

## Chapter 33 Isaiah 56-66

### The Anointed One

*“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.”* Isaiah 61:1-4

Isaiah’s ascent up the glorious mountain of truth reaches its peak in the revelation of the suffering Servant whose atoning sacrifice inspires undying praise (54) and an invaluable invitation (55). From this unique vantage point, Isaiah looked out over the future and saw a panorama of truths across the horizon of salvation history. He surveyed the great landscape of revelation without reference to time and distance. He made no attempt to indicate the distance between peaks, which from his vantage point appear to converge. His purpose was for us to stand back and take it all in, letting the truths of divine justice and righteousness, atonement and adoration, judgment and hope shape our lives.

The struggle for justice and the promise of a new heaven and a new earth are placed side-by-side in Isaiah’s end-times picture. The prophet meant for us to feel the immediacy of God’s redemption and vengeance and to be aware of the cataclysmic fault line between goodness and evil. He wanted us to sense deep in our souls the difference between the darkness of present day depravity and the overwhelming delight of the future Day of the Lord. The description of the Man of Sorrows reveals the depth of God’s love, but it is by no means the last word on the Servant of the Lord.

At first glance the end of Isaiah may appear to be a random collection of passages. But upon closer examination it is best viewed as a mosaic of revelational glimpses into a future that is painfully divided between those who follow the Lord and those who don’t— a future dramatically split between judgment and salvation. Isaiah *answers* the question, “How should we then live?” His purpose was practical. In the light of God’s glorious salvation how do we remain faithful to the end? His aim was to offer down-to-earth spiritual direction that was meant to change the way we view ourselves and others. Given the truth of God’s atoning sacrifice for sin and the faithfulness of his everlasting covenant, Isaiah articulated what our vision of God and our mission to the world should be.

In his own inimitable style and inspired by the Holy Spirit, Isaiah answered the question of how we should live. His conclusion gathers up the themes that have gone before, the vulnerability of the righteous, the futility of man-made spirituality, the obstinacy of Israel, the immediacy of God’s comfort, the redemption of the nations, the inevitability of God’s holy judgment, and the

certainty of his glorious salvation for all who put their trust in him. Each truth adds to his panoramic view of the end. A landscape artist sacrifices detail in order to paint the distant horizon, but the prophet poet zooms in for a close-up and then pans out for the horizon. Isaiah moved rapidly between sincere empathy for the righteous and angry disgust for the wicked, all the while keeping us alert to vivid scenes of end-times vengeance and the ultimate vision of a new heaven and new earth. At times it is hard to keep up with Isaiah because of the sheer force of his inspired prophecy. We are tempted to diffuse its impact by dissecting the text and using it as fuel for debate rather than food for the soul. But the Word of God is not meant for our curiosity and critique, but for our comfort, conviction, and commitment to Christ.

### **Isaiah's Beatitudes**

Isaiah's revelation of the finished work of the Man of Sorrows concludes with a satisfying description of praise and invitation, followed by a note of finality: "This will be for the Lord's renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed" (55:13). This everlasting sign is referred to again in the last chapter when the Lord says, "I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations... They will proclaim my glory among the nations" (66:19). Knowing what we do about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, "the 'sign' can only be his cross" (Motyer, p.541). It is the true story of the Man of Sorrows, who paid the horrible price for our sins to reconcile us to God. This is the indestructible truth that the Church is commissioned to preach to all the nations (Mt 28:19). And in between these two references to the Cross, Isaiah explores what it means to live in the end times, between the coming of the Anointed One who preaches good news to the poor (61:1) and the Lord's second coming, when he will be "robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength" (63:1).

Here we have not only a description of how the people of God are to live in the in-between time, but a sobering picture of the evil that confronts today's followers of Christ, as well. Isaiah placed these two descriptions side-by-side in order to impress upon all who seek God the need to choose justice over oppression, righteousness over empty ritual, confession over conceit, repentance over resentment and humility over pride. Throughout this concluding section Isaiah drives the truth home of the inevitability of God's judgment against evil and the enduring hope of salvation for all who place their trust in the Anointed One. In many ways Isaiah's challenge to pursue justice and righteousness reminds us of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Isaiah's description of blessing agrees with Jesus' beatitudes. Both messages denounce man-made religion and call for true righteousness.

Isaiah begins his message with a practical, down-to-earth *challenge* that is entirely based on the *comfort* he has so thoroughly explored in the previous chapters (40-55). Unlike Jesus who came as the Lord's Anointed (59:21; 61:1) and spoke on his own authority, Isaiah began his message declaring, "This is what the Lord says:

'Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. Blessed is the [person] who does this, the person who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil'" (56:1-2).

In the course of his message Isaiah described more fully what it means to pursue justice and keep the Sabbath. He addressed those who are “contrite and lowly in spirit” (57:15), the same type of people Jesus called when he said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” and “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Mt. 5:3-4). Isaiah declared that “the high and lofty One” draws near to the brokenhearted, to those who are aware of their greed and willful ways, and says, “I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him, creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel” (57:18-19). The justice, Isaiah envisioned, was motivated out of grace, not guilt.

