

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

ISAIAH

Trusting God's Promises



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All Scripture quoted from English Standard Version.

How to Use This Devotional

The goal of this devotional is immersion in the book of Isaiah during the season of Lent. Isaiah's main themes of renouncing self-reliance and trusting God's promises of deliverance seem particularly relevant for this season set apart for repentance and rediscovery of God's grace. And, of course, Isaiah's messianic prophecies, which gain clarity and force as the book progresses, uniquely contribute to our anticipation of worshipping the Crucified and Risen Christ during Holy Week.

Each week during Lent, plus the bonus Easter week, focuses on one section of Isaiah. Be sure to read the corresponding section each week, which you may want to break up into daily readings of one to two chapters, or you might read in its entirety each day.

Each devotional reading highlights a specific verse from that week's section, and provides some reflections or application questions along with a brief prayer. Devotional readings are not included on Sundays because we will feast on God's word together with God's people during Lord's Day worship at church.

May the Spirit increase our faith, enhance our hope, and deepen our love for God and others as we let Isaiah guide us on this Lenten journey.

LENT BEGINS

Week of Ash Wednesday

Read Isaiah 1-5

Ash Wednesday / Lent Begins

*Come now, let us
reason together, says
the LORD: though
your sins are like
scarlet, they shall be
as white as snow;
though they are
red like crimson,
they shall become
like wool.*

- Isaiah 1:18

PRAYER

Lord, we repent
of our sins and
bow down in awe
of your mercy.

Scarlet Mercy

Imagine yourself in the cosmic courtroom facing the judge of all that exists. You are charged with the highest crime. You have forsaken the Lord your God. The evidence is indisputable. The heavens and the earth have proven reliable witnesses of your idolatry and injustice. You have been compared to a cheating spouse, a rebellious child, and an unruly animal. The verdict is clear: Those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed. Those who refuse him now will certainly be refused by him in eternity.

Lent must begin with an honest assessment of our standing before God. In our sinful state, we are estranged from God and in need of his mercy. Sin disorders our loves and damages the communion God desires with us.

And yet, the Judge makes an unexpected offer. Delaying sentencing, he says, "Come now, let us reason together. Consider your condition. Do you have any hope? Turn to me. I can expunge your criminal record. I can pardon your sins. I can cleanse your conscience and make it pure again. You have forsaken me, but I have not forsaken you. I, the Lord whom you have rejected, have not rejected you. In Jesus Christ I have come near, bearing sin and death to heal, forgive, and restore you. I bled scarlet on the cross for you, and paid for your idolatry and injustice with my crimson blood." Have you come and accepted the gracious offer of the merciful Judge?

Ash Wednesday reminds us that the Christian life is a life of perpetual repentance. It is turning away from sin and toward God, and living in the humility of a pardoned criminal. It is noticing daily that the scarlet of sin has been replaced by the brilliant white of God's own righteousness. It is the sunrise-like wonder at the self-giving, reconciling love of the Savior, whose life poured out cleanses, forgives, and renews. His blood, in the words of John Donne, "...hath this might, that being red, it dyes red souls to white."

Thurs / Day 2

*O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of
the LORD.*

- Isaiah 2:5

PRAYER

Lord, let us walk
in your light as we
wait for the glory
of your kingdom.

The Light of the LORD

Throughout the book, Isaiah combines rebukes of present sins with glimpses of future glory. Repentance and change are encouraged in view of God's promises to restore and renew. In the present, Jerusalem is threatened by foreign invaders. It's not the spiritual and moral center it is supposed to be. The holy city is hardly the home of the glory of the Lord! But what Zion is not now, it will surely one day be, because the Lord will make it so.

Isaiah presents a vision of Zion as a gathering place of the nations of the earth. They will stream to the exalted mountain, attracted to the revelation of the transformative truth of the Lord. They will come because God is there, the real God who speaks and acts and changes everything. Under the revelation and rule of the Lord, war will become unnecessary. Nationalism, ethno-centrism, imperialism, xenophobia, and racism wither and die in the light of the Lord. Swords become plowshares and spears pruning hooks. Strength and skill are not used to inflict pain and destroy, but to cultivate life.

Having finished the description of the future glory of Zion, the prophet calls on God's people to walk in the light of the Lord. The logic is clear. If the revelation of the truth and rule of God is what will attract the nations to the restored Zion, then those to whom the Lord has already revealed himself should live consistently with his truth and under his rule. Hope is a vision of a better future that affects our present experience. Are we hope-filled people? Is it possible that the nations are not drawn to the church and her teaching because the church herself is not walking in the light of the Lord? Do our lives reflect the future glory that is ours in Christ? Does the light of the gospel shine so brightly in our church that others are drawn to it?

Fri /
Day 3

*For Jerusalem has
stumbled, and Judah
has fallen, because
their speech and their
deeds are against the
LORD, defying his
glorious presence.
- Isaiah 3:8*

PRAYER

Lord, we
welcome your
glorious presence.

His Glorious Absence

The prophet describes the Jerusalem society in the process of disintegration in vivid detail. Those who are expected to provide stability and direction are failing to lead. They are acting like children. Social order has collapsed. All parts of the leadership structure are affected—law enforcement, military, courts, government, and religion. The standards of leadership are low, and yet few want to become leaders. Anyone even remotely resembling a leader is given a position of influence, only to refuse it immediately. To accept it is to rule over a heap of ruins with no ability to fix the problems of the community.

Why does Jerusalem find itself in such a leaderless mess? The cause is clearly stated: The people defy the glorious presence of the Lord. The city of God refuses to acknowledge God in their city. Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen because they speak against God, and they live against his will. Without the Lord, there is only disintegration.

Why is poor or absent leadership a fitting punishment for defying the glorious presence of the Lord? Because human leadership is inextricably dependent on his presence and influence. Human leadership is derivative. Made in God's image, all people are called to rule over the world, but only as God's representatives and never as their own sovereigns. A culture functioning in opposition to the Lord cannot, by definition, have good leaders. It is afflicted with selfish, fame-seeking, power-hungry little would-be deities. It does not take long for such leaders to reduce their kingdoms to heaps of ruins.

And yet, in his absence, God's glory is revealed because people desire for the light of his presence. Sometimes when God withdraws we see him more clearly. We see how essential he is. In the darkness of a godless culture, a desire is awakened. This desire is for a leader who can heal, skilled in binding wounds. A leader who can raise up those who have stumbled and fallen. A leader who can turn a heap of ruins into a beautiful and prosperous city. This desire is for Jesus Christ, the King of kings.

*What more was
there to do for
my vineyard,
that I have not
done in it?
- Isaiah 5:4*

PRAYER

Lord, we take
full responsibility
for our sins.

Whose Fault Is It?

Sin is not only rejecting God, but also making him responsible for our rejection. Beginning with Adam, who blamed his sin on the woman whom God gave him, we attempt to make God guilty of participating in our criminal activity, or at least not preventing crimes he could have easily stopped. It may come out in such a philosophical question as, "Is God not the author of evil?" Or in an existential cry, "Where is God when sin prevails?" Or in a low-grade, life-long resentment that God has not given us what we want. Such attitudes are essential components of our sinful nature. Sinfulness necessarily contains irresponsibility. No sinner believes they are ultimately to blame.

The Song of the Vineyard gives us two images that confront our blame-shifting. First, there is a picture of the Lord as a skillful and careful vinedresser (5:1-2). He plants choice vines on a fertile hill, protects it from a watchtower, and prepares a vat for the wine. And still, the vineyard yields wild grapes unsuitable for making wine and thus useless. This picture is followed by a question (5:3-4): What more could the vinedresser do to ensure a good harvest? Nothing. No rational person can blame the vinedresser. The problem is clearly with the vines and the grapes.

The second picture is the vineyard left without the vinedresser's attention (5:5-6). Without the protection, the pruning, the weeding, and the watering, the vineyard does not stand a chance! Imagine your life without God's involvement. Now consider, what more could the Lord do for us? In another story about God's vineyard (Matthew 21:33-41), we learn that God went as far as sending his own Son, only to see him killed by the wicked tenants! Is there really anything else in the world that God could have done to turn us away from sin?

The problem is with us. To reconcile with God and to live consistently in a relationship with him, we must take responsibility for our own sinfulness as well as our specific sins. If there is bloodshed instead of justice and outcry instead of righteousness, surely it is not God's fault. It is ours and ours alone.

WEEK 1

Lord's Day / First Sunday in Lent

Read Isaiah 6-12

*And one called to
another and said:
“Holy, holy, holy
is the LORD of
hosts; the whole earth
is full of his glory!”
- Isaiah 6:3*

PRAYER

No one is
like you, Lord.

Holy, Holy, Holy

How holy do you think God is? Before you can answer this question, we need to define holiness. Holiness is God-ness. To say that God is holy is to say that God is God. He is who he is. He is so specifically and wonderfully God that he must be put in a category all by himself. Only God is God. Only God is holy.

But the Bible describes people and even things as holy too. A person is holy in as much as they resemble God. “Be holy as I am holy,” God commands. A person is holy because they are connected to God and reflect his nature. A thing can be holy because it has been set apart to be used only for God who is holy, like utensils in the temple or priestly garments. But nothing can be holy, according to the Bible, unless it is linked with God’s nature and character.

Of course, that is not how most of us understand holiness. Our sinful journey consists of searching for holiness apart from God and away from him. We find many people and things we consider holy, even if we don’t use the term. They are deities of various value and influence. For example, we might consider our work holy, demanding that we sacrifice health and rest in service of that little god. Or we might consider our political affiliations holy, a god powerful enough to break up churches and families.

So, how holy do you think God is? Is he holy like some other idols in your life, content to take his place in the pantheon and happy to get any attention at all? Is he twice holy like some of the idols that you have let into the holy of holies of your heart—important, sure, but fiercely competing with other divine rulers? Or is he thrice holy? Is he holy in a way that defines holiness? Is he so above the other would-be gods that they lose their appeal? Is he so apart from anything and anyone that new linguistic tools are needed to describe him?

In the Hebrew language, superlatives are often expressed through repetition. “Peace, peace” means perfect peace. But only once in the Hebrew Bible is a word repeated three times. It is a super superlative because God is God, and he is holy, holy, holy. He is gloriously, brilliantly, earth-shakingly, burning-hot holy. That is how holy he really is.

How holy do you think he is?

