 6: 27-35 and 7:37-38. Then in v.4 the witness of God's Servant is spoken of, followed by a promise that those who are awakened by and responsive to the call of God's grace will in like manner become fruitful witnesses. This will happen, not so much by anything they do or say, but by what they become. It is unconscious or unselfconscious witness operating from the lives of people who have come back to their God. Compare Ezek. 36:23 and Matt. 25:34-40. When witness is natural and human it speaks more of Christ than of the witness.

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55:6-7

These two verses are very important with regard to all witness and to preaching in particular. True evangelical preaching of the Gospel is never a mere believism or "decision-ism". It must be moral and practical as well as spiritual and emotional. You have it in Acts 20:20-21: repentance and faith. If people are to be converted and to find salvation freely in Christ, they must be prepared to have done with their sins. When the crowds flocked after John the Baptist, instead of being mightily pleased with his success as a preacher he challenged those moved to activity by his ministry to bring forth the fruit of a changed way of life as a seal of the authenticity of their conversion (Matt. 3:1-12). This is the evidence of a true work of the Holy Spirit in community and nation (Acts 19:18-20), and a revival that does not have an impact on the life of the nation, to purge it of bitter and evil things, is not true revival. The man who has not seen that his sins are hateful to God is a man who will not see the goodness of God in mercy and pardon. But do not fail to see here also the strong note of urgency which can be applied to professing Christians as well as to unbelievers. When God is on the move and He draws near in the day of His visitation, there is an opportunity to be grasped and grasped firmly and swiftly while God is near and to be found. When we trifle with God and presume on His grace, the voice of His calling grows fainter and

fainter and finally fades from conscience and consciousness. Read Luke 19:41-44; Heb. 2:1-3; 3:12-15. *Now* is the accepted time. Tomorrow may be too late.

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55:8-13

These verses speak of the quiet superiority of God in His methods and His serene assurance with regard to results. In the actual experience of the Jews at this time the people were struggling with circumstances and were hindered by their own introverted thoughts. It is like being surrounded by fog, seeing nothing but vague shapes, but when you climb to the standpoint of the God of power and purpose, you begin to see things in clearly defined perspective. It is pride on our part to limit God in His working to the dimensions of His faltering creatures. Doubt, uncertainty, fumbling and repeated changes of mind belong to people, not to God. His ways are sure and His working produces results *in due time*. Note that the illustration used to drive home the lesson is taken from nature, where fruit-bearing is a slow but sure process which involves much hard labour in clearing the ground, ploughing, sowing and waiting for the harvest. Now, says God, My word is like that. It is the seed which has life within itself. It does not fall to the ground uselessly but prospers in the purpose for which I send it forth. Of course there is the human element. Paul plants and Apollos waters, *but* all is vain if God does not give the increase (1 Cor.3:5-7). It is not pressing the illustration too far to liken the rain to the prayers of God's people, and we have much to learn here about praying for the Word after it has been preached. At the end of v.10 the words signify that the fruit of the sowing is both present food and continuing seed. There is no end to it. There is life in the Word of God because God is in His Word. This is our confidence as we wait for evidence of a growing crop.

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55:8-13

Take this passage again today, for it is a great constraint to worship and a great source of encouragement. If it contains challenge, it is to the effect that we should guard against getting in God's way as He moves majestically forward through history working His sovereign will. But look at the abounding joy of the last two verses. The whole order of creation is transformed in the gathering again of the sons and daughters of God (cf Rom. 8:18-22). There is a song instead of a sigh in the wind. The trees of the field stand in full glory of natural development, never having known the interfering hand of man's pruning. This is the work of God's own hand and it stands as a testimony to His glorious grace. But the glory of God is not seen *fully* in renewed nature but only in renewed humanity, in the church that is His ransomed family. Cf. Eph 2:4-7 and 3:10-21. In these verses God is already looking upon and savouring the joy of things as they are yet to be in the perfection of His purpose. That is how we must learn to look on things for then, and only then, shall we make sense of the interim stages and be enabled to wait upon the Lord.

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56:1-8

We have seen in Chapter 55 that blessing and revival are all of God's grace, but that does not in any way invalidate God's call to righteousness, obedience and prayer. These three requirements hold together (Mic. 6:6-8). And note how Sabbath keeping and moral righteousness are held firmly together as they must always be. Why this emphasis on the Sabbath? In Babylon the Jews were away from both Temple and sacrifices, but in that godless society it was still possible to set apart a day unto the Lord and on that day to give themselves to fasting and prayer. This is the bulwark of true religion, and in our generation as Sunday observance goes, so do true godliness, reverence and the clear testimony to eternal values. In this context the churches that provide early morning services on a Sunday in order to let people break the Sabbath thereafter with an easy conscience are doing wrong! Humanity dances six days to the music of Mammon and needs to hear the voice of the Eternal on the remaining day. Do Christians grudge God His day which He has ordained for their blessing? See in v.6 how serving the Lord and loving the Lord are linked with keeping the Sabbath. Keep this day different by every means in your power. Your Sunday lies at the heart of your spiritual life, just as the sanctity of the Sabbath lies at the heart of the Ten Commandments.

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56:1-8

The people blessed by the grace of God must learn obedience to God, and part of that obedience is to make the House of God a house of prayer as God ordained that it should be. Remember that Jesus cleansed the Temple! When you think of the godly Jews holding firm to their Sabbath you begin to see why, even in their days of humiliation, they had a testimony which drew others to their God. Religion that comes from the heart in spite of the cost is a powerful instrument for good. Two groups are spoken of: the foreigner (son of the stranger AV) or Gentiles who have believed, and "eunuchs" or Jews mutilated by their captors according to the custom of the time. Both these groups dreaded the return to Jerusalem because according to the strict application of the Law they would be disqualified and have no right of entry to the presence of God. But God promises here to the Gentiles who had believed and obeyed, and to the Jews who had suffered, a place, a reward and a blessing. Cf. Mark 10:29-30. The disqualified become pillars of the Kirk and have a name better than sons or daughters. This is the word to those who say, "I've sinned too much to be a real Christian," or "I'll never be good enough, not with all my flaws and failures." God's gracious desire is there for you, just as His justifying grace was there for the man who could only pray, "God be merciful to me the sinner." (Lk.18:9-14)

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56:9-12

Today's verses are a rebuke to the leaders of the nation. Neither the prophets nor the politicians gave a real word from God. The picture could be either of the complacency and decadence of Judah which led to the captivity in Babylon, or of the time after the exile when Ezra found the people of God at ease in the day of God's power. It is a vivid message intended to awaken the conscience. The beasts of the field depict the enemies, ravenous and encircling, and as they wait to pounce and devour, the shepherds and watchmen are slothful and sleepy in their indulgence. Take the message to ourselves in relation to our spiritual responsibility to the nation, and for the salvation of those we meet day by day. The spirit of devouring self-interest which marked the people can lead only to spiritual stagnation and loss. The life that is concerned only with getting and never with giving is a life which is in fact progressive death. Think of the words of Jesus in John 12:24-25 and Matt. 16:24-27. God holds us responsible. Beware of the spirit of ease and indifference which is the spirit of the world and not of God.