Isaiah made a special appeal to those who understand their lowliness before “the high and lofty One” and who mourn for their sins. He gave special reassurance to the foreigner “who has joined [bound] himself to the Lord” (56:3). and to the eunuch, whose physical disability was no longer a hindrance to full participation in the family of God. Yahweh The Lord God’s inclusion of the foreigner and eunuch, “who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord, and to worship him” (56:6), affirms the word of the Lord that declares, “my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations” and underscores the promise, “I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered” (56:8). Jesus quoted this line from the prophet Isaiah when he cleansed the temple (Lk 19:46) and alludes to the promise when he said, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (Jn 10:16). There is a strong missionary appeal throughout Isaiah’s entire prophecy and especially in his concluding section (60:3; 61:11; 62:10; 66:19-21). It is the same impulse underscored by Jesus in his outreach to the Samaritan woman (Jn 4), the Roman centurion (Lk 7:1-10), and the Greek woman whose daughter was demon possessed (Mk 7:26).

In contrast to the message of hope delivered to faithful foreigners and eunuchs, Isaiah leveled a stinging condemnation of Israel’s leadership, her blind watchmen and lazy shepherds, who said to themselves, “Let us drink our fill of beer! And tomorrow will be like today, or even far better” (56:12). These “watchmen” and “shepherds” were not unlike the self-indulgent religious leaders in Jesus’ day, who “neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness.” Jesus categorically condemned these proselytizing, egocentric, moralizing hypocrites, “You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” (Mt 23:24).

Isaiah drew attention to the vulnerability of the righteous and the callousness of the wicked. “The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil” (57:1). Meanwhile those who mock and sneer at the righteous, openly participate in fertility cults, cherish their idols, and indulge their sexual passions, think that they are getting away with apostasy, but they’re not! They may have felt they had cleverly concealed their paganism, “Behind your doors and your doorposts you have put your pagan symbols” (57:8), but it was in fact blatant. Outwardly they tried to appear sincere. They practiced all the prescribed rituals religiously, thinking that they could extort divine favor in a quid pro quo arrangement with God, but all to no avail. Isaiah offered the Lord’s assessment of their piety:

“For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high” (58:2-4).

Isaiah was clear that the Lord God’s chosen fast was very different and was designed to serve others and glorify God.

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I” (58:6-9).

It is easy to see parallels between Isaiah’s description of Sabbath keeping and Jesus’ description of heart righteousness. Then and now, the righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees consists of love instead of hate, purity instead of lust, faithfulness instead of infidelity, integrity instead of dishonesty, and reconciliation instead of retaliation (Mt 5:21-48). For Isaiah the choice was between a fast without a blessing (Isa 58:3) and a feast with a blessing! (58:14). And the only way to experience the joy of the Lord was to respond to God’s call for repentance with genuine confession. Until we admit our sin there is no hope for renewal. As at the beginning of his ministry (6:5), Isaiah included his own sin in the confession, saying, “So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us” (59:9). He gave the people the words of repentance and confessed them himself, from the heart.

“For our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offenses are ever before us, and we acknowledge our iniquities: rebellion and treachery against the Lord, turning our backs on our God, fomenting oppression and revolt, uttering lies our hearts have conceived. So justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil is prey” (59:12-15).

Confession is a constant reminder that apart from the grace of God all our efforts are to no avail. If justice were left up to us the result would be anarchy and oppression. “The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw no one, and he was appalled that there was no one to intervene...” (59:15-16). There is no place for independent, self-congratulatory effort, no place for triumphalism and pride. We are not saved by grace, only to be sanctified by works. The

moment we say to ourselves, “Look at what I have achieved for God,” we have forgotten that “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (64:6). Isaiah’s conclusion drives the point home that our dependence is upon the Anointed one, and that apart from him we can do no good thing. We find our strength, wisdom, hope and glory in the Lord our Redeemer (59:20; 60:16; 61:10). The greater our maturity, the deeper our humility. We never stop praying,

“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people” (64:8-9).

We never stop trembling at God’s word (66:2,5) and depending upon his grace and mercy. Everything Isaiah said about our relationship to the Lord God is consistent with the apostle Paul’s bottom line, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). Isaiah’s Spirit-inspired vision is consistent with the author of Hebrew’s challenge, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (12:2).

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Isaiah’s conclusion is this: Everything depends on the Sovereign Lord, who is the God of all Salvation and the Lord of the nations. Isaiah looks out over the horizon of truth with little concern for history’s time line, but with absolute confidence in the Lord of history. Apart from the Sovereign Lord there is a complete void of justice (59:16) and “thick darkness” covers the peoples (60:2). The city of man lies in ruins, a place of “robbery and iniquity” (61:8) incapable of saving itself and destined for judgment. The world’s only hope is found in the Sovereign Lord, who “will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations” (61:11). If the Lord does not come to our rescue and “put on righteousness as his breastplate and the helmet of salvation on his head,” we don’t have a fighting chance! But when he puts on “the garments of vengeance” and wraps “himself in zeal” watch out, for his Salvation and Judgment are forever (59:17).