*Ask a sign of the
LORD your God;
let it be deep as Sheol
or high as heaven.
- Isaiah 7:11*

PRAYER

Lord, give us
opportunities to
trust you.

I Will Not Ask

How do you respond to adversity? Do you see it as an opportunity to trust God? Or do you see it as a problem you must solve on your own?

King Ahaz of Judah was faced with the combined forces of Syria and Israel preparing to storm Jerusalem. As any person under pressure and facing future uncertainty, he could respond in one of two ways: He could trust the Lord or he could trust himself. What will it be? Faith or self-sufficiency? The Lord wanted Ahaz to trust him, and he spoke to the king through his prophet, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God." The Lord wanted to encourage Ahaz to trust him by giving him a sign of his presence and power. It is wonderfully thoughtful and caring of the Lord to help the king respond in faith. God is willing to go to the deepest depths and highest heights to encourage his people to trust him.

But Ahaz refused to ask for a sign. He did not want any extra reason to exercise his faith. He preferred to leave this crisis in the realm of human affairs and untouched by God's presence. God himself came to Ahaz and said, "I will help you trust me, I will make sure it will be easy for you to trust me." And Ahaz refused. Even worse, Ahaz used a Bible verse to justify his self-reliance. "I will not put the Lord to the test," he said.

Ahaz was the last sovereign king of Judah. His refusal to trust the real ruler of Jerusalem cost him his kingdom. Instead of trusting the Lord, he hired Assyria to protect Judah, and ended his dynasty in the process. The razor purchased for protection was instead used to humiliate God's people. (7:20)

What about the sign? The Lord gave it anyway. A virgin did conceive and gave birth to a son and called his name Jesus. To all who follow Ahaz and refuse to trust the Lord, Jesus is a sign of judgment, a reminder that reliance on their own wisdom and grit ultimately results in defeat and devastation. But to all who are not afraid to ask for a sign, who want the Lord's help to believe, Jesus is a sign of God's reliability and faithfulness. Jesus Christ, Immanuel, the boy from David's line, came to restart the royal dynasty and save his people from their sins.

*But the LORD of
hosts, him you shall
honor as holy.
Let him be your
fear, and let him
be your dread.
- Isaiah 8:13*

PRAYER

Lord, you are our
fear and our dread.

Fear and Dread

Isaiah 8:12 gives us a good description of the emotional state of the people in Isaiah's time. They were fearful. Their minds were occupied by almost daily revelations of some conspiracy ready to bring about the downfall of Jerusalem. Rumors substantiate anxieties, which in turn give credibility to new rumors, not unlike our own times.

Isaiah offers an alternative. Instead of living by fear based on rumors, live by faith based on truth. Honor the Lord as holy. In other words, elevate God above others. Turn up the volume of his voice and turn down the noise. Give the Lord your attention and your trust. Don't worry when you hear of a new catastrophic scenario. Entrust your heart to the Lord.

Isaiah encourages us to let God be our fear and our dread. At first, it sounds awful. I am already struggling with fear. Should I now be afraid of God too? That is not what the prophet means. To let God be our fear is to take him seriously. It is to assess him accurately. Fear is the true index of our worldview. Our fear is greatest when we think we are about to lose what is most important to us. We fear something or someone we consider as having real power over us. Take a person whose emotional state matches the rise and fall of the value of their investments in the stock market. They live in fear of losing their financial security. They consider the state of the market to be the controlling factor of their happiness.

To let the Lord be our fear is to restore him to the position of supreme value and power. It is to say with words and actions, "You are what is most important to me, and I cannot lose you. You are in control of my life, and I have nothing to fear because you have committed yourself to me." That is why the Lord is described as a sanctuary for those who trust him. There is always stability and hope with him. But for those who live in fear, whose hearts are tossed around between dangers old and new, like in a game of catch, tragedy is always around the corner until it is finally here. They shall fall and be broken. They shall be snared and taken. And their end will be much worse than they feared.

*Therefore thus says
the Lord GOD of
hosts: "O my people,
who dwell in Zion,
be not afraid of the
Assyrians when they
strike with the rod
and lift up their staff
against you as the
Egyptians did.
- Isaiah 10:24*

PRAYER

Lord, open our eyes
to the reality of
who you are and
who we are.

Don't Be Afraid

Illness, injury, betrayal, violence, tornado, sinkhole, home invasion, slander, job loss, economic downturn, virus, war—there are enough real threats out there to sustain a consistent level of anxiety. Many people live in fear. Many Christians live in fear. Is this normal?

The people in Jerusalem were very afraid of mighty Assyria, and for good reason. The Northern Kingdom of Israel already fell to these merciless invaders. Judah was next. It felt like it was just a matter of time. How could anyone not be paralyzed with fear while waiting to be dragged out of their home and killed?

It is into this anxiety the Lord speaks. He says, "Don't be afraid." What? The absence of fear in a life-threatening situation seems delusional. Isn't that what we Christians are often accused of—living in denial of reality? Does the Lord just want us to close our eyes and plug our ears and pretend the world is safe?

Actually, instead of denying reality, God reminds us of it. His command not to fear is rooted in the fundamental security every Christian has. In other words, we should look at real threats in the context of the real security we often forget about. The Lord says, "Don't be afraid. Remember who I am. Remember who you are."

The person who tells us not to fear is the Lord God of hosts. He is the almighty sovereign ruler of everything. He wields the axe of history. He lets the Assyrian forest grow, but only until he is ready to fell her mighty trees. The people of Jerusalem were about to be reminded of their God's power when 185,000 Assyrian troops were slaughtered by the angel of the Lord just outside the city gates. Had they known this is how the Assyrian invasion was to end, would they have been afraid?

Remember who God is and don't be afraid. But also remember who we are. The Lord calls us his people. We are his covenant people. He is committed to us. His love for us is the stability we need as we face life's threats, real or imagined, and refuse to live in fear.

*For the earth shall be
full of the knowledge
of the LORD as the
waters cover the sea.
- Isaiah 11:9*

PRAYER

Lord, we want
to know you.

Do You Know the Lord?

The prophet envisions the world restored under the rule of the divine king from the line of David, the son of Jesse, full of the Spirit of the Lord, wisdom, and power. In this new world, the oppressed will be vindicated and the oppressors punished, all hostilities will end, nature will once again function the way it is supposed to, and there will be no destruction or pain any longer. It is a magnificent vision that gives hope to all who struggle with the injustice and disappointment of the current state of affairs.

Isaiah not only describes the way the world will be, but also how it will be kept in this glorious state. The new King will be at the center of the new creation, and everything will function properly and precisely because everything will be centered on him. Or, poetically, “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” The knowledge of the Lord—his presence, his acceptance by his creatures as their sovereign creator, the full expression of his character—will permeate all creation. The knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth completely so there is no part of the new creation in which the Lord is not known.

Restoration of the world will be inextricably connected with the restoration of relationship with the Lord. The world cannot be what it is supposed to be if the Lord is not known by his creatures. Likewise, we cannot be part of the new creation unless we know the Lord. While we are waiting for the complete renewal of the world when Christ returns, the Bible says we are now already new creations in Christ. We have already been renewed by the knowledge of the Lord in Christ.

Do you know him? Does your relationship with him reach every corner of your heart and every part of your life? Is every decision made by his wisdom and understanding? Is every challenge met by his power? Is every treasure offered to him in tribute? Is every insecurity cured by his love? Is every fear submitted to his rule?

*With joy you will
draw water from the
wells of salvation.
- Isaiah 12:3*

PRAYER

Lord, we want
to enjoy your
salvation in the
community of
your people.

Wells of Salvation

In his commentary on chapter 12, Alec Motyer said, “To enter salvation is an individual experience but to enjoy it is communal.” This truth is a little obscured by the English translation, but perfectly clear in the Hebrew. “You” in 12:1 is singular. But “you” in 12:3 is plural.

The chapter begins with the individual believer’s experience of salvation. He has experienced God’s mercy in an intensely personal way. God’s anger against his sin has been turned away and replaced with God’s comfort. God himself has become his salvation, his strength, and his song. And what is the means of God’s grace? Simple trust in him.

Isaiah 12:3 calls on the community of the delivered to enjoy their salvation together. Let’s go and draw water from the wells of salvation! One well of salvation is corporate worship, calling on the name of the Lord together with joy and gratitude for what he has done for his people. Another well is evangelism, making known what the Lord has done among the peoples. Notice that proclamation of the gospel in evangelism comes from our proclamation of the gospel in worship.

Here is another truth communicated through Hebrew grammar: The masculine singular of 12:1 is complemented with the feminine singular of 12:6. Salvation belongs to the sons and daughters of Zion. The diversity of the redeemed community enhances our joy of salvation. All of us who met the Lord as individual men and women, people of all backgrounds and experiences, gather to enjoy his salvation together. We shout and sing, to God and to each other, because the Lord is great in his mercy and grace to us, and he is in our midst.

WEEK 2

Lord's Day / Second Sunday in Lent

Read Isaiah 13-27

*They will be
dismayed: pangs
and agony will seize
them; they will be
in anguish like a
woman in labor.
They will look aghast
at one another; their
faces will be aflame.
- Isaiah 13:8*

PRAYER

Lord, we are
aghast at our sins
and aflame with
your love.

Aghast and Aflame

The prophet predicts God's judgment of Babylon, one of the greatest powers of its day. Who could envision such a fall? Only the Lord, because it is the Lord who will judge on the appointed day of his wrath. The day of the Lord will come on all evil. One of the clearest messages of the book of Isaiah is that judgment is certain unless God's mercy is accepted by simple, humble trust. Throughout Scripture, Babylon is an example of human pride that rejects God's mercy. Perhaps this is why this series of oracles against the nations begins with Babylon.

When judgment finally comes, the stubborn people's response is one of disbelief. Isaiah describes their emotions as "aghast" and "aflame"—aghast in dismay that God is judging them, and aflame in embarrassment that all their wrong and evil is exposed. It is rather incredible that so many of us live by pretending that we are better than we know ourselves to be, and that somehow, if we maintain this pretense, everything will turn out okay in the end. And yet, on that awesome day of God's judgment, all flesh will be held accountable. Many will finally have to face their own wickedness, unable to pretend anymore, and face their Judge. Initial dismay at the severity of God's judgment, a realization that, "I guess he will do what he said, and he is as just as I feared," will give way to the inevitable acceptance that this judgment is merited by their life under the unbiased and irrefutable examination of God.