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57:1-2

This is a very vivid and up-to-date picture, possibly stemming historically from the time of Manasseh, the evil King of Judah. The first phrase of v.2 could read, "who walk straight before Him," or "who went straight forward." The second rendering appeals for it pictures the righteous pursuing an unswerving course, regardless of the clamour and confusion of the world. Nothing could distract or seduce them from their God. The overall picture reveals the silent progress of the work of the Kingdom of God in both salvation and judgment. The righteous and merciful (godly and kind) are disappearing from the community one by one through the door of death, and no-one is noticing. They live and die unsung but their end is peace. In a very real sense they are being taken out of the way of evil, which is increasingly rampant, and of judgment which is drawing near. We need to keep this thought in mind when we pray for young and old to be converted. What will they have to live through in this life for Christ's sake? But the picture here is of a community and nation becoming more and more devoid of righteous men and women, until there is nothing left but a godless group of humanity with no salt to preserve it. Read the last two verses of the chapter and you see what that means. This is our situation in the middle of the twentieth century, when unbelief is hailed as intellectual insight and the "new morality" counsels people to do whatever is right in their own eyes. In the deepest spiritual sense we face a crisis of destiny. What a responsibility to those who know God and His light and truth.

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57:3-13

This is a warning to the unrighteous. The unrighteous are the unfaithful amongst the people of God, who have heard so much about God and His Word but have never taken it in reality to themselves. In v.8 we read of the pagan symbols, rather than the traditional Jewish remembrance symbols, set up on the wall. The picture is one

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of promiscuous adultery and is full of passion and shame. In v.5-8 you have the words "burn with lust", "your lot or choice", "your bed" and "behind doors" which signify shame. In v.9 there seems to be reference to the humiliation of some of the kings of Israel and Judah, who went cap-in-hand to beg favours of heathen overlords. In v.10 the people are challenged about persisting in a way of life that is only wearying them. But they will not admit their folly and wrong. This is the pride of the sinful heart. And God holds His peace (11), with the result that the unrighteous nation, receiving no thunderbolt of judgment *at the time*, concludes that all is well. But, says God, in v.12-14, I will expose your so-called righteousness and you will yet see the utter loss of your ways. Let your associates, whom you have chosen instead of Me, come now to your aid, *if they will have you*. You have made your bed; now lie on it, and blame no-one but yourselves. It is in a situation like this within the church and the nation that the righteous, in their straightforward loyalty to the God of salvation, come into their own, cf. Isa. 32:2; Zech. 8:23 and Rev. 3:9. But if the salt has lost its savour in the day of people's desperate and fearful seeking for shelter from the judgments that are come upon them, what hope is there?

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57:14-21

The forgotten God calls His wandering, sinning children home. This is undeserved mercy, yet is no contradiction of righteousness, for in the working of His providence God sees to it that sin is punished. We can understand this eventually only as we behold the Cross of God the Son, and the mighty work of His reconciliation. This is no "common" God or man-made idol who speaks but the High and Lofty and Holy One who inhabits eternity and who is yet desirous of coming down to dwell with the penitent and to work with majestic power on their behalf. It is passages such as these that we need to ponder often lest we make our God too small. Everything about Him is big. The integrity of His righteousness underlies the whole fabric of the universe. He always punishes sin, yet the sinner is not abandoned. This is the astonishing message of the passage, seen clearest if read in a modern translation. Link it with the confession and worship of Micah 7:18-20. Go back in thought to Isaiah 6 and the prophet's staggering vision of the holiness of God with whom we have to do. But this is no remote God, aloof and unapproachable. His desire is towards His people, and He is far more eager to have them and their fellowship than they are to have Him. Why should this be so? It is sin persisted in which distorts the thoughts and imaginations of our hearts and makes God appear a tyrant bent on bringing people to judgment, rather than a Father yearning for the return of His prodigal children. How we slander Him by our unwillingness to trust Him.

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57:15-21

"God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." (Shorter Catechism) He is never to be trifled with, yet His name is Love, and the proof is right here in the declaration of His intentions for His people, cf. Jer. 29:11-14. God has been angry with, as well as grieved by, the attitudes of His own people, whom He has redeemed for Himself. But He will not always be angry, even though He has just cause so to be, for His forbearing love has been pressed to its limit. Look at v.17. Because of iniquity, God had to smite His own people, and in the withdrawing of His face He denied them the sweetness and blessing of fellowship with Himself. But what was the result? They went on backsliding in the way of their own heart. God goes on to say that He has seen or watched His people in their perverse ways yet He is determined to heal and restore. What agonies of love must fill the heart of God, and what strivings of desire must constrain His Spirit. Think of it in terms of Hosea 11:1-4, 7-9. Come, let us to the Lord our God with contrite hearts return. But what of those who find no desire for or place of penitence in the disciplines and love of God? For them, there is no peace, ever.

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58:1-5

This chapter has been entitled, "Formal religion and an unlovely life," and brings to mind the challenge of John the Baptist to "bring forth fruits that befit repentance." The prophet is called to cry aloud with a deep, vehement, cutting voice and expose the sins of a religious people. They were a people with a greed for ordinances and meetings but they were cold, formal and legalistic. They were also more than a little indignant that God did not

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seem to appreciate all they were doing for Him (v.3a); as if God were someone to be patronised and kept in good humour by the titbits of religion He was offered. But inasmuch as they asked God a question, they got an answer straight and plain. In the midst of their fast, they managed to get down to discussing business and exploiting their workers. The parallel to this is seen in our own day. In the House of God before the service starts we are planning our weekly, worldly activity, arranging ventures for our pleasure (but not usually inviting people who need to be brought to Jesus). Then the service intrudes for an hour or so, and within minutes of the benediction, we are putting the finishing touches to our plans, as if nothing that had been said or done in the service had any bearing whatever on the lives we were planning to live. But the prophet goes on in v.4 to say that their "fasting", that is, their participation in things religious without the involvement of their hearts, had served only to put a sharp edge on their tongues and tempers. The second half of v.4 reads in the RSV, "Fasting like yours this day will not make your voices to be heard on high." The attitudes of their lives annulled their religion. To them life was serious, but religion was a game or a pastime. How sad. How bad!

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58:6-7

Read in from v.5, for God is contrasting the outward motions of religious ritual with warm heart-worship which manifests itself in reverence to God and love to people. When religion does not make you do anything for people, anything that really costs you in terms of sacrifice and self-denial, then it is not the religion of the Cross. Jesus "came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give up His life for many." What we need to do today is to read the Scriptures in Matt. 25:34-46; Luke 10:25-37; John 13:1-5, 12-17; and 1 Cor. 13. God does not say that worship, approach to Him through the appointed sacrifice, penitence for sins, the sacrifices of praise and the prayers of the heart are not necessary or not important. But He does say that if these things are confined to the "holy days" and never constrain the heart and life in the "ordinary days", then there is such a division in the life that the word hypocrisy needs to be used. Faith which does not issue in works of grace is dead, and not faith at all.

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58:8-12

Part of the power of the call to return to the Lord in righteousness of life is the prospect of the fruitfulness which will ensue. The passage could be entitled, "The blessing and fruitfulness of a Christ-like life" and should be compared with 2 Peter 1:5-9. Peter is not slow to remind us of the debt we owe to the God who has purged us from our sins. And he warns, as Isaiah does, that a return to trifling with those sins will do nothing but dull the light and quench the flow of the vital water of our witness amongst others. But when we forsake our sins and return to the Lord in singleness of heart, we are first blessed ourselves in a restoration of fellowship and joy and spiritual prosperity, and in consequence, by the overflow of grace, we are made a blessing to other people. In v.11 the waters that never fail are a spring that gives and never runs dry. A preacher was once complaining of the constant demands to give and give spiritually to a people who never seemed grateful or satisfied. His counsellor said simply, "If you stay at the fountainhead, you will never run dry". How very true, and how very wonderful that in such a life you become a builder and repairer (12), and the work and witness of your life lay a foundation for more than one generation to come after you. The fundamental fruit of a life is often not seen until that life is over. Judge nothing before the time.