Isaiah emphasized that the work of saving and judging the nations is not left to us, but belongs to the Anointed One. Everything depends on his word. “‘My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever,’ says the Lord” (59:21). This is the word that will not return void (55:11), that will dispel the darkness (60:1-2) and draw the nations. We can tell that Isaiah reveled in this truth. He exemplified the awesome sense of expectation and hope that was meant to prevail among God’s people. “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (60:3). People will be gathered from everywhere, “bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord” (60:6). Isaiah envisioned an end to the vulnerability of the righteous and the violence of the wicked. “No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders, but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise” (60:18).

The gospel according to Isaiah depends on the Anointed One. He alone brings salvation and

judgment, vindication and vengeance. The “year of the Lord’s favor” and “the day of vengeance of our God” converge in Isaiah’s prophecy. From his Spirit-inspired vantage point, Isaiah saw both truths together, salvation by grace alone and the finality of God’s everlasting judgment. But what he did not see was the distance between them. We readily recognize Isaiah’s climactic description of the Anointed One as the words that Jesus used to introduce himself and his ministry.

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for all those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair” (61:1-3; see Lk 4:18-19).

In Isaiah’s prophecy the saving, sacrificing work of the Man of Sorrows precedes the description of the Anointed One, whereas in the New Testament the order is reversed. Yet from both sources it is clear that Jesus’ atoning sacrifice is the basis for the Gospel to the poor, the brokenhearted, and the prisoner. Jesus’ entire life and ministry can only be understood in the light of the Cross. In him all that was said of the Man of Sorrows and all that was said of the Anointed One reach fulfillment. Therefore the Gospel insists that justification and justice belong together and must not be separated. As the apostle Paul said, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18).

We should note that Jesus ended his quotation from Isaiah 61 intentionally after he proclaimed the year of the Lord’s favor, because it was not then, nor is it now, the day of vengeance. The apostle Paul made a similar point when he used Isaiah’s language to challenge believers to put on “the full armor of God.” He referred to the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation, but he did not advise believers to “put on the garments of vengeance” (Eph 6:12-17; Isa 59:17). The people of God are called to participate with Christ in preaching good news to the poor, in binding up the brokenhearted, and in proclaiming freedom for the captives.

### **Isaiah’s Vision of the End**

Isaiah used a powerful array of images and metaphors to capture the beauty and splendor and glory of his Spirit-inspired vision of Salvation. “For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent” (62:1), was his inspiration for describing the place the Lord called “My Delight”(62:4), “The City No Longer Deserted” (62:12), and “my holy mountain” (65:11,25). The joy of the new Jerusalem will be like that of a happily married couple on their wedding day or a people liberated from their oppressors (62:5-9). Her peace will flow like an rushing stream and God will nurture and comfort her like a loving mother caring for her baby (66:12-13). Zion is Isaiah’s code word for a place that only God can and will create.

“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more” (65:17-19).

Salvation and Judgment are not under our power, and for that we can thank God, but we are called to proclaim the gospel and seek justice. We are called to “raise a banner for the nations” (62:10) and “proclaim [God’s] glory among the nations” (66:19). We are to do so in faithfulness, obedience and joy, with the full realization that God alone accomplishes salvation and judgment. With humility, and without triumphalism, we depend upon the God of the Exodus (63:11-14) to save and to judge according to his perfect justice and mercy.

Isaiah was equally confident in God’s judgment and salvation. His vision of the Man of Sorrows and the Anointed One would be incomplete without a vision of the Mighty God, “robed in splendor” trampling the nations in his anger and executing judgment upon all those who insisted on their own way (63:1-6).

“See, the Lord is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For with fire and with his sword the Lord will execute judgment upon all people, and many will be those slain by the Lord” (66:15-16).

Isaiah’s prophecy gives us every indication that human depravity and obstinacy will continue right up to the end. After 50 years of ministry, Isaiah was still saying what he was led to say from the beginning. He was still raising his voice in protest, saying, “Your acts of worship are acts of sin: Your sacrificial slaughter of the ox is no different from murdering the neighbor...Your presentation of memorial gifts, no different from honoring a no-god idol. You choose self-serving worship, you delight in self-centered worship—disgusting!” (66:3, The Message). Isaiah’s last word on evil is a perpetual warning against those who refuse God’s mercy and choose their own way. It is a picture of utter horror. The unburied, maggot infested corpses of those who persisted in rebelling against God are being burned in an unquenchable fire and “everyone who sees what’s happened and smells the stench retches” (66:24, The Message). If any picture was meant to shock us into reality, it is this graphic picture of hell. As far as Isaiah was concerned it is better to get into God’s great salvation story scared than not to get into it at all!