While this is the inevitable end of all who prefer to stay in a state of self-deception, it need not be so. The Lord is offering his grace to all who would trust him. Instead of being dismayed at the severity of God's judgment and humbled by the depth of our sins on the day of the Lord, we can be dismayed at the severity of our sins and humbled by the depth of his mercy today.

*Therefore I weep
with the weeping of
Jazer for the vine of
Sibmah; I drench
you with my tears,
O Heshbon and
Elealeh; for over
your summer fruit
and your harvest the
shout has ceased.
- Isaiah 16:9*

PRAYER

Lord, thank you for
weeping with us
over our sins.

The Weeping of Jazer

In his pride, Moab rejected the Lord's offer of salvation through an alliance with God's covenant people in Jerusalem. And so they sealed their own fate. Far from an unfortunate twist of history, the destruction of Moab by the Assyrians is the Lord's doing and in accordance with his perfect justice.

We might expect that Moab's refusal of God's grace and defiance in the face of divine judgment would cause the Lord to ratchet up his anger even more, or to resign himself to the uselessness of his desire to help. The divine, "Now you're really gonna get it!" or, "I knew you were never gonna change!" would have been quite appropriate here. But that is not the response we find recorded in these verses.

In an unrestrained expression of emotion, the Lord grieves over the devastation of Moab. His tears are mingled with the tears of the sufferers of Jazer, the northernmost region of Moab. His tears gush over and drench parts of the land. He moans like a lyre from the deepest parts of his heart. The Lord is no mere observer of the pain his own righteous judgment has brought to Moab. He is participating and sharing in their pain. His weeping is not a general sorrow over the state of sinful humanity. It is specific and personal. He weeps over Jazer and Heshbon and Elealeh and Kir-hareseth. He feels the devastation not only of Moab as a whole, but of each town, neighborhood, and household. His grace, extended in love and refused in pride, has resulted in the comingling of divine and human tears. He weeps with the weeping of Jazer!

This passage in Isaiah cannot but remind us of the Lord Jesus weeping over Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37-39. Both divine and human sorrow over sin and judgment were perfectly united and resolved in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the true weeper of Jazer. Not only did he weep for the sufferers, but he also suffered for the weeping. On the cross, Jesus was invaded by God's wrath on our behalf, and his tears brought healing to all who would weep with him.

*Blessed be Egypt my
people, and Assyria
the work of my
hands, and Israel
my inheritance.
- Isaiah 19:25*

PRAYER

Lord, use us to
bring healing
to the nations.

Egypt My People

At the end of the judgment oracle against Egypt, full of grief and sorrow, there is a promise of healing. Judgment is now presented as discipline. The hand that strikes, as it turns out, is the hand that heals.

Because the Bible is written through the lens of God's covenant commitment to Israel, it is understandable that sometimes we see other nations only as Israel's allies or enemies, as if they only matter in relation to Israel. But the Lord is dealing with all the nations in his perfect grace and justice. And here, for example, he has special plans for Egypt.

In an almost matter-of-fact way, God says, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance." God puts Israel, Egypt, and Assyria under one blessing! The whole world is under his care, and he will accomplish all his purposes for every nation. Remember that the original promise to Abraham was to make him into a great nation and to bless all the nations of the world through him (Genesis 12:1-3). God has always been concerned with the whole world.

God's plan for the nations is unfolding through the ministry of the church. The evidence of his global concern is the church's invasion of every corner of the world. The church has never been able to contain itself to one nation or culture. The church has been proclaiming the message of Jesus in every language and dialect, often even devising alphabets to translate the Bible. The church of Jesus Christ is a transethnic, multilingual, international movement propelled by the Holy Spirit. The church of Jesus Christ continues to grow as people from every tribe and tongue respond to God's gracious invitation and are gathered into one redeemed family.

*You made a reservoir
between the two
walls for the water
of the old pool.*

*But you did not look
to him who did it, or
see him who planned
it long ago.*

- Isaiah 22:11

PRAYER

We trust you
to give us
what we need.

The Water of the Old Pool

The king's response to the threat of the Assyrian invasion was to make military alliances with Assyria's enemies and to make improvements in the city's defenses. The prophet highlights these preparations as evidence of the fatal sin of self-reliance. It is far from the faith and trust the Lord wants to cultivate among his people. Notice the contrast: "...you looked to the weapons of the House of the Forest..." (22:8), "But you did not look to (the Lord)..." (22:11). The House of the Forest was Jerusalem's armory. The king increased his stock of weapons, but exhausted his stock of faith. He looked to his arsenal for protection, but failed to look to his Lord for deliverance. He built up the walls of the city and walled off his own heart from the Lord.

Jerusalem's main vulnerability was its water supply. An exposed channel could easily be blocked off by the enemy, and the city would not be able to resist for very long without water. The king constructed large reservoirs within the city and fortified the walls to equip Jerusalem to withstand a long siege. This accomplishment bolstered the people's trust in their own ability to take care of themselves, and at the same time took away an opportunity to trust in the Lord. By "fixing the problem," the king put himself above the Lord. He did not look to him who did it or see him who planned it long ago. The implication is that Jerusalem's vulnerable water supply was part of God's own design. The Lord chose the site for his temple and his royal city not in spite of its vulnerability but because of it. The Lord never wants us to trust in our own ingenuity and effectiveness. He builds vulnerabilities into our lives as opportunities to trust him. Threats to our self-reliance are planned avenues for our faith.

One of our greatest dangers is that we really would believe in ourselves. Persistent self-reliance - closing ourselves off from God's grace - leaves no room for the healing and forgiveness God longs to give. There is no hope for those who would rather trust in themselves than in God, but he gives us hope by not letting us trust in our own wisdom and power. Think about your vulnerabilities. Instead of building up the walls and gathering water in the old pool, look to the Lord to provide, sustain, and deliver.

*Wail, O ships of
Tarshish, for Tyre is
laid waste, without
house or harbor!*
- Isaiah 23:1

PRAYER

Lord, save us from
putting our trust in
anything but you.

Without House or Harbor

How much do you rely on money? Of course, most Christians would say, and should say, that money is just part of life, but all provision is from God. Think about your daily life. Do you ever question that the money in your bank account can easily be withdrawn or used via your debit card to buy a gallon of milk? Do you expect an ATM to dispense cash? Do you assume your paycheck will be deposited directly into your bank account on the specified date? Have you seriously entertained the possibility that your retirement fund could simply disappear because some intern pressed the wrong key?

Tyre was a Phoenician port city known for its commerce. It was the merchant to the nations holding a monopoly on sea trade. Such was its economic power that the inhabitants of Tyre felt invincible. Its fall was unimaginable. However, as every wealthy community in human history learns, power based on money is predictably unstable. There is always someone who is more determined to take power from someone who can no longer keep it. Assyria's military power proved too much for Tyre's considerable economic power. When the ships of Tarshish reached their destination, they discovered Tyre laid waste, without house or harbor. Just like that, Tyre was gone.

Ultimately, Tyre's fate was not decided by Assyria. Assyria was an instrument in the Lord's hand. The arrogant Tyre, which once felt invincible, met the source of all power and lost both house and harbor. The so-called bestower of crowns (23:8) met the King of kings.

How foolish it is to find security in money! How silly it is to think we can hold on to power built on paper and ones and zeros!

Before there is a storm, bring your ship into the harbor of God's peace and build a house on the rock of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

*You keep him in
perfect peace whose
mind is stayed on
you, because he
trusts in you.
- Isaiah 26:3*

PRAYER

Lord, we want to
experience your
peace today.

Perfect Peace

What kind of peace can we expect from God? Perfect peace, or in Hebrew “peace, peace.” A believer in the Lord can experience internal peace now because God can be trusted to bring about complete peace on the day of the Lord.

The future for all who trust the Lord is secure. As described in chapter 25, God will swallow up death forever. He will wipe every tear and right every wrong. All reproach will be taken away and all pride brought low. He will feast with his people, and his people will rejoice in his salvation. That is the kind of peace that will be ours. It will be ours because God himself will accomplish it. Perfect peace.

This future is not yet, but not all peace is deferred. Because we trust in the Lord, we can experience his peace now, even as we wait for his perfect peace to envelop the world. The certainty of our future security allows us to feel secure today. The certainty of our future reward helps us appreciate God’s gifts today. The certainty of our future vindication makes it possible to endure injustice done to us today. The certainty of the future feast makes today’s hunger tolerable.

How can we experience this perfect peace today? Isaiah tells us to stay our mind on the Lord. If safety and security and vindication and retribution and all other elements of the promised perfect peace are from the Lord, then we should humble ourselves before him now and rest in him as the source of all peace. To stay our mind on the Lord means to have a mindset of faith, to have a posture of trust. It is to live in anticipation of God’s final salvation. It is to assume, based on God’s own faithful character, that he will do as he promised. To live by faith is like living in a strong city set up and defended by the Lord himself.

We can stay our minds on the Lord today. We can focus on who he is, what he has done, and what he promises to do. We can remember that he is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose for our justification. As we trust him, his perfect peace will fill our minds and sustain us in our waiting for the Lord to bring the whole world under his perfect rule.

WEEK 3

Lord's Day / Third Sunday in Lent

Read Isaiah 28-35

*Ah, the proud crown
of the drunkards of
Ephraim, and the
fading flower of its
glorious beauty...
- Isaiah 28:1*

PRAYER

Lord, dispel
the drunken
fog of pride
and humble us
to receive
your grace.

Ah, the Proud Crown of the Drunkards

This is the first of six indictment oracles in this section of the book, each beginning with the Hebrew word translated “ah” or “woe.” The Lord speaks against Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which is about to fall to Assyria. Jerusalem in the south better take notice not to repeat the sins of her sister!

Samaria’s self-confidence led to self-indulgence. The drunkards of Ephraim exalted themselves over the Lord in their self-complacency and crowned themselves sovereigns of their lives, invincible to any harm, free to satisfy the desires of their flesh. However, the flower is fading. The party is dying down. The crown is about to be knocked off by the Assyrian soldiers. Behind the impending overthrow of Samaria by the Assyrians is the Lord. He is about to judge the proud city. His judgment is swift, like a hailstorm. Samaria will be swallowed up like a ripe fig. The message is clear: All self-confidence, self-indulgence, and self-exaltation will be punished.

The declaration of doom is followed by the assurances of restoration. This is classic Isaiah. Notice how the symbols of pride are recast as symbols of grace in 28:5. The Lord himself will be a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty for Samaria. Short-lived beauty will be replaced by eternal brilliance, self-made crowns by divine glory, and drunken stupor by everlasting joy.