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58:13-14

This chapter which has emphasised the service of others as being basic to religion, also emphasises that duty to God and loyalty to Him are fundamental. Indeed it is only as we are right and do right by God that we are in a spiritual and moral condition to help our neighbours. Now, says the prophet, to delight in God is to delight in God's day, not least because all our service finds its inspiration and impetus in our meeting with God and with His saints on the day appointed by Him. Note that it is in this chapter, which slates the vanity and futility of empty religious observances, that we find this exaltation of the observance of the Sabbath. It is a necessary corrective to the idea that all our duty is fulfilled in service to people. The service to God has logically and practically a prior claim. God first is the command, and the passage here is clear: "Inasmuch as you do it unto

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the Sabbath, you do it unto God". In the case of the Jews and their captivity in Babylon the Sabbath remained a central focus of faith when all other standards of religion had been swept away. In our own day and generation one of the most potent forms of witness we have is in regard to how we use and what we do on the Lord's Day. It is this which marks us out as a different people, belonging to the God of salvation. We do not advocate a grim, cold, legalistic and loveless Sabbath. But if the day is to be a Sabbath of love and consequently of fellowship, then there must be the walk with God and the fellowship of prayer day by day. It is when we try to cram all our worship and holiness into one day that the Lord's Day becomes a legalistic, unattractive thing.

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59:1-2

In our desire and prayers for spiritual revival and its consequent issue of righteousness in the body politic, we must always remember that God is able. God's power and willingness to hear and answer prayer and to bless and prosper His people and their work is never for a moment in doubt. But our two verses speak of the shackles set upon God by the sins of His own people. This was the cry of chap. 58:1, "Show My people their sins." We like to preach against the sins of the world, the arrogance of unbelievers, and the sliding moral standards of the nation. But these are the fruits of spiritual apostasy, not the cause of it. It is because the people of God are what they are that the nation knows so little of the living power of God. Can you condemn the unbelieving for knowing nothing of the living power of God, when the lives of so many believers are every bit as worldly and materialistic? Can we condemn a world that does not call upon God, when the members of His holy Church are scarcely ever found at prayer? This is the burden of the opening of the chapter, and to confirm it to our hearts we consider the following Scriptures: Matt. 17:14-21; Mk. 6:5-6; 2 Cor. 4:1-3; Acts 24:16; Ps. 78:41; Ps. 66:18; Isaiah 1:11-20. This realism is needed when every Sunday testifies that we know little or nothing of the saving power of God amongst those who come to services, let alone the thousands who never cross the threshold of a church building.

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59:3-15

The language of this whole chapter speaks of a God who has a heart to feel for His people, an ear to hear their cry, and an arm to raise in power on their behalf. The intensity of the language indicates the depth of God's desire to come again to His people and turn their captivity and thus renew fellowship with them. But what a picture is given of the life of the nation of God's people. In v.7 "ruin and destruction" speak of wrecking and vandalism. In v.8 there is no peace, no justice, and all is crooked and untrustworthy. In v.9b we see the people who keep on hoping for the breaking forth of light and blessing but nothing comes. In v.10 we have life without direction. Earlier in v.7, the shedding of innocent blood speaks of ruthless self-interest. In v.9 there is no sign of God intervening on behalf of His people. In v.11 ill-tempered shouting and self-pitying moans mark the life of the people. In v.15 truth has gone missing and the man of faith, because he stands by his integrity, becomes the prey of ravenous men. If one dares to stand out against wrong the others will call a strike and compel action to maintain unrighteousness. Read v.12-15 which gives a clear declaration of the displeasure of the Lord. What would you do if you were a God of righteousness? Israel's God wants to get rid of their sins so that He can take His people back. But first, there must be evangelical repentance. Read Jer. 14:7-12 and Amos 8:11-12 and Rev. 3:20. But who will hear the voice of God and answer? And how long will the voice of the Lord be heard? "My Spirit shall not always strive with man" is a solemn reminder (Gen. 6:3 AV).

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59:16-21

This is the climax of the chapter. When things are at their worst and there is no one to help at all, the Lord God Himself intervenes to save. In v.16, though we may rightly use the verse to speak of the amazing lack of men of prayer to stand in the gap for the salvation of the nation, the words "no intercessor"(AV) should read "none to intervene". If anything is to be done, God Himself must do it. An interesting reference here is Luke 18:7-8. But questions arise. How long does God wait and how desperate does He allow the situation to become, before He girds on His armour and takes the field in the strength of His right arm? Do the verses here indicate the intervention of God in final judgment, or is it intervention unto revival? What do we mean by revival? It is

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certainly more to do with a spirit of moral righteousness and practical holiness than with crowds and commotion! But note also that the passage which speaks of great and abiding blessing for the Lord's people speaks also of sore judgment for others. When we cry to God to come amongst us in the power of the Holy Ghost we need to know what we are in fact asking for. Think of 1 Peter 4:17-18. Revival is essentially the re-kindling of the fires of holy life amongst the people of God, and we all know how much sifting is sometimes needed to get the dead ashes away so that the breath of wind can fan the flames. How is the fire in your heart?

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59:16-21

However much the commentators argue about the true translation, the second half of v.19 is a glorious promise on which we stand and in which we shelter in the evil day. Link this with Rev, 12:12, 15-16 and then read, as in AV, "When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him." Think of Psalm 121 "My safety comes from the Lord." This is gloriously true and we are beginning to prove it, for storms and tides which at one time would have swept us away, now no longer harm us because we have learned, perhaps the hard way, to trust in God and not in ourselves. But since the whole passage speaks of the intervention of the Lord, there seems justification for rendering the second half of v.19, "He (the Lord) will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the Lord drives."(RSV). G.A. Smith translates it, speaking of the coming of the glory of the Lord, "like a pent up flood shall it come, the breath (spirit) of Jehovah driving it on." However you take it, it is glorious. God has purposed blessing and neither men nor devils can stop it. And the nature of the blessing is this: God Himself comes in Person to His people, because their hearts have been made soft by His grace. What a promise is in the last verse. The Spirit and the Word shall not depart from us, nor from our children, nor from their descendants. There is only one thing which can blight or obscure this blessing, and it is found in verses 1-2 of this chapter.

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60:1-9

G.A. Smith entitles the section from 60:1 - 63:6 "Salvation in sight." The day the people of God have waited for has begun to dawn and the people are called to arise and enter into their possessions. The immediate reference is to the return of the Jews from exile, but what is here portrayed in physical and territorial terms can be applied spiritually in a way that turns our eyes forward to the consummation of all God's purposes in, for and through His people. In v.2 the picture is of the sudden transformation from darkness to light which takes place in the East at dawn. One moment it is dark, then light has come and the new day has begun. When God comes to His people, along with the entrance of light there is quickening in the life of His people and a consequent drawing of others from all nations to the hill of the Lord where salvation is. The language used indicates that this is blessing beyond all measurement, and indeed there is a blessed deliverance from statistics, for there is only one name that matters at all, and it is the name of the Lord who has done all things well. The people of the Lord rejoice saying, "God is with us" and the nations around hear and draw near and instantly their testimony is, "Surely God is in this place." Oh, for a foretaste of this in true "revival" blessing before the great day of His glory finally comes.

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60:1-9

Three words could be used to describe this glorious day and with them we give some Scriptures to be considered. It is *sudden*, therefore watch: Luke 12:35ff; 17:20-24. It is a day of *light* and who can stand the light? Malachi 3:1-3; 1 John 1:5-7. It is inevitably a day of *division* and by it people are shown for what they really are: Exodus 11:7; 14:19-20; Malachi 3:18; 4:1-2. Read also Ephesians 5:8-14 which seems to echo this passage. Think lastly of Psalm 34:5 which says, "Those who look to him are radiant (lightened AV)." The picture is of a reflection of Divine glory lighting up the faces of those who have sought their God in and through the travail of experience. We need 2 Cor. 3:18 to finish this scripture meditation on "God is light." Take the phrase "open face" and consider your dealings with God in the light of it. We may be far from perfect, but could there be any greater commendation than to be told we are "open faced" with God? That is what it means to walk in the light (1 John 1:7). Does it not make you think of the Almighty One smiling?