There is a challenge for us here. What do we prefer? What will we choose? Will we crown ourselves or be crowned by the Lord? Will we settle for the sensual pleasures of the flesh or pursue the higher joys of the Spirit? Will we cling to the disappearing beauty of the world or receive the imperishable inheritance in Christ?

*Ah, Ariel, Ariel,
the city where
David encamped!
- Isaiah 29:1*

PRAYER

**Lord, open our eyes
to the reality of
your saving love.**

Ah, Ariel, Ariel

The second lament is for the city of Jerusalem, referred to as Ariel. “Ariel” most likely means “altar-hearth.” Sacrifices were offered in Jerusalem to propitiate God’s wrath and delay his judgment of the people’s sins. While the temple fires are burning and year after year animals are sacrificed, there remains little faith among God’s people. What can the Lord do to facilitate his people’s trust in himself?

The Lord showed his trustworthiness through a dramatic deliverance of Jerusalem from Assyria. The city was all but sacked by the invaders when the angel of the Lord unexpectedly struck down 185,000 Assyrians, and the rest fled home (37:36-37). This last-minute salvation, inexplicable apart from the Lord’s direct intervention, was designed to cause a spiritual transformation. This undeniably supernatural deliverance was supposed to restore the spiritual sight of the people, but it did not.

How often we neglect the Lord’s unmistakable presence and prefer to hide our self-reliance behind empty religious rituals! Ah, Ariel, Ariel, how can you be so blind to the Lord’s power and care? Why do you need dramatic interventions to believe that God loves you? What can be more dramatic than the crucifixion of God’s own Son? What can be more convincing than the single, sufficient sacrifice of Jesus for our sins? And yet, we still doubt. We still question. We still live as if the Lord is not able to save or is not willing to come to our rescue.

*Ah, you who hide
deep from the
LORD your counsel,
whose deeds are in
the dark...
- Isaiah 29:15*

PRAYER

Lord, we want
to come out of
hiding and live
in your reality.

Ah, You Who Hide

The third “woe,” or “ah” oracle, is an indictment of willful ignorance of God. We hide from God because our works are evil. We would rather pretend that God does not exist, or that he does not know or does not care, than face our own sinfulness. This is not an honest lack of knowledge. This is a deliberate refusal to be accountable to God.

The only way to justify our sin as normal is to distort reality. Sin creates a topsy-turvy world. Look at 29:16. “You turn things upside down,” says the prophet. First, there is deliberate ignorance of God’s holiness. The potter is regarded as clay. The creator is regarded as a creature. God cannot judge me because he is just like me. I can shape him to fit my preferences. Second, there is deliberate ignorance of God’s authority. God did not make me, so I am not accountable to him. He has no authority over me. Why should I obey him or seek his counsel? Third, there is deliberate ignorance of God’s wisdom. He has no understanding. He does not know what he is doing. Why should I trust him? Can he really govern the world? I would definitely do a better job if I ran the world!

The greatest example of a sin-induced, upside-down reality is the death of Christ. On the cross, the Son of God is treated as the lowest of criminals. On the cross, creatures put their creator to death. On the cross, sinners declare that the world would be better without God. And yet, in Christ, God has turned the world right side up. On the cross, we see that God is not like us. Who would die for his enemies? On the cross, we see that accountability is unavoidable. Sin must be dealt with. On the cross, we see that God can be trusted. Consider his wisdom in saving us through applying the righteousness of Christ to us.

Do not hide from the Lord by refusing to acknowledge his holiness, submit to his authority, and trust his providence. Look at the cross of Christ, and have your world turned right side up again.

“Ah, stubborn children,” declares the LORD, “who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit, that they may add sin to sin...”
- Isaiah 30:1

PRAYER

Lord, save us
from thinking
we know better
than you what
we need to do.

Ah, Stubborn Children

The fourth “ah” oracle is directed toward foolish decision makers. The situation in question is Jerusalem’s plan to make an alliance with Egypt to protect themselves from Assyria. But the leaders’ plan was not from the Lord, and their decisions were not guided by the Holy Spirit. They were like children refusing the wisdom and help of their parents.

To realize how foolish a child can be in making plans, we need only look into the backpack of a 5-year-old who is contemplating running away from home. We are likely to find a coloring book and crayons, a set of footie pajamas, a favorite stuffed animal, a flashlight, some cookies, two nickels and one Canadian penny, and an Etch A Sketch. No I.D., bus tickets, warm clothing, substantial food, or water. And, to make things worse, the kid had to ask his mom to help him pack. Of course, the daring fugitive thinks his plan is flawless, and he has all he needs to make it on his own in New York City.

Are we really that different when we refuse the wisdom and guidance of the Lord and make our own plans? Are we not just like kids thinking we know better than our parents? While a 5-year-old packing his backpack can be harmless and even cute, our stubborn rejection of God’s involvement can only distance us further from the source of all wisdom, and introduce all sorts of troubles into our lives. We add sin to sin as our initial cluelessness is replaced by stubbornness, followed by defiance, and ending in resolute disobedience.

The prophet does not leave us under any illusion that plans made without God can somehow still succeed. Judah’s alliance with Egypt proved useless. Their trust in their own cleverness resulted in shame and humiliation (30:3). All plans that are not made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit have the potential to bring ruin and disgrace. The only reason not all runaways are run over by a bus or stuck in an old well is because their parents do not let them implement their foolish plans to the fullest. Praise God that he exposes our childish folly and intervenes by grace!

*Woe to those who
go down to Egypt
for help and rely on
horses, who trust
in chariots because
they are many and
in horsemen because
they are very strong,
but do not look to the
Holy One of Israel or
consult the LORD!
- Isaiah 31:1*

PRAYER

**Lord, help us
remember what
you have done
and trust you to
take care of us.**

Woe to Those Who Go Down to Egypt

As we learned in the previous oracle, Judah's childish plans to avoid the Assyrian occupation involved making an alliance with Egypt. With its many horses and chariots, Egypt looked impressive. Signing a military treaty with Egypt seemed like the perfect solution to the Assyrian problem. However, as history was about to show, Judah's trust was misplaced. Once Assyria heard of the local Palestinian states' conspiracy with Egypt, its army came down and devastated the whole region. Only Jerusalem survived because of the miraculous intervention of the angel of the Lord.

Historically, Judah's fascination with Egypt's power makes no sense. Were they not slaves in Egypt? Why put yourself in Egypt's debt again? And when the people of Israel left Egypt, was Pharaoh not pursuing them with his many horsemen and chariots? And was he even powerful enough to defeat a bunch of unarmed shepherds with their backs against the sea and scared out of their minds? How could Isaiah's contemporaries not remember that it was the Lord who drowned the Egyptian army to save his people? As the envoys went down to Egypt, did they not realize that they were retracing the steps of the people led by and protected by the Lord himself? Why, faced with the Assyrian aggression, did they go down to Egypt and not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord? For the same reason we do not trust the Lord, and look instead to all sorts of "Egypt" in our own lives.

What is your "Egypt?" Who do you trust to rescue you, to provide meaning and security for your life? Is it a person? Perhaps your spouse or child or parent or friend? Is it something as trivial as money or food? Now, stop and think. Does it make sense to put your trust in a sandwich or in the Holy God of Israel? It is foolish not to trust the person to whom we naturally compare all others. It is silly not to consult the one from whom all wisdom and knowledge spring.

So, do not go down to Egypt today. Instead, remember that everything and everyone may fail you, but the Lord will guide and protect you.

*Ah, you destroyer,
who yourself have
not been destroyed,
you traitor, whom
none has betrayed!
When you have
ceased to destroy,
you will be destroyed;
and when you have
finished betraying,
they will betray you.
- Isaiah 33:1*

PRAYER

Lord, we thank you
for your justice
and your mercy.

Ah, You Destroyer

Many in our culture have embraced the concept of karma, or at least some version of it. In popular use, karma is being punished for one's bad actions and rewarded for one's good actions. What goes around comes around. For example, when an inconsiderate driver gets hit by another inconsiderate driver, someone might say, "That's karma for you!" Or, positively, a person who paid for a stranger's coffee might expect to be rewarded by getting an unexpected insurance premium reduction. The common belief in karma betrays our desire for a just world and moral accountability. However, it also exposes our ignorance of how God's justice is administered.

An average believer in karma keeps it exclusively horizontal. It's only what is done to or for other people that matters. They also keep it rather trivial. Tipping, for example, seems to cover a lot of sins. Likewise, karmic consequences are expected to kick in very quickly, as if kindness can't keep. And most importantly, karma is seen as an impersonal principle.

Now, let's compare this to our passage. The sixth indictment oracle affirms moral accountability and supports our desire for a just world, but gives us a much more accurate concept of justice. And while it is directed to the duplicitous and cruel Assyrian empire, it applies to all sinners. Their sins are not overlooked as somehow acceptable in the course of human history or human life. Their sins will return to them as punishment. All sins, trivial or heinous, will be examined by the Lord himself. And who can survive such a judgment? The Lord will punish. He will call us all to account. He needs only to get up from his throne and the nations will scatter (33:3). And God's judgment is not temporal but eternal. Many injustices are not corrected in this life, but all will be set right in the next. Many good deeds go unnoticed for decades, but they will be celebrated in eternity.

And here is the last big flaw with karma: It's hopeless. But with God, while evil is always punished, he himself was punished in our place. Jesus Christ was betrayed and destroyed for us. And anyone who trusts him gets something much better than karma. We get mercy.

WEEK 4

Lord's Day / Fourth Sunday in Lent

Read Isaiah 36-39

*And the Rabshakeh
said to them,
“Say to Hezekiah,
‘Thus says the great
king, the king of
Assyria: On what
do you rest this
trust of yours?’”
- Isaiah 36:4*

PRAYER

Lord, teach us
to simply
trust you.

A Matter of Trust

Sometimes the world has a more accurate assessment of a situation than the church.

The Rabshakeh, a high-ranking military official, speaking on behalf of the king of Assyria, reduces the situation before him to a matter of trust. The Assyrian army has taken all the local towns. Jerusalem is under siege. In military terms, this is a hopeless state of affairs. Why not surrender now and make peace with Assyria? But King Hezekiah has prepared for a long siege. What does he expect to happen? And, more importantly, whom does he trust to come to Jerusalem’s rescue? The Rabshakeh’s question is as relevant to us today as it was to the people on the wall of the holy city: Whom do we trust to save us?

An average person encounters problems every day. A cough that won’t go away, a car that won’t start, a friend that won’t listen, personal conflict, professional frustration, financial struggle, a panic attack, insomnia—it can all happen on the same day. While few of us have experienced war, the sense of being besieged and attacked is known to all. The Rabshakeh’s question sounds in our hearts as well: Whom do we trust to deliver us?

All of life is a matter of trust, and every life contains many instances of failed trust. For Hezekiah, Egypt proved to be a broken reed of a staff that pierced his hand when he leaned on it (36:6). Who has failed you? Was it a parent who left you? Was it a respected adult who took advantage of you? Was it a friend who betrayed you? Was it a spouse who lied to you? Was it a politician who used you? Was it a boss who never even noticed you? Was it the whole system that fell apart? Was it your own judgment that proved unreliable? And now, as you face yet another crisis, whom will you trust? Will you lean on the broken staffs from your past only to be disappointed again?

Throughout the book, Isaiah has consistently challenged his readers to turn to the Lord and trust him. The answer to the Rabshakeh’s question is, “I will rest my trust on the Lord.” As the Jerusalem residents under Hezekiah’s leadership and every Christian throughout their life will learn, only the Lord can be trusted. No matter how hard we lean on him, he does not break.

*Who among all
the gods of these
lands have delivered
their lands out of
my hand, that the
LORD should
deliver Jerusalem
out of my hand?*
- Isaiah 36:20

PRAYER

Lord, we worship
you as the Lord of
heaven and earth.

Not Like Other Gods

The Rabshakeh treated the Lord like other local deities. The Assyrian army was able to conquer one kingdom after another with relative ease. Their experience seemed to confirm their theological assumption that there were many gods of various degrees of influence. Each local deity was either unable or unwilling to protect its territory from the Assyrians. Each was either less powerful than the Assyrian gods or supportive of the Assyrian invasion, or so the Rabshakeh concluded. Why should anything different happen when he came to Jerusalem?

But the Rabshakeh's theology was not right. At least it was not right when it came to the God of Israel. The Assyrians would soon learn that the Lord is unlike any other god they had encountered, that he would indeed deliver Jerusalem out of their hand, and that their defeat would cost them the lives of 185,000 troops.

Do you also see the Lord as a local deity? Is it possible that for all our theological training and creedal confessions, we are not that much better than an Assyrian polytheist, at least in practice?

Here are some questions to help us expose what we really believe about God: Do you limit God's influence to specific areas of your life? Perhaps he rules over your ministry at church but not over your professional or academic life. Do you think God doesn't care about your politics or sexuality or money?

Are there areas of your heart or life that are off limits to God? Are there other local deities who rule there?

Do you trust him to judge you but not to forgive you? Or, conversely, do you trust him to forgive you but not to legislate what constitutes sin?

Do you believe God can determine your destiny but not your identity? Do you expect God to meet you in your joy but not in your pain?

Would you agree from your heart with this statement from Abraham Kuyper? "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!"

*O LORD of hosts,
God of Israel,
enthroned above the
cherubim, you are
the God, you alone,
of all the kingdoms
of the earth; you
have made heaven
and earth.
- Isaiah 37:16*

PRAYER

**Lord, you alone
are God and we
trust you alone.**

Sounds of Faith

Isaiah 37:15-20 records the king's prayer for deliverance from Sennacherib's invasion. This prayer would be answered through the angel of the Lord releasing Jerusalem from Assyria's grip by slaughtering 185,000 enemy troops. This is the kind of faith expressed in prayer that Isaiah has preached about, and the kind of faith the Lord has been cultivating among his people.

First, the king's prayer is rooted in God's own nature and character. Biblical prayers tend to begin with verbalizing and affirming who God is. He is the Lord of hosts, the covenant God of Israel, ruling in heaven above the cherubim and on earth over all the kingdoms. Heaven and earth are his because he made them. He alone is God.

Second, the king's prayer is concerned with God's glory. Hezekiah pleads with the Lord to pay attention to Sennacherib's mockery. The Assyrians are treating the living God like an idol made of stone or wood. For Hezekiah, God's reputation is at stake.

Third, the king's prayer is conscious of God's mission in the world. He wants all the kingdoms of the earth to know that God alone is the Lord. While Hezekiah is praying for a local deliverance, he has not lost sight of God's global purposes.

Fourth, the king's prayer expresses his exclusive trust in God for salvation. "So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand." He is not hedging his bets in case Egypt doesn't come through for Jerusalem. It is God or nothing, which is the essence of biblical faith.

Do your prayers reflect the same kind of faith? Think about the last prayer you prayed. Was it rooted in God's character? Was it concerned with God's glory? Was it conscious of God's global mission? Was it an expression of desperate dependence on God alone?

And the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.
- Isaiah 37:36

PRAYER

You are our
deliverer and
we trust in you.

The Angel of the LORD

The prophet was right to tell the people to trust their Lord for deliverance. The king's prayer of faith had been answered. The mighty Assyrian army had been defeated and Jerusalem could celebrate God's victory.

The very way God delivered helps us understand what kind of God he is and what kind of trust he desires from us. When the people awoke, everything had already been accomplished. The Lord worked when the people rested. Or, maybe more accurately, the Lord worked when the people anxiously tossed and turned in their beds. While God often uses human or natural means for his purposes, he certainly does not need anyone or anything to do what he wants. He is a sovereign deliverer.

We should also notice how effortless the deliverance feels. The description is deliberately sparse. "And the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians." It shows us that the Lord is always perfectly able to deliver. Whenever deliverance does not come as we hope or expect, we trust that God remains present and faithful, working even in suffering toward redemption and new life. He is both sovereign and good. Our trust is always justified. The Lord can never fail us. Note how impossible such a deliverance seemed to anyone under siege in Jerusalem, and yet how real it was when the people woke up that morning.

This divine intervention might remind us of another deliverance, just as unimaginable and yet real. Early in the morning, some women came to the tomb of their teacher and friend. But they did not find a dead body there. Instead, an angel announced that the crucified Jesus they sought was not there because he had risen from the dead. The Lord brought life through the cross and empty tomb of his Son. Who could have imagined it the night before? And yet, when the disciples slept, the Lord worked. When the disciples pondered how the Lord could deliver his people from their sins, the angels were rolling away the stone and folding burial cloths. When the disciples wondered if their faith in Jesus as Messiah was justified, the Lord justified his people through his Son's death and resurrection.

*I have heard your
prayer; I have seen
your tears. Behold,
I will add fifteen
years to your life.
- Isaiah 38:5*

PRAYER

Lord, increase
our faith in you.

In Sickness and in Health

The timing of Hezekiah's recovery from sickness and the welcome of the Babylonian envoys can be placed before or after Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem, with good evidence for either case, especially considering the prophetic propensity to put theology above chronology. However, it seems simplest to stick with Isaiah's own order of events, which is the same face-value chronology we find in 2 Kings 20 and 2 Chronicles 32. Jerusalem seemed lost to Assyria, but the angel of the Lord delivered the city in response to Hezekiah's prayer. Then the king got sick and almost died, but the Lord miraculously healed him. The Lord added 15 more years to Hezekiah's life in response to his prayer.

The contrast between Hezekiah's two prayers is intentional and striking. The first prayer was full of faith, made on the basis of God's own character and in pursuit of God's glory. The second was full of doubt, insecurity, self-pity, and self-righteousness. In some ways, it makes sense why the Lord answered the first prayer. But why did he answer the second? The Lord is gracious, and he does not treat us based on our faithfulness or even the robustness of our faith. Not only does the Lord heal Hezekiah's illness, but he adds 15 years to his life and reign. He seals his promise with a supernatural sign. God literally turns the clock back on the king's life.

Hezekiah's psalm reveals a man capable of faith and yet unsure of his relationship with the Lord—fearful of death and clinging to life as if it were all that mattered. Why did the Lord give him 15 more years? I am sure there are many reasons, but one of them may be that the Lord was giving Hezekiah more time to grow and to establish a stronger, more secure, and closer relationship with him—a relationship not threatened by physical death, but anticipating both the renewal of all creation and God's eternal rule with his people. This is exactly where Isaiah's book eventually ends. Perhaps Hezekiah needed to hear a few more oracles from the prophet Isaiah and see a few more signs and miracles from the Lord.

*And Hezekiah
welcomed
them gladly...
- Isaiah 39:2*

PRAYER

Lord, help us
remember your
deliverances
and trust
your promises.

Royal Unbelief

According to the prophet's apparent chronology, the envoys from Babylon came after the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem by the angel of the Lord, and certainly after the miraculous healing of Hezekiah. This is not a good moment for a person who had prayed for two miracles and had both prayers answered. By receiving the representatives of the king of Babylon and showing them his riches, Hezekiah was not just being a good host. He was making a military pact against Assyria, their common enemy. Hezekiah was looking for new allies to prepare for the next invasion by Assyria. His intentions were not hidden from anyone, least of all the prophet Isaiah.

How easy it is for us to revert to unbelief! Hezekiah prayed and the Lord delivered him, and he promptly turned away from the Lord and began to look for other deliverers. When the Lord added 15 years to Hezekiah's life, he also promised to deliver and protect Jerusalem from Assyria. Why would the newly recovered king not trust the Lord to keep his word about Assyria also? Can you identify with Hezekiah's intermittent faith?

The Lord spoke through his prophet, "You really prefer Babylon to me? To Babylon you shall all go!" This is a case of God giving a person what they want. As surprising as Hezekiah's openness to a treaty with Babylon was, perhaps his response to Isaiah's prophecy was even more surprising. He said, "The word of the Lord is good, I will be gone by the time Jerusalem falls to Babylon." This is how short-sighted unbelief is. But faith is concerned with the future as well as the present, with eternity as well as the current moment.

This king's unbelief eventually resulted in the Babylonian exile. The selfishness of Hezekiah failed the people of his kingdom. It would take another King's unrelenting faithfulness and selfless persistence to deliver God's people from exile and gather the elect from all over the earth into the new Jerusalem to be with their God forever.

WEEK 5

Lord's Day / Fifth Sunday in Lent

Read Isaiah 40-48

Mon / Week 5

*Comfort, comfort
my people, says
your God.
- Isaiah 40:1*

PRAYER

Lord, we mourn
over our sins
and rejoice in
your salvation.