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60:10-22

The picture is of the rebuilding of the city or Jerusalem and its Temple, and can be compared with the description of the new Jerusalem in the second half of Revelation 21. One thing is clear. The Lord Himself is the light of His people and the central focus of this picture of blessing. This means we are to think of all the abundance of provision and wealth as the blessings He brings with Him. But there is more than mere wealth spoken of here. In v.12 and 14 there is the solemn thought of inherited retribution, for the descendants of the persecutors are brought low and are under the moral and spiritual authority of a revived people. This is no temporary triumph or vindication for the people of God. The blessing here envisaged in v.11 is so marked by peace and unquestioned security that there is no need for the gates of the city to be closed. God is not only the light and blessing of His people, but also their defence and security. One deep lesson to be taken from the passage is that in viewing the magnificence of God's work for and blessing of His people, we should call on all that is within us to praise His holy Name. Surrounded by the walls of salvation so that nothing is able to shake our sure repose, have we not cause to praise Him?

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60:10-22

The tremendous inflow of wealth from all directions for the rebuilding of Jerusalem has many lessons as we keep the spiritual rather than the earthly Jerusalem before our minds. It teaches us that God will provide the necessary money and materials for that work which is ordained by His will and executed at His command.

It also teaches us that "eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, the things that God hath prepared for them that love Him," (Isa. 64:4 AV and 1 Cor. 2:9). All the riches spoken of here are to minister to "the place of God's feet," (13) that is, His sanctuary. But is all the effort and sacrifice to go only to making a shrine of beauty? Where is the place of God's feet? When God became man, and we beheld His glory full of grace and truth, where did His feet tread? He went to the Temple and His desire was to make the House of God a place of prayer. But He also walked among the sick, broken and oppressed, and wherever He went there were gleams of glory as people caught sight of the wonder of His saving power. In many senses the people of the world are saying to the Lord's people, "Lighten our darkness," and it is to this end that our sacrificial service must be devoted. But we must never forget the story of Jesus who rebuked Martha when she was cumbered with much serving and had no time to sit at His feet to listen and learn. Neither must we forget the commendation of the woman who broke the box of precious ointment at Jesus' feet. First things must come first. And Jesus is first, always.

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61:1-3

How shall all the glorious blessings of the last chapter be brought to pass? By what instrument shall the victory be accomplished? It is by the Servant of the Lord, and the identity of the Servant is made quite clear by the use Jesus makes of these words in Luke 4:16-21. Remember too that from the moment Jesus' work began it met with the fierce opposition of men and devils. We must learn to see that the Gospel is always a message of crisis, because it is not words only but the message of God's decisive actions. And when He takes the initiative and sets in motion that which cannot be stopped, then all people are judged by their reaction to that work. Jesus came to those living in barren and formal religion and He spoke the words of a living, working God and demonstrated the presence of this saving God amongst them by unmistakable signs of word and action. The whole progress of His ministry was a dividing of people into those who believed and those who refused, and we see, as in Isaiah, that the acceptable year of grace is also, at the same time, the day of vengeance. In the passage from Luke it is customary to point out that Jesus cuts short His quotation from Isaiah, omitting the reference to judgment. This was not because Jesus believed that the day of judgment had been expunged from the glorious message of the Gospel, but because it was not time *yet* for judgment. But, it is because that day draws near that all who are the servants of the Lord must seek that unction of the Spirit which makes them powerful and fruitful witnesses to the truth of the Gospel. We dare not be at ease, for time is short.

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61:1-3

Two thoughts remain to be considered here: the act of proclamation and the message of grace to be proclaimed. These are the two elements of the prophet's spiritual mission to the people of God and through them to the nations. Note that it is a word *first* to God's own people, spoken of here as the meek, the afflicted and the captive. This order is fundamental, as we shall see in v.9, for it is only as God's own people grasp the glory and significance of the sovereign grace bringing them full deliverance and glorious freedom that the message through them becomes recognisable and comprehensible to the unbelieving generation. It is a Gospel which proclaims from first to last something that God has accomplished for men and women and given to them gift-wise. The method of its communication is by preaching, or proclamation, so clearly enunciated here, though this is completely contrary to the modern attitude that the day of the sermon is past. Faith comes by the word preached. (Rom. 10:13-17) and God has ordained that He will work by the method of proclamation (1 Cor. 1:21). But the message will never be heralded with confidence by the people of God until they themselves are delivered from their mourning and heaviness which lie upon their souls because of their sin and failure in the past. This is exactly what the Spirit would convince them of, that the past is in fact past, and in the mercy of God they are being called to rise from the dead and God will give them life and light. God is the Saviour who has broken every chain of evil and overcome every barrier of demoralisation. Now He calls His people to forget the past and to press towards the mark for the prize of their high calling. What a word to start a new day with!

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61:4-9

Yesterday's passage ended with the people of God, awakened and restored, no longer dogged with a fainting spirit but spoken of as "oaks of righteousness", strong and abiding and capable of becoming a shelter for the weary. This is the doing or planting of the Lord and all to His glory alone. Now we read of that which was written off as waste and hopeless material being rebuilt after lying desolate for generations. Is not this a wonderful picture, if you think of the spiritual condition of our parishes and congregations? Can we imagine the strangers being drawn in by the spiritual magnetism of the grace of God through a revived and cleansed people? What would the impact of a church be that was known as a place and a people blessed of God? This is what we must be, as it was in the life of Jesus. It was so manifest that God was with Him that there gathered unto Him all the burdened and broken and He healed them, so that they glorified God (Matt. 15:29-31). It is amazing to think of those who had for so long been rejected, now being used for the blessing of many. We have the same mystery of providence in Romans 11:12 where the awful failure of the Jews in crucifying their Messiah became the fountain of salvation to the Gentiles. God brings good out of evil at terrible cost. Think of the suffering of Jesus, and of the Jews even to this day. But it is the privilege of service, the honour of position and the rewards of grace in v.6-7 that really astonish. God is no man's debtor, and over against the "cost" we reckon we pay in faithful service, we must place the "double portion" of blessing we receive.

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61:10-11

The first main thought here is the personal nature of the thanksgiving as the heart of the prophet sings. It is one thing, and a glorious thing, to speak of the blessing of the Lord upon the fellowship and the work, but when the amazed heart begins to say, "He loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*," and the individual begins to realise that he personally has been clothed with garments of love, privilege and intimacy, this makes the heart sing. Ultimately it is only in the unity of the fellowship that the full glory of the work of God's grace can be seen and expressed. (Eph. 2:4-7, 18-22). But this in no way diminishes the wonder that my life has been drawn up and integrated into the glorious purposes of the God of salvation. This is the kind of thought which delivers from a sense of inferiority and lifts up our heads, cf. Luke 1:46-55. The other main thought in the passage is the suggestion in the last verse of the parable of the Sower. But here, there is no mention of stony and unfruitful ground, nor of any enemy sowing weeds. The God who sows the seed of His saving purposes in the world is the God who grants the increase and causes it to come forth. Go back and read Isa. 55:8-13. This is the prophet's abiding confidence. Not only is God *with* His people, He is working on their behalf and the right arm of His power guarantees the victory, no matter the immediate circumstances or evidences. In due season we shall reap if we

faint not. Be not weary. If God be for us, who can be against us? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory. Do you believe this? You must.