Comfort, Comfort

Isaiah 40:1 serves as a transition from the warnings and threats of judgment in the previous chapters to the assurances and promises of the rest of the book. Of course, it is not that the earlier chapters contain no encouragement and the latter chapters no criticism, but there is a change in tone. In this way, it is similar to the change of tone between the Old and the New Testaments, each providentially containing the same number of chapters as the respective parts of Isaiah. The following chapters are addressing God's people in exile. They speak into their experience of disillusionment with a self-centered approach to life. Human self-sufficiency and self-dependence have been found utterly lacking and unreliable for salvation, and now it is time to proclaim the divine solution to the human predicament.

The Lord speaks tenderly to his people and promises comfort to them. The people can be comforted because their warfare is ended and their iniquity is pardoned (40:2). Here is the logic: The sin of the people is forgiven, paid for with a sacrifice acceptable to the Lord. Since sin has been dealt with, the conflict between God and his people has been resolved, and now the Lord can comfort and encourage them. All of this is the Lord's doing. He has found the way to atone for the sins of his people.

As we continue to read Isaiah, we will see that the Lord's Servant, Jesus Christ, who is both God and man, received from the Lord's hand double, meaning "more than enough," for our sins, having taken our place under God's judgment. Jesus entered our warfare, bled for our iniquity, and secured our comfort.

Take heart, Christians. As Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." (Matthew 5:4) If you mourn over your sins, you must also receive comfort from the Lord. After all, how can we be comforted if we have not mourned? The Lord did not leave you in your misery, but met you there and lifted you out of it.

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

*Fear not, for I have
redeemed you; I have
called you by name,
you are mine.
- Isaiah 43:1*

PRAYER

Lord, we are yours
and we trust
your presence
and protection.

You Are Mine

The Lord speaks to his people as they go into the Babylonian exile. He tells them not to be afraid of something very frightening. It is like saying, "You are about to get into a terrible car accident, but don't worry." Why in the world would God's people not be terrified of the Babylonians violently removing them from their homes and driving them all the way to that godless city? Because they belong to God. The Israelites in Babylon can take courage because they belong to God. We can be unafraid in any scary circumstance because God declares that we are his.

The Lord claims his ownership of us based on two realities. One, we are his because he has redeemed us. We belong to him because he has purchased us. We are valuable to God. Our value is determined by the price he was willing to pay for us. What was the ransom that secured our freedom from slavery to sin? Jesus' own life. We were bought with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:19). That is how valuable we are to God. Two, we are his because God has called us by name. He has brought us into relationship with himself. While we have been purchased, we are not property to him. We are family. The price paid by Jesus was the cost of our adoption.

The Lord says, "Don't be afraid, you are mine, my treasure and my family." Let's work out the implications. If we are God's treasure, will he not protect us? Will he not make sure we are secure and safe and will not be lost or destroyed? It is in God's own interest to protect us, whatever the scary situation in which we find ourselves. If we are God's family, will he ever leave us? No, he will not forsake us. He adopted us and now he keeps us close. He will always be present with us, no matter how vulnerable we may feel.

Listen to what the Lord says to you today and don't be afraid, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." (43:2-3)

*I am the LORD,
and there is no other,
besides me there
is no God...*
- Isaiah 45:5

PRAYER

Lord, we want
to see you
as you are.

There Is No Other

It is not uncommon to hear someone say, "I cannot believe in this kind of God." Such a statement is usually made at the end of a conversation in which a person discovers that their view of right and wrong differs significantly from the Bible. There is a certain noble defiance in such an attitude. This kind of God has no place in my world! I will not change my views to accommodate his. I would rather stay myself.

This is sometimes followed by saying that they choose to believe in a different kind of God—usually a God who agrees with them. For example, some say they cannot believe in a God who sends people to hell. They prefer to believe in a God who forgives everyone. Others say they cannot believe in a God who forgives and does not punish. They prefer to believe in a God who treats everyone exactly as they deserve.

As much as we are used to the role of discriminating consumer in many parts of our lives, this simply does not work with God. Sure, we may get indignant about a particular politician's platform and vote for someone else. We may boycott a company with unacceptable business practices and purchase similar products from its rival. But the Lord has no rivals or competitors. He is not one of the candidates running for office. He does not belong in a column of a comparison table. "I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God..."

There is one God. He is who he is. It does not matter what anyone thinks of him, or if anyone thinks he even exists at all, he is the only God. As difficult as it may be for today's religious consumer, we must approach God on his terms or not at all. An attempt to adapt God's attributes or views immediately moves the worshipper into the realm of idolatry. We can imagine God any way we want and worship him with great devotion, but we would not be dealing with God, only with an idol of our own making.

True worship rests not on imagination but on discovery. "I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God..." God is using his covenant name to describe himself. It is the name by which he has revealed himself to his people. His self-revelation allows us to discover who he is and to accept him as he is.

*I have made, and
I will bear; I will
carry and will save.
- Isaiah 46:4*

PRAYER

Lord, free us
from the futility
and absurdity
of idolatry.

The Burden-Bearing God

When Babylon fell, its idols had to be removed and cared for by their worshippers. Bel and Nebo were loaded up on donkeys and transported to safety. Much less than protecting the city, they could not even protect themselves. They could not even move without human help. At this point, everyone should have been able to see that these idols were just burdens.

In contrast to Babylon's gods, the Lord is a burden-bearing God. He reminds his people that he has supported them from before their birth. He has carried them from the womb, and to their old age. When their hair turns gray, he will still be who he is and will continue to carry them. Idols are made by people, but the Lord made everything that exists. Idols cannot move, much less save. The Lord saves his people.

Consider your life. What idols are you dragging around? One of the themes of Isaiah's prophetic ministry is the futility of worshipping idols. An idol is anything or anyone that we place in a position to give us ultimate meaning, hope, and joy. Idols promise much and deliver little. They take more than they give, until all they do is take and take and give nothing in return at all. Babylon's loading up and transporting their idols is a great picture of the absurdity of idolatry. The gods that were supposed to protect the city and guarantee its prosperity have proven to be useless. And still, the people protect them, making sure they are not damaged by the invaders.

Will you throw off the burden of idolatry? Of course, we cannot simply stop worshipping altogether. We must replace our object of worship with another. So, look at the burden-carrying God of the Bible. He promises everything and delivers it all. He gives and gives and gives. When he takes, he does so in a way that we end up gaining even more. He takes on our burden of sin and dies crushed under it, so he can say, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Is There Peace for the Wicked?

*“There is no peace,”
says the LORD,
“for the wicked.”
- Isaiah 48:22*

PRAYER

Lord, don't let
us settle for
superficial peace.

This chapter ends on a verse that feels out of place. Some commentators even go as far as saying it does not belong in the chapter at all. The context is the Lord's promise to bring his people back from the exile in Babylon. He takes on the responsibility of the next-of-kin redeemer and pledges to rescue his people. This is what the raising up of Cyrus is all about. The people are called to rejoice as they leave Babylon and proclaim that the Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob (48:20). Why follow with the promise that there is no peace for the wicked?

The Lord's redemptive work is not based on the faithfulness of Israel. In fact, his people have not been faithful. That is why they went into the Babylonian exile. Had they been obedient to the Lord's commandments, they would have had peace and righteousness, and their future would have been secure (48:18-19). Instead, their unfaithfulness landed them in Babylon. But the Lord's faithfulness would deliver them just as it had in the first exodus. His grace would bring them home.

If we pay attention to the dual themes of redemption (political redemption through Cyrus and redemption from sin through the Servant), the final verse of this chapter begins to make sense. While the Lord promises to deliver his people from captivity in Babylon, the people's rebellious, wicked nature remains unchanged. Political solution is promised, but things like peace, righteousness, and hope are still out of reach for the wicked. There is no peace for the wicked. There is no lasting peace for those whose nature has not been changed.

Many people have experienced some redemptive activity of the Lord in their lives. For example, there may have been a miraculous healing or a restoration of relationship. Many have benefited from the gifts of the church. As wonderful and real as this is, it cannot be mistaken for redemption from sin. Temporary prosperity or health, though redemptive in nature and rooted in God's grace, is not the same as permanent peace with God. The wicked can find real peace only if they are made righteous by the death and resurrection of the Servant, Jesus, who went into exile so he could bring us home to God.

*Can a woman forget
her nursing child,
that she should have
no compassion on
the son of her womb?
Even these may
forget, yet I will not
forget you. Behold,
I have engraved you
on the palms of my
hands; your walls
are continually
before me.
- Isaiah 49:15-16*

PRAYER

Lord, let us see
your love in the
scars of Jesus.

I Will Not Forget You

Under the Lord's discipline, it is not uncommon to feel abandoned by him. This is how God's people felt. "The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me." (49:14) How does the Lord respond to our doubt of his care for us? He reiterates his love.

One of the strongest bonds known to human beings is that of a mother and her baby. It is especially strong during the months of nursing. Day or night, several hours a day, looking into the eyes of the feeding infant, the mother feels an intense attachment to her baby. And yet, the Lord's love is even stronger. In some cases, a mother can struggle with feeling affection for her baby. In rare cases, a mother can neglect, reject, or even abuse her baby. This is one of the most unnatural phenomena. Most people have a hard time believing that it can happen at all. But even if the mother-baby bond can be broken, the bond between God and his people cannot. His love goes beyond the natural affection of a parent for their child. God's love is an indestructible connection. He will not forget us—not when he disciplines us, not when he allows us to experience the consequences of our sins, not even when we forget him. He still loves us then and will love us always.

To convince our hearts of his faithful love and care, the Lord says that we are engraved on the palms of his hands. What else can he mean but that Jesus' hands were pierced in evidence of God's love for us? Jesus was forgotten so that God would never forget us. Jesus was neglected, rejected, and abused, so that God could look into our eyes with the affection of a nursing mother. Jesus was destroyed proving God's love for us to be indestructible.

HOLY WEEK

Lord's Day / Palm Sunday

Read Isaiah 49-55

*Who has believed
what he has heard
from us? And to
whom has the
arm of the LORD
been revealed?
- Isaiah 53:1*

PRAYER

Lord, help us
marvel at
the cross.

The Wonder

G.K. Chesterton said that all humans possess “the ancient instinct of astonishment.” Of course, this sense of wonder gets duller as we get older. Babies are amazed by the world around them. Older people are rarely surprised. “A child of seven is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door and saw a dragon,” Chesterton writes. “But a child of three is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door.” The gospel of Jesus Christ can restore childlike awe and at the same time impart the wisdom of the aged.

The prophet asks, “Who has believed what he has heard from us?” In context, the question refers to the earlier depiction of the mysterious Servant of the Lord, who would suffer greatly and yet would bring unspeakable blessings to many. His suffering and, as stated later, his death would bring life to many nations. How can this exalted, high and lifted up person (remember Isaiah’s vision of God in Chapter 6) be humiliated and disfigured beyond human likeness? Who would believe it? Who would understand it? Who would be wise enough to explain it? Only those to whom this mystery has been revealed.

Wonder is fed by revelation. A magician swiftly opens a door to show that the woman we all saw go into the box is gone. A child tears the wrapping paper off to reveal a present she didn’t think she would ever get. A reader turns a page to discover an unexpected resolution. The Holy Spirit reveals to us that God became man, suffered, and died, so he can save us from death and bring us into his eternal kingdom.

The gospel is not something we can work out in our own wisdom. It is the wisdom of God, wisdom from above, that reveals the Gospel to us. And it is this gospel explained by the Spirit, this mystery revealed by grace, that can recover a sense of wonder that is both ancient and new every morning. This is why Christians sing so much. It is the wonder of the gospel in our throats.

*Yet it was the will of
the LORD to crush
him; he has put him
to grief; when his soul
makes an offering
for guilt, he shall
see his offspring;
he shall prolong his
days; the will of the
LORD shall prosper
in his hand.
- Isaiah 53:10*

PRAYER

Lord, help us
glory in the
cross of Christ.

The Plan

Was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ a regrettable event, an accident of history, a disaster that could and should have been avoided? Would Jesus have been arrested if his disciples had been more vigilant and courageous? Would Jesus have been spared if he had answered Pilate's questions more cleverly? Would Jesus have been released if the crowd had been silent?

Many people today, as they did in the past and likely will in the future, think of Jesus as a man whose good life was cut short by the powerful elite who felt threatened by his message of love and forgiveness. "Imagine how much more Jesus could have done," they say. "What a tragedy!"

People of this opinion are usually not familiar with the accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each of the Gospels presents the suffering and death of Jesus as something inevitable from the beginning, something that was supposed to happen. Jesus himself is described as one who lived in anticipation of the cross, not one who was surprised by it. An honest reader of the New Testament would agree that Jesus came to die. Jesus never expected a long ministry on earth. His plan was not to change the world by his life, but to change lives by his death. The cross was always the plan.

This verse in Isaiah cannot be any clearer. "It was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief..." All human actors in the gospel drama, including the priests, the soldiers, the crowds, Pilate, and Judas, must be accountable for their own choices and actions. But above all the actors is the divine playwright. God's saving purpose is not thwarted by human sin, and yet every human actor remains responsible for their choices. It was within God's saving purpose that Jesus would give himself for the life of the world. It was the central event of his mission. On the cross, the world was defeated, the devil disarmed, and the guilt of all who believe taken away. Through the cross, a new family was formed, a new community founded, and a new life released.

*But he was pierced
for our transgressions;
he was crushed
for our iniquities;
upon him was the
chastisement that
brought us peace,
and with his wounds
we are healed.
- Isaiah 53:5*

PRAYER

Lord, help us
see our Substitute
on the cross.

The Substitute

Few words in the Bible rival the little preposition “for” as more critical for understanding the Christian message. It is impossible to understand the gospel without understanding the idea of substitution. Whatever theory of atonement you subscribe to as the dominant one, substitution is at the core of them all. Christ came to defeat our enemies and deliver us from slavery, but he fought and won our battle. Christ came to meet God’s just expectations by perfectly obeying the law, but he obeyed on our behalf. Christ came to pay the penalty for our sins, but he died in our place. Christ came to reverse the harm done by Adam to God’s good creation, but he became our representative in Adam’s stead.

This verse focuses our attention on Christ’s death as the means of justifying us before God. He was killed for our sins. Our offenses against God put him on the cross. Jesus Christ, though innocent himself, was treated as guilty because of us. He took our place before the Judge and was condemned as a sinner. He bore the weight and consequences of our sin. He accepted our record of disobedience, false worship, and injustice as his own and entered into our broken condition and carried our sin and sorrow.

However, redemptive substitution has a double benefit. Christ, in perfect love and obedience, offered himself fully to God, confronting sin and breaking its power by offering himself as a sacrifice big enough and good enough and sufficient enough to remove us from God’s condemnation. But if that was all Jesus did, we would simply return to neutrality. Not only did Christ become our substitute, but we can also become his. It is an exchange. He stepped into our place, and we step into his. He was subjected to the consequences of our sins, so we can get the benefits of his innocence and righteousness. He was treated like us on the cross, so we can be treated like him by God. We are healed by his wounds. His punishment brings us peace. Or, as the apostle Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Maundy Thursday / Holy Week

*He was despised and
rejected by men, a
man of sorrows and
acquainted with
grief; and as one
from whom men
hide their faces he
was despised, and
we esteemed him not.
- Isaiah 53:3*

PRAYER

Lord, help us trust
the weakness of
the Crucified.

The Pain

Jesus is a man of sorrows. What kind of sorrows did Jesus feel? Hebrews 2:17 says that he was made like us in every respect. Hebrews 4:15 says that he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because he has been tempted as we are in every respect. Do you know what this means? There is no pain in our experience that Jesus does not know. He is personally and intimately acquainted with all our grief. There is not one human tear that he cannot relate to. There is no heartache he has not felt.

What is your deepest sorrow? What is it that you don't want to remember but cannot forget? Jesus is familiar with it. What is the wound that will not heal? What thought can darken your mood in an instant and cannot be wished away? Jesus knows it.

No sufferer should ever be able to say that Jesus just doesn't understand what they are going through. He does. His body was subjected to torture, abuse, and excruciating pain. His heart was broken by the rejection and abandonment of all his friends. His human will was wrestled down by his divine will. And on the cross, Jesus experienced God's wrath as our propitiation. No one loved more fiercely and hurt more deeply than Jesus. He is a man of sorrows.

We have been taught to sing:

“Little ones to him belong,
They are weak but he is strong.”

And it is true. But it is also true that Jesus belongs to us because we are weak and he was weak. He was made weak so we could always be near him. We can only be strong if we entrust our sorrows to him who knows our pain.

Good Friday / Holy Week

*By oppression and
judgment he was
taken away; and as
for his generation,
who considered that
he was cut off out
of the land of the
living, stricken for
the transgression of
my people?
- Isaiah 53:8*

PRAYER

Lord, help
us embrace
the cross.

The Cross

The violence of the cross is shocking. That is, the cross is meant to shock us into paying attention. The Son of God was cut off, hacked off, forcibly separated from life. Even by diminished human standards, Jesus' life was cut short. It was not a quiet, dignified death. He died in tremendous pain, every breath torturous. Abandoned, yet mocked. Alone, yet a public spectacle. Exposed, naked, his body stretched out, its vulnerability fixed, and yet his true identity still hidden from all but the angels.

The words "by oppression and judgment" identify Jesus as a victim of unrestrained injustice. It is not inappropriate to liken the cross of Christ to a lynching tree in the American South. Jesus was obviously innocent. Everyone involved in his arrest and execution knew he had done nothing wrong. They all just wanted him dead. And they killed him because they could.

On this Friday in Holy Week, we must not sentimentalize or romanticize or tame the cross. We must face what happened that day on the hill outside the city. See its horror: The bruised, torn, bloody body; the humiliation and shame of a public execution; the anger of the mob; the skilled violence of the Romans; the abuse of the guards; the death of the Son of God.

The horror of the cross is far greater than it has been described so far. Jesus was stricken for the transgression of his people. He was not only stricken by his people but for his people. He was stricken by God. The injustice of the people revealed the justice of God. The violence of the people revealed the mercy of God. Jesus was punished justly for our transgressions, and his death spares us the hellish violence of divine wrath. That is why we call this Friday "good." And on this Good Friday, we sing the words of Charles Wesley:

"Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, should die for me!"

*And they made his
grave with the wicked
and with a rich
man in his death,
although he had
done no violence,
and there was no
deceit in his mouth.
- Isaiah 53:9*

PRAYER

Lord, we can't
wait to praise
you tomorrow!

The Grave

What is the dominant emotion of the day after the crucifixion? Several options are plausible for the original disciples of Jesus.

Were they feeling guilty? Did they think they failed to protect their leader? What if they had exposed Judas' betrayal before it was too late? What if they set up better security for Jesus?

Or maybe it was shame. After all, their cowardice and concern for their own safety left their Lord utterly alone and defenseless.

Was it disappointment? Just a few days earlier, Jesus was about to be crowned in Jerusalem, and then he was dead, wearing a crown of thorns under Pilate's sign, highlighting his unfulfilled dream.

Could it have been sorrow? Their friend was gone. He was so loving, so inspiring, so pure, so courageous—and now he was gone.

I am sure there was a sense of irreversible finality that Saturday. The shock of the arrest and the execution had dulled. It was time to accept reality. The season of hope had passed. The wonderful journey with Jesus had ended. That Saturday was an epilogue after a harrowing conclusion.

While Jesus' disciples of subsequent generations can share in the early disciples' guilt, shame, disappointment, and sorrow to some degree, none of the above emotions should dominate. The silence of the grave for an informed Christian is anticipatory of the resurrection. It is like hiding right before yelling, "Surprise!" The silence of the grave is preparatory for the celebration of the Lord's greatest victory. It is like a nap before an extravagant holiday dinner party. Holy Saturday is about hardly being able to contain the excitement of the new life about to break into the earth's guilt, shame, disappointment, and sorrow and wash them away forever. It is a preface to the most exciting first chapter of a new story.

EASTER WEEK

Lord's Day / Resurrection Sunday

Read Isaiah 56-66

CHRIST IS RISEN, INDEED!

Mon / Easter Week

*Is such the fast that
I choose, a day for
a person to humble
himself? Is it to bow
down his head like
a reed, and to spread
sackcloth and ashes
under him? Will you
call this a fast, and
a day acceptable
to the LORD?*

- Isaiah 58:5

PRAYER

Lord, make us
whole by
your grace.