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62:1-5

God continues His message of wondrous love to His people. They have been in exile because of their sins, but now they are being restored to privilege and to service and there is nothing sparse or grudging about God's dealings with them, cf. Joel 2:25-27. In these verses it is almost as if God is baring the innermost secrets of His heart, so that the people may know that He really loves them like this and with this level of generosity, care and loyalty. If it was not written so clearly in Holy Scripture, it would be almost too much to accept. Can God really love a people who have failed Him so much and who have been so unworthy of His loyal love? Did not the prodigal's father call the soiled and tattered wanderer "*my son*"? Look carefully at today's verses for they tell how totally God gives Himself to His people and publicly rejoices in them. In v.4 "Hephzibah" means "My delight is in her," and "Beulah" means "married". In v.5 "your sons" could read "your Restorer". God is determined in love to be loyal to us and to give Himself to us in that bond of love and togetherness which brooks no breaking. And what is more, He is not ashamed to own His bride in public. In v.3 the bride is proudly displayed and held out by God to receive the admiration of the nations. This is what is meant when the Bible says that God loves His people.

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62:6-9

This is all about God's remembrancers and their prayers of intercession on behalf of His people. In the first verse of this chapter, we found God speaking of the unceasing exercise of His heart for the well-being and salvation of His people. Think of the New Testament testimony to Jesus, the Great High Priest who "pursues in heaven His mighty plan, the Saviour and the friend of man." But here the expression of the desire of God's heart is found, not in His Son's work, but in the prayers of His people. They are God's remembrancers, who continually bring to God deliberate reminders of His great promises to His people. This is the basis of our prayers. We are not trying to force God's hand, nor trying to extort blessing from an unwilling deity, but in the mystery of the working of righteousness, our prayers are the effectual instruments of the advancing of God's purposes. Who was it who said, "The prayers of the saints are the decrees of God beginning to work"? What a challenge to our prayerlessness! Verse 6b should read, "You that are the Lord's remembrancers, keep not silence." The New Testament apostle takes up the cry, "Pray without ceasing". But note that the passage ends with the thought of living our lives in the courts of God's holiness.

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62:10-12

The details of this passage are difficult even though the general theme can be grasped and felt. The call to go through the gates may refer either to the people of God departing freely from the place of their bondage, or to their entering into the city of salvation prepared for them. In each case there is no doubt or hesitation, for the work has been done by God and His declaration of salvation has gone out to all the earth. Following upon the earlier verses on prayer, there could be here the exhortation of the Spirit of God to a people still just waking up out of sleep and dragging their feet a little. God is eager to get on. But who does the work of preparation and road-building and the setting up of standards to act as a guide along the way? We have had it made plain to us that the Lord goes before His people, and yet this seems to be the work of men. Can it be the preparatory work of the prophets of God who prepare the way for the coming of the Lord? The hard and exacting toil of road-making, laying foundations to guarantee permanence, and the slow rate of progress all apply to the work of the prophets and prayer remembrancers. But undergirding all is the certainty of the Lord's proclamation, and the fact that His salvation is sweeping on to encompass all His people. Then when the Lord's saving work is made plain before the face of the nations, the city that is founded and built in holiness will be so mighty in testimony that it will be sought out. The Holy City has an attractiveness and arresting power. That is how it should always be. This is a salvation and sanctification that draws rather than repels.

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63:1-6

Salvation to Israel is judgment to her enemies, of which Edom here is the chief. Do not be startled by the intrusion of solemn judgment into this wonderful picture of God's triumphal march forward for the salvation of His people. Look back to chapter 61:2 and remember that all our work is done against this solemn background of eternal judgment. All our preaching, praying and living must be mindful of the ultimate and eternal destinies of the people amongst whom we live our lives. It is no exaggeration to speak of rescuing the perishing, or of snatching brands from the burning, for those who remain unbelieving, stubborn in their proud refusal to repent and be saved, determined not to cast in their lot with God and the ransomed people of His choice, must in the end perish in the day of righteous judgment. That day is the theme here. Consider Scriptures such as Deut. 32:35; Joel 3:13-14; Heb. 2:1-2; 10:26-31, 38-39; Rev. 14:18-20; and the words of our blessed Lord Himself in Matt. 25:31-46. It remains only to ask if, in fact, we do live in the light of such final issues. Perhaps here lies a great deal of the explanation of the lack of drive, urgency and compassion in our Christian life and witness.

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63:1-6

It is not reading into the passage to say that just as we have seen the Suffering Servant in relation to the salvation of God's people, so here we see something of the suffering God in relation to the issues of righteous judgment. Note that the picture is not of an army but of a solitary warrior returning victorious from battle with the marks of warfare upon him. Who is this with "raw red" (dyed) garments striding (travelling) forward in the majesty of his strength? The answer given needs no exposition, for it thrills mind, heart and spirit. This is the God whose every word (and action) is spoken in righteousness, the God who is *mighty to save*. But His apparel tells of His work of judgment, in which work He is upheld by His righteous wrath (v.5). When we speak in measured terms of the fact of final judgment, which we must never seek to deny, we must also recognise that down through the ages of history, God is always coming down amongst men to see their wickedness and to bring it to judgment. Think of the story of the cities of the plain in Genesis 18:17-22. Today's verses in Isaiah speak of God treading the winepress, whereby the evil fruit of godlessness has been compelled to express its juice, so demonstrating the necessity and the righteousness of judgment. This is the God with whom men and nations have constantly to do, and before whom they must stand in the final judgment. How solemn then the verdict in Daniel 5:23. Could it be said of us?

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63:7-9.

We could almost have expected the prophecy of Isaiah to have ended with yesterday's reading. The final salvation of Israel has been spoken of as sealed, and the final day of judgment has come to view as a necessary corollary. But now there begins what is really a final prayer that Israel, the whole of Israel, might be ready for this great salvation and willingly respond to its call. This prayer occupies the passage from 63:7- 64: 12. It is followed in chapter 65 by an answer from God, and the final chapter brings us again to the last judgment. Note that in this prayer, which begins with a tremendous statement in which the loving-kindness of God is recalled, the prophet identifies himself with the people and speaks of them in a very personal way. In a very real sense Isaiah was not guilty of the sins of base ingratitude spoken of here, nor of the proud rebellions of the people, nor of the false and superficial relationship with God. But, like the Servant of Whom he has spoken, Isaiah numbers himself with the transgressors, bears the sins of many, feeling their load and grief, and he makes intercession for many. This is the kind of man he has become in and through his dealings with God. In his prayer he pleads the past mercies of God and confesses the worst sins of the people. Take but two of the phrases referring to God and ponder them well. He speaks of the multitude of God's loving kindnesses (7) and his love and sparing grace (mercy) in v.9. But who can plumb the wonder of the opening of v.9? "In every pang that rends the heart the man of sorrows has a part."

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63:10

By taking this verse alone we can highlight the enormity of the sin it portrays. If God had been harsh, cruel, cold, demanding or even strictly righteous in His dealings with us, we might have some cause for failing to be warmhearted in our response. But in view of what He has been, what He has done, and what He has given, who can possibly justify this sweeping and contemptuous neglect and rejection of God? But this is what Israel did all through her history, as Stephen declared so boldly in Acts 7:51-53. Is not this what we do? When we get tired of God and of His discipleship, does He not still ask the question of Micah 6:1-3? How quickly we get to the stage of saying *we* will not take any more unworthy contempt from our fellows, while God's love goes on yearning over *us*. We say we would not treat God so, but we treat God's other children so! We need to consider the exhortation, "Grieve not the Holy Spirit", and to ponder the practical application of Eph. 4:26-27, 29-32; 5:1-2. Read also Isa.1:2-3!

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63:11-19

This prayer could be likened to the story of the prodigal, for it reveals the terribleness of sin against love and the surpassing wonder of the forgiveness of love. In v.11-14 it seems that present distress and spiritual barrenness make the people look back to the days when God was mightily at work amongst them in the power of the Holy Spirit. But it is not so any more. In v.11 read, "*Then they remembered.*" They cry, "Where is the God who divides the seas, shepherds His people and shows the Spirit's power in their lives?" In v.13-14 the picture is of the hand of the master on the bridle of the horse, guiding, reassuring and keeping. Why do people ever turn from such a God? This is the folly and perversity of sin. In v.15 the people seem to know in theory the fact of God's heart of love toward them, but they do not feel it and they seem to cry, "Where is the surge of yearning in Your heart?" It is as if in prayer the people cry to God not to hold back or stifle the sighs of *His* yearning for them. They plead that even if their illustrious forebears cast them off and disown them God may still call them by His name. Why should He? Because He is the true Father of the prodigal. But ponder what it would be if God's love did weary of us. We should not take it so much for granted.

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63:11-19

Two thoughts are in the hearts of the people as they ask the Lord to return to them. They wonder if the disciplines of God have hardened their hearts like Pharaoh's so that they no longer feel the living, spiritual poignancy of true prayer. Think of what a later prophet had to speak in Jer.7:16; 11:14; 14:7-12. Why, oh why, do we think so lightly about our sins and count easy repentance all that is needed to make things right again.? Look at Isaiah's confession on behalf of the people of God in v.19, where he says they have become as those who have never known the name of the Lord. Having begun their plea on the basis of the great mercy of God, they now speak of the greatness of their need. It is almost as if by displaying their pathetic condition they might move the heart of God towards them. Had they but known, His heart yearned for them. The barrier was on their part, not His. It is one thing to feel pathetic or even penitent, but another to forsake the sins that have taken us away from God.

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64:1-4

This is a prayer for revival, whatever we may mean by that much abused word. It is a cry for the intervention of God on behalf of His people and work as in the days of old. It is a longing that all understand who have a heart-burden for the spiritual and moral barrenness of the nation and the church within it. The plea for God to come down is a development from 63:15 where God *looks* down. But do we understand what we are asking for when we pray for revival and long for the out-pouring of the Spirit's power from heaven in quickening and awakening? We recall the words of Malachi 3:1.-10. Who indeed can abide when, in Isaiah's words, the presence of the Lord makes mountains melt, kindles the brushwood with fire, and causes the waters to boil and erupt? Does it not make you think of the darkness and the rocks rending at the Cross, or of the vivid and alarming visions of the Book of Revelation? It is no light thing to ask God to come down and work salvation to

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the glory of His own name. In v.3 we are faced with changes we did not expect, things awesome in their prospect. But the important thing is not the outward manifestations and commotion, but the living presence of God among His people. Nothing less and nothing other than this will turn the captivity of the church in our day, and this is the work God is waiting to do for the people that wait upon Him.

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64:5-7

If God dwells with the contrite in heart and works mightily for those who wait upon Him, what is the situation when God's own people are not particularly disposed to have Him so mightily and disturbingly in their midst? Think how we can gripe and complain when an extra meeting (or a very long sermon) intrudes upon our carefully laid plans for our pleasure and entertainment. How would we react if the living presence of God in the community brought orderly life to a standstill, as people sought salvation with an earnestness that comes only of the Holy Ghost? Is the explanation of the limitation of the Spirit's blessing to be found here in our churches and congregations? God chooses His company, says the prophet in v.5, and with this people He is angry. The soiled, tattered and withered condition of their spiritual life is vividly portrayed in v.6, and in v.7 the charge is made that they do not really want to change. Take the phrase, "strive to take hold of you," and consider it in relation to our private prayer, our prayer in the Prayer Meeting, and our whole spiritual outlook. Are we really surprised that there is no revival? The end of v.5 is difficult. It could mean, "We have been dawdling like this in our sins for a long time. Is there any real hope of being saved?" Or it could, for our encouragement, be taken in the general context of God being in fact already at work, and read, "In those ways of God there is continuance that we may yet be saved." However we take the message, it is clear the future is in the balance.

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64:8-12

There is every reason why God should wash His hands of a people like this, but over against the tragic brokenness of Israel stands the God of their salvation. He is their Father, the One by whom they were born as sons. They were chosen in the mystery of eternal election and became sons in fact and experience by their willing response to the call of His grace. But should not sons show a willing submission to their Father? True; but is there not such a thing as a prodigal son, one who knows there is no righteous ground for being taken back, who yet pleads with eloquent silence the love of the Father? The Father is also the Potter, the one by whose providential discipline the chosen and called material is fashioned into a vessel that will fulfil its appointed destiny and purpose. It is this relationship of love and purpose that is made the basis of the final petition of the prayer in v.9-12. We are God's people by creation and by the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. But we are His people many times over: by His choice and election; by His effectual call, by His regenerating power; by His patient discipline and providence; and by His heart of love that still desires us for Himself, even when we by our lives for a season contradict all His hopes and aspirations for us. How thankful we should be that He is a determined God, not easily put off, a God willing to chastise us sorely rather than let us sell our inheritance.

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64:9-12

The prophet takes God at His own word and says, "We are Your people, God. You have said it Yourself." (63:8). The prayer seems to acknowledge all the sins and failures which have brought the work of God to such a low ebb that it is despised by the community. But now the people ask God to intervene for the work's sake, and this is exactly what He does. He preserves that which is His own. This does not mean that every time we get into a mess because of our sins and bring a blight of powerlessness upon the work entrusted to our care, God will hasten to remedy and revive. Think of the long years that Israel dwelt in Egypt because of her sin. Think of the inevitable national landslide into captivity because there was no moral repentance when God called by His prophets. Think of the searching words spoken by Jesus in Matt. 21:33-43, especially the last verse. Then, in the light of today's passage, consider the challenge of 2 Cor. 6:11-7:1. The spiritual torpor is not on God's side but on ours, and if the voice of His Spirit can reach right into our hearts, then the future possibility of our lives and service is literally beyond measurement. What God has done in the past He can do again if He finds a willing people in the day of His power.

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65:1-7

If you think this is a strange answer to the prayer in the previous two chapters, remember 64:3. God moves in a mysterious way, and as His work moves on to its glorious climax a deep division becomes increasingly clear, not merely between Israel (the church) and the nations (the unbelieving world), but between the faithful seed and the faithless people within the sphere of religious profession. It is a division which takes time to show, but in the end it cannot be concealed and because of this we do not need to force the issue. All will be clear at last. Let the wheat and weeds grow together until the harvest (Matt. 13:24-30), by which time each fruit will have declared its root and source. Although wheat and weeds may have many similarities in early stages of growth, so that people may mistake the one for the other, in the harvest one is clearly destined for burning and the other to be gathered into the barn. Jesus said, "Not all who call Me 'Lord, Lord' shall enter into the kingdom of heaven," (Matt. 7:20-23), and Paul makes the same distinction between outward profession and inward reality in Romans 9:6-8. God makes the distinction here when He describes His people, the people who call themselves by His name, as a people rebellious and insensitive to His call, a people who deliberately provoke their God and stir His resentment (3). Is it not this same God who speaks in His Son as He weeps over Jerusalem many years later saying, "I would . . . but you would not" (Luke 13:34; 19:41-42)?