Acceptable to the Lord

Isaiah 58 is God's assessment of Jerusalem's model worshippers. The Lord takes issue with their sacred activities. Their religious observance was admirable—sackcloth and ashes, fasting, and bowing in prayer. They humbled themselves before the Lord and expected that he would notice and bless them. However, the Lord looked beyond the visible personal piety of the fasters, and he saw that even as they fasted, they sought their own pleasure and not his (58:3). Their hearts were full of pride and self-love. The Lord saw that they oppressed their workers and quarreled and fought with others (58:3-4). Such fasting not only does not bring the worshipper closer to the Lord, it puts even more distance between them. Such external piety, in conflict with internal posture, communal obligations, and relational responsibilities, is no worship at all. It is manipulative, hypocritical, and offensive to the Lord. It does not please him. He does not accept it.

Today is the day after Easter. Most likely, yesterday you sang loudly, listened attentively, and looked lovely in a new outfit. Some may have even considered you a model worshipper. But what did the Lord think? Was your heart in sync with your tongue? Was your attention truly on the Lord? Did you want to impress others or please the Lord? What did you expect in return for your sacrifice of praise? As you proclaimed that you were at peace with God because of Christ's death and resurrection, were you also at peace with others? As you praised the Lord for his redeeming love revealed at the cross, did you also seek to restore justice in your community?

The Lord wants humility and surrender in public worship and private devotions, in external piety and internal affections, in personal responsibility and communal concerns. He wants integrity, cohesion, and wholeness. Jesus did not rise to give us a new activity or two, but a whole new life. Sin fractures, but grace makes whole. Is there integrity to your Christianity?

Tues / Easter Week

*I will greatly rejoice
in the LORD; my
soul shall exult in
my God, for he
has clothed me
with the garments
of salvation; he
has covered me
with the robe of
righteousness...
- Isaiah 61:10*

PRAYER

Lord, let us
share in the joy
of our Savior.

Happy to Save

These are the words of the Messiah, the Servant, the Anointed. Jesus Christ rejoices in his role in the divine plan of salvation. He has been called and equipped to accomplish salvation for his people. He has been outfitted to be their Savior. And he accepts this mission with divine joy. Jesus is not begrudgingly agreeing to save us. He is an ecstatic Savior!

Jesus knew that his mission included unimaginable suffering, pain, and ultimately death. Here in our passage, Jesus agrees to be abused and rejected by his creatures and condemned and punished by God in their place, and he does so with joy. He is glad to save those who would literally kill him. In fact, he likens his salvation uniform to the festive attire of a couple about to be married. As a bride adorns herself with jewelry in anticipation of being united with her husband, and as a groom dresses up in anticipation of being united with his wife, so does Christ put on the garments of salvation and the robe of righteousness in anticipation of the reunion of God with his people. This is the first reason for the joy of Jesus. He can see the outcome of his sacrifice and his victory on our behalf, and he rejoices in it. Jesus despised the shame and endured the cross for the joy that was set before him (Hebrews 12:2). He was happy to plant the grain of wheat into the soil to die because he could envision the harvest of righteousness and praise (John 12:24, Isaiah 61:11).

The second reason for the joy of Jesus is his desire to please his Father. It is his Father who has clothed Jesus with the garments of salvation and covered him with the robe of righteousness. Jesus' joy is the outworking of trinitarian love. He is happy to save because he is happy to make his Father happy. In Luke 10:21, we read that Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."

Meditate on this truth today. The Lord is happy to save you. It brings him pleasure. The Trinity rejoices in your salvation.

Wed / Easter Week

*You shall no more
be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall
no more be termed
Desolate, but you
shall be called
My Delight Is in
Her, and your land
Married; for the
LORD delights in
you, and your land
shall be married.
- Isaiah 62:4*

PRAYER

Lord, help us
embrace and
practice our new
identity in Christ.

No More

Using the compelling imagery of human marriage, the prophet describes the outcome of the Servant's work. Salvation is an astonishing transformation. It is no less dramatic than going from the loneliness caused by abandonment and rejection to the joy of a happy marriage. Salvation is leaving one state and coming into another, leaving one experience and entering another, leaving behind an old identity and embracing a new one. The New Testament describes salvation as a transition from being dead in trespasses to being made alive together with Christ (Ephesians 2:5), from serving idols to serving the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9), from slavery to sin to slavery to righteousness (Romans 6:17-18), from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God (Acts 26:18). This transformation happens instantaneously, even if many believers cannot pinpoint the exact moment of their conversion. A wedding is the event that transforms two single persons into a married couple. Conversion is the event that transforms a guilty sinner into an adopted child of God.

Notice the categorical language of Isaiah. "You shall no more be termed... but you shall be called." A divine declaration changes a person's identity and transfers them to a new reality and experience. When a person trusts that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and his victory in the empty tomb took place to save them from their sins and to reconcile them with God, they move from desolation to divine delight. This person shall no more be termed "forsaken," "rejected," and "condemned," but this person shall be called "accepted," "loved," "cherished," and "forgiven."

The challenge then becomes to live consistently in our new God-declared reality. As some married people live as if they were single, some Christians live as if they were still forsaken and condemned. The Lord delights in us, so let us live like it. Let us walk in his light, serve and obey him, and enjoy our relationship with him. That is what he wants. Do we want it too?

Thurs / Easter Week

*Where is he who put
in the midst of them
his Holy Spirit..?
- Isaiah 63:11*

PRAYER

Holy Spirit, we
want you to work
in our midst.

The Holy Spirit

Notice all the references to the Holy Spirit in this passage. Isaiah, like the rest of the Old Testament, is not silent about the third person of the Godhead. Of course, the doctrine of the person and work of the Spirit of God is not fully developed until the apostolic writings, but all the basic truths are at least hinted at in the prophets. For example, the Spirit is presented as a person who can be rejected and grieved (63:10). Certainly, he is not an impersonal force to be manipulated by clever humans. The Spirit is God's presence in the midst of his people because he is God himself. The Holy Spirit guided and protected them during the exodus from Egypt. It was he who brought them home into the land of promise and gave them rest (63:14).

The Christian Church has not fractured the one God of Israel. Isaiah's many references to the Holy Spirit, his extensive teaching on the divine Servant coming to deliver God's people from their sins, and his high view of the thrice-holy God of Israel are compelling reasons in their own right to affirm the doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine is a distinct understanding of God based on his self-revelation in the Old and the New Testaments. Far from just an abstract concept, the belief in the Trinity is highly applicable.

Let's consider Isaiah's question, "Where is he who put in the midst of them his Holy Spirit?" Or, to paraphrase it, "Why should we expect God to act any differently now?" He is the same God who put his Spirit in the midst of his people as he led them out of slavery in Egypt, through the sea, in the wilderness, and into the land. We should expect his Spirit now to release us from slavery to sin (conversion), to sustain us in our spiritual growth (sanctification), and to bring us home to be with the Lord forever (glorification).

None of the warnings in Isaiah can be heeded without the Spirit's conviction, none of the promises can be trusted without the Spirit's assurance, and none of the blessings can be enjoyed without the Spirit's presence. Seek a deeper relationship with the Spirit and trust him to change you by his power.

Fri / Easter Week

*For behold, I create
new heavens and a
new earth, and the
former things shall
not be remembered
or come into mind.
- Isaiah 65:17*

PRAYER
Lord, make
all things new!

The Old and the New

Newness is universally appealing. A new model of anything—a phone or a car—is impulsively desirable. A restaurant under new management automatically attracts more patrons, at least initially. A new vision is always exciting. Anything new holds out a promise of a renewed life, renewed world, or renewed self.

To be sure, a person buying a new coat is not consciously equating the purchase with their longing for the new heavens and the new earth, but that desire is in their heart, nonetheless. We realize that the world, including us, is not the way it's supposed to be. It had gotten old and frail before we even had a chance to know it at its eternal youth. Our experience of the old allows us and even encourages us to imagine what it once was and long for what it may one day become. C.S. Lewis calls this our “inconsolable secret.” The old contains only “the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.” Hence our fascination with everything new.

Not surprisingly, we repeatedly discover that new is not always better and that new immediately becomes old once in our possession. And yet, undeterred, we continue to pursue newness. Such is the fate of a sinner in a sinful world—wearied of the old, unable to take hold of the new. It is in this very real experience that the Lord speaks his incredible promise, “I will make everything new and the old will not even be remembered.”

Only God can create new things. Only God can replace the old with the new. When the Lord renews his creation, the redeemed will be so immersed in the experience of newness that they will not remember the old experiences of sin and suffering. This is not because we will not be able to recall what happened in the old creation, but because we will simply not need to think about the old, so vibrant will the new experience be. When Christ returns, the deep nostalgia for the world we never knew will be healed by the renewal of heaven and earth. But, of course, the work of renewal has already begun. Anyone in Christ is a new creature singing a new song to their Redeemer and waiting for the world to catch up.

*But this is the one to
whom I will look: he
who is humble and
contrite in spirit and
trembles at my word.
- Isaiah 66:2*

PRAYER

Lord, we will
tremble at your
gospel of grace
in all eternity.

You Who Tremble at His Word

There are only two groups of people in the world. The difference between the two rests fundamentally on their relationships with God. These groups are not religious and secular, or moral and free, or even good and evil. On the one hand, there is a group, a people, a kingdom of those who have humbled themselves before the Lord and look to him for direction and deliverance. Inconsistently and imperfectly, they see themselves accountable to him and trust in his power to forgive and restore them. He is their merciful lawgiver, their just and gracious king. On the other hand, there is a collection of people who have exalted themselves to a position rivaling God's. They are their own authorities. They have their own morality. They congratulate themselves on their accomplishments and chastise themselves for their failures. They see themselves as self-sufficient and self-reliant.

The prophet describes the difference between the two groups in relation to the word of God. The first group trembles at his word. The second ignores it. People in the second group do not answer when the Lord calls, do not listen when he speaks, and choose that in which he does not delight. To listen to God's word is to acknowledge God's existence, God's authority, and God's desire to communicate with us. But to tremble at his word is to enter into God's reality, to submit to his authority, and to rejoice that he is speaking to us. On the contrary, to ignore or reject God's word is to prefer a world without God, to rebel against him, and to reject him as a person.

These two groups have diverging trajectories and distinct destinies. The ones who tremble at God's word will live with God in the new heavens and the new earth in unending and unimaginable joy (66:22). The ones who only listen to themselves will encounter God in his judgment, fire, and fury (66:15-16). As Richard Sibbes said, "That which is begun in self-confidence ends in shame." Unending and irreversible shame.

The book of Isaiah ends on a challenge. Will you turn away from God and continue to play your own god and deliverer? Or will you tremble at the living Word, Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Servant of the Lord?