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65:1-7

Many New Testament echoes are here. With what measure ye mete it shall be measured to you again. Whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap. Read this passage in a modern translation and you will see it to be an indictment of the faithless, the spiritual traitors of Israel. Their attitude of refusal of the speech of God, together with the unholy substitutions they offered to God as sacrifice, the God-forbidden things they dabbled in, and their astonishing spiritual pride (5) all mark them out as apostate. How could they live like this and still call themselves the people of God and assume His favour was upon them? It was because they were not really interested in God, and that is the sum total of the religion of countless church members today. Read v.1, "I was there for enquiry by those who never asked Me, I was there to be found by those who did not seek Me. I said, 'Here am I, here am I,' to a nation that has not called upon My Name." This was a religious people who went on living in a way that they knew was not pleasing God, but they were not disposed to change a way of life they had followed for a long time. God could say what He pleased, as loudly and in whatever way He pleased, but they were not going to change, not even to please Him, not even to seek to learn what pleased Him. How can such people believe they are Christians and how can they possibly expect to go to heaven when they die? They would try to change heaven into a place that had no room for Jesus. Indeed, they would try to throw God out of heaven as they have tried to throw Him out of the Church and the world. But it cannot be so.

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65:1-7

In Romans 10:20-21 Paul uses these verses in relation to the Gentiles finding salvation in Christ whom the Jews rejected. Here are some telling words from the notes of Rev. W. Still: "With regard to the backsliding, Isaiah compares them with others (pagans or unspiritual folk?) who stumble upon God and realise they were looking for this Jehovah all the time though they knew it not. But Israel does not stumble upon Him; she passes by in the temple and market place and never sees Him. She is utterly blind to Him. If you told them that the God of their temple was a living God who was looking down and beholding them, as their pagan idols couldn't do, they would get the shock of their lives. How true this is to life! Some sit under the sound of the Gospel for years, even live in an atmosphere soaked in private and common prayer, and yet it never strikes them that God is living. They only hear men speaking, and do not understand even what they say. And into the midst comes a 'stranger' who sits and listens, leans forward, drinks it in, almost scrambles over the pew at the end crying, 'This is who I have been looking for, lead me to Him. Where do I find Him? In His Book?' And before you know where you are the 'stranger' is leading the people of God, but still the others sit in darkness and exclaim contemptuously, 'Another has caught the disease!' Marvellous are Thy ways, O God, and that my soul well knoweth."

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65:8-10

This is a word spoken to the faithful and it emphasises that they are secure whatever happens. The judgment on a decadent nation which has apostatised from the faith is not necessarily immediate, although nevertheless certain. The picture here is of one cluster of grapes showing signs of future produce while the rest of the vine is barren. Because of the small "remnant", the small group that shows spiritual promise, the few who are pressing on with God and into God, the whole barren organisation is spared. Although it may not be immediately obvious, it is the faithful remnant which carries the whole burden of the work of the Spirit, and many things which merit rebuke and chastisement at the hand of God are spared temporarily for the sake of that remnant. But in the end, of course, all things must be made plain and many who have fondly imagined they were rather wonderful saints will discover that they have been spiritually paralytic for years and have been carried along by others. Think of some Christians when they are detached from the love (which they despised) and the support (which they were unaware of) of the fellowship which is their spiritual home. When they go to a new area, they are required to stand on their own feet and prove the validity of their spiritual profession. They will quickly find their own level, and it may be so low as to be scarcely recognisable as Christian. But the remnant will stand no matter what happens for they are of a basically different spirit. They may blunder and stagger at times but they are God's elect, His people, His servants, and they seek Him.

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65:11-16

It is God alone who judges and makes distinctions, and the word here returns to the theme of the faithless being cast off. Note how the Lord charges them with deliberate wrongdoing. In as much as they have claimed religious background and privileges and instruction, they have no cloak or excuse for their sins. There may be some excuse for those who have never had the Word of God brought to them and explained, but there are no mitigating circumstances in the case of those who have been taught line upon line, precept upon precept. Note how these religious people have allowed their religion to become a hotch-potch of superstition, preparing a table for Fortune or Good Luck (Destiny). But v.12 goes to the heart of the matter with devastating reality and power. This is the test. What do we do and how do we react when God the Lord speaks? Read John 12:47-49. Isaiah's words in v.13-14 are to be compared with those of Jesus in Luke 6:20-26, and with emphasis there on the contrast between "now" and "after". God says to the faithless that their name will be a warning to future generations, and like Lot's wife their story will be a solemn sermon on the end of those who go back from their faith.

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65:17-25

The last statement of yesterday's passage turned our thoughts from the solemnity of judgment to the person of the God of truth, or the true God, or the God of the Amen. This is the God who can be depended upon to keep His word, and therefore His word is a sufficient practical basis for life. It is an infallible word in the true sense of that expression. It is a word that will not let you down or lead you astray. It is an amazingly balanced word, as we see here, for we are not left with the suggestion that judgment is the end to which God's purposes are directed. God works towards life and peace and blessing, and judgment is a stage and instrument of that purpose which will culminate in God's being able to say again, "Behold, it is very good." (Gen.1:31). In all the travail of present experience and the apparent delay of fulfilment of God's promises, we must constantly remind ourselves that in fact "we look for new heavens and a new earth." (2 Peter 2:10-14) The direction of all our life is "the world to come" and not "this present wicked world". This is one reason why we need to keep the Sabbath holy, or set apart for God, and keep it free from the intrusions of the worldly world of the other six days. We need to reaffirm in our deepest spirit that "our citizenship is in heaven." Perhaps if we had more grasp on the facts of eternity we might have more evangelistic zeal. Life is short and eternity is for ever. But all too often it is the things of time that kindle our excited zeal and energetic action, while the things of eternity grow dull and stagnate while we excuse our indolence by saying we have no opportunity. Is it not strange that Christians seem to have so much more opportunity for earthly activity than heavenly?

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65:17-25

Before we deal with this passage in detail, read back over the whole section from v.8 to grasp the clear distinction God makes between His own people and all others. Now note in the central section v.11-16 that the issue of unbelief in the lives of men and women is *present frustration* because sin is its own reward (Jas. 1:11-16). Unbelief brings also *present judgment* because God's face is against evil (1 Peter 3:12 and Psalm 34:11-22). But the present situation is projected into the eternal and we see *permanent rejection*. Just think of the words of gracious, gentle but realistic Jesus when He said, "Depart from Me, I never knew you, you that work iniquity." In utter contrast, what we have in v.17-25 is the rest and peace which Jesus promises to those who bear His yoke. This is blessing which is not postponed entirely to eternity, although it is found in its fullness only there. Pleasures for ever more contrast totally with the pleasures of sin for a season (Psalm 16:11; 36:7-9; Heb. 11:25). But remember that Jesus promised that *in this life* the pleasurable compensations of faith would be accompanied by persecutions (Mk. 10:28-31). The cost does not rob the experience of its blessing. How could it, when in experience we begin to know the healing of discord and hurt as is promised in v.25?

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65:17-25

The new order of things which the prophet describes in material terms in relation to an earthly Jerusalem is a very vivid spiritual picture. It is God's doing, and in it the past is forgotten (17). It is a world of God's intense pleasure in which we are called to share the delight (18-19). It is difficult to say what v.20 means, for eternal life is not merely prolonged days and in this new world there can be no death. It may be that the verse hints at the shattering intrusion of death (as the fruit of sin) into human experience with all the consequent distress, and declares there will be none of that any more. There is security of life and a place of belonging (21-22) and there shall be no ending. This future state is spoken of as a family (23) in which there is communion of a most wonderfully personal and immediate kind (24). But have we not found something of this kind of experience even here upon earth? And looking back, have we not discerned the workings of God in preparation for the answer to our prayers, before we have really formulated our petitions in coherent expression? Last of all, the word speaks blessedly of the ending of the blasts of discord and winds of suspicion and the tearings of tension that mark the life of humanity. Is such blessing too good to be true and too much to hope for? Read on into the next chapter and learn to taste and see that the Lord is good.

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66:1-2

God is able. There is no inability on His part. God is all powerful, all knowing and everywhere present. All is His. He is everywhere. Everything serves Him, and He fulfils Himself in so many different ways that we who have made Him small by the inhibitions of unbelief are in danger of losing our capacity to see Him at work. In fact, sometimes when we see Him at work, we refuse to believe it is He and try to put an end to His working (Mark 9:38) because it does not conform to the pattern we expect God to adopt. But God, although He chooses to work through the people He has chosen, refuses to be trapped in and confined to a religious system that has lost its reality, vitality and pliability. Neither will God be impressed by and drawn to the mighty edifices and works that people create out of their own ingenuity. Wherever God can find a humble and contrite spirit, sensitive and responsive to the Word He speaks, He is instantly desirous of drawing near. God looks on the heart and any sacrifice, be it pagan or evangelical, is hateful to Him if it does not come from a pure and single heart. It is all too possible to do great things that involve much labour and possibly much pleasure as a substitute for giving God the heart. Think for example of what we seek to do for God as an alternative to and substitute for praying at home and in the Prayer Meeting.

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66:3-4

In v. 3 which is difficult the reference is to four Jewish sacrifices linked with four pagan ones. Then, in the last part of the verse, the people are accused of taking their own way in terms of religion and being exceedingly

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pleased with their worship which God in fact hated. It is difficult to decide if the verse means that there were Jews offering both types of sacrifices. If so it means their religion had become a syncretism of the holy and profane. Or it may mean that the appointed sacrifices offered without the obedient heart were in God's sight as hateful as the pagan rites of unenlightened people. Whatever the exact meaning, it is clear that the Jews were pleased with their pattern of religious activity and were not disposed to change for any prophet, or for God Himself. But God brings home His righteous recompense on a rebellious people. This is the inevitable fruit of lives that refuse so blatantly to give heed to what God is saying. It is easy to brush off such words as these and to go on living *religious* lives while the heart is altogether removed from God, and all the while say with a self-confident laugh, "My conscience is clear." Your conscience may in fact, be dead and incapable any more of registering whether *God* is pleased or not. This is spiritual tragedy.

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66:5-6

Wherever you find a situation of spiritual apostasy you also find a spirit of contempt for and persecution of those who seek to stand by the Word of God and its full testimony. It is never easy to be part of a minority movement, and when that movement grows smaller and smaller numerically and the forces of unbelief grow stronger and more blatantly vocal, the cost of faithfulness increases. Look how they deride the remnant who take the word of the Lord with such deep and practical solemnity. Not only do they cast them out as spiritually "undesirable", they mock their testimony and say as in 5:19 - "Let us see your God doing some of the things you say He will do." But God does not "perform" at the command of men. When His time comes He will *appear* to the joy of His people and He will *act* not merely to preserve them but to *vindicate* in full those who have suffered for their faithfulness. In v.6 there is a shout heard which signifies that God is settling accounts in full (Joel 3:9-16). See how all this is echoed in the words of Jesus in references such as John 15:18-21; 16:1-4; Luke 21:12-19; Matt. 27:39-44. In the very hour of seeming defeat and catastrophe victory was being won. Do you believe this? In your patient endurance you will take possession of your souls.

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66:7-9

These words have their primary application in relation to the return of the Jews from captivity after long years of weary waiting. When the time came, it all happened so quickly they could hardly believe it. The miracle was so swiftly and (apparently) so easily accomplished (Psalm 126:1-3) that many failed to recognise the greatness and significance of the event, just as the event of Bethlehem was passed over as an incidental and irrelevant happening. But if people had eyes to see and hearts to understand, they would be aware that "God is on the field when He is most invisible." (Faber) The sudden outbursts of God's working are usually preceded by long preparation. Think of this in terms of an individual conversion! *Then* when God's time is fully come, there emerges into view the work He has been preparing (Gal. 4:4; Acts 2:1). Keep in mind that in God's work there is both the long travail of preparation (Matt. 24:1-8, 13) and also the swift fruition (2 Peter 3:8-10; 1 Thess. 5:1-3). Be ye also ready, for in such an hour as you think not God will call you to action and participation in what He is doing. But keep in mind the assurance of v.9, and think of the words of the hymn writer, "Thy mercy will not fail us nor leave Thy work undone; with Thy right hand to help us, the victory shall be won." (Plumptre)

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66:10-14

We have been trying to emphasise that all God's workings are perfect in preparation, timing and execution. The present travail of His faithful people is not for nothing, and its living issue will be brought forth to the joy and delight of both God and His people. Those who have a heart for God's Jerusalem will be conscious of love, deep and continuing, for her and her work, and when she is distressed they will be filled with sorrow. But the time will come when sorrow will be turned to joy (John 16:20-22) and all the costly labour will be forgotten in the delight of the new thing that has been brought forth. Note how close a relationship is portrayed here and how it is the sharing of one life, one love, one family and one rejoicing. The fortunes and pleasures of God, His people and His work are all bound up together in the present travail of this world and in the future blessedness of the world to come. If *we* love that part of the work we are called to, just think how much God loves it! If we grieve

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over its failings how much more does God! If we are angry at those who despise and harm the work, so is the God whose hand is power as well as love (v.14).

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66:15-24

This final passage is full of solemn tones of judgment, yet it contains great gleams of mercy. It is above all else realistic because it compels us, however unwillingly, to face the ultimate issues of heaven and hell and the eternal antagonism between God's righteousness and man's unrighteousness. Consider Revelation 22:10-12, and then Jesus' words in Mark 9:43-48, where the word "sin" could read "stumble". Take also the words of Jesus in Matt. 25:31-33, 46 to confirm in our thoughts and feelings the issues of destiny that are forever challenging us as we live out our days in the midst of God's working. In Isaiah's day, as in ours, the worldly people did not care and the religious people did not believe, but the day of the Lord came upon them and God carried out His judgment (v.16) and the "slain of the Lord" were many. The "glory" that they see (v.18) is judgment not salvation (Rev. 1:7); a great gulf is fixed between the saved and the lost (Luke 16:19-31) and the separation can neither end nor be remedied. Over this solemn issue stands the Cross, the sinner's hope, the only way to God.

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66:15-24

We are told that in the ritual of the Jewish synagogue when the last chapter of Isaiah is read, verse 23 is read a second time *after* verse 24, so that the final note of the prophecy is of mercy triumphing over wrath, and that is how we desire to end our studies. We dare not, nor do we desire to, deny the solemn eternal issues. How could we, for they are true! The wording of v.23 "one new moon to another" is equivalent to our "for ever and ever," and the worship spoken of links the glories of v.18 and the awe-fulness of v.24. You begin to see the link between the "fear" and "great joy" the Scriptures speak of so often together. It is thus we must consider our calling to service and witness. Inasmuch as we possess the light and truth of God whereby sinners are saved, we cannot deny them to those who sit in darkness, who live without hope and die without Christ and without God. This witness is the responsibility of the faithful remnant, saved in the midst of and by means of judgment. If we ever feel we are few, very few, in face of the need, then the responsibility is all the greater. There are people and nations waiting to hear the glorious message of grace and salvation and judgment (19). God still says, as He did at the start of this Book of Isaiah, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Isa. 6:8). Isaiah said "Here am I, send me." The fruit of his consecration to service is this prophecy we have studied with so much profit.

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