

ISAIAH

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Isaiah 1-39

INTRODUCTION

Isaiah of Jerusalem was one of the four great, eighth-century prophets. Amos and Hosea prophesied a generation before him in the northern kingdom of Israel. Micah was his contemporary in the southern kingdom of Judah. Both Israel and Judah had enjoyed political and economic prosperity during the mid-eighth century but this was accompanied by grave abuses in every realm of life. Isaiah prophesied from 742 B.C. (6.1). The latest date which can be assigned to his ministry is 701 B.C., the year of Sennacherib's invasion, but it is virtually certain that he continued to minister after this event. A Jewish tradition that he was sawn asunder (cf. Heb. 11.37) during the early years of the apostate king Manasseh (687-642 B.C.) may well be correct. His prophecies are not in strict chronological order and there is an evident tendency to group together oracles of a particular type (e.g. the prophecies concerning foreign nations in chs. 13-23).

Isaiah 1.1-15

The Great Accusation

This blistering attack on Judah's hypocritical religion has been described as Isaiah's most representative prophecy. It must have seared the very ears, as well as the consciences, of his hearers, smugly confident as they were that their conventional religion was acceptable to God. Blow by blow Isaiah demolishes such false security.

Sin, he declares, is basically rebellion against the Lord (2-4). The heavens and the earth are invited to witness so abnormal a crime, as though the whole universe was a court-room presided over by the Almighty (cf. Deut. 4.2.6; 32.1). Even the ox and the ass, the two most common domesticated animals, were capable of showing some gratitude and sense of ownership but Israel was quite heedless and ungrateful. The tender paternal care of the Lord contrasted sharply with the shabby indifference and wilful rebellion of His people. For this reason His rod of correction had fallen upon the nation (5 f.). the picture is of a slave who has been punished so frequently for his misdeeds that there was no area of his body which was unaffected. But there was not the slightest sign of repentance, which would have allowed the master to drop the rod and seek to heal the wounds. In vs. 7-9 this imagery is abandoned and the cold hard facts of history substituted. In Isaiah's own lifetime Judah was subjected to attacks from Israel (the northern kingdom, which lost its identity in 721 B.C.), Syria, Edom, Philistia and the mighty Assyria. All of these were 'the rod of My (i.e. God's) anger' (10.5), and Judah was brought very low; a booth or lodge (8) was a frail structure of branches designed to give shelter from the sun at harvest-time. Only a few faithful survivors prevented a parallel with the total destruction of the notorious cities of the plain (Gen. 13.13). One can imagine how the rulers and citizens of Jerusalem would cringe with horror when they were likened to Sodom and Gomorrah

(10)! In this one sentence Isaiah sweeps away all their false complacency as the covenant people. Their disobedience placed them outside the covenant and made them fit only for the judgement. Sacrifices (11 f.), religious festivals (12 ff.) and prayers (15) were so much humbug when their hands were bloodstained. God would have none of them.

Note: Isaiah's teaching on the remnant was of great importance in later theology. Trace his distinctive views in 6.13; 7.3; 8.16-18; 10.20-22; 11.11,16.

A thought: What would be God's verdict on our religious acts when set against the background of our lives?

Isaiah 1.16-31

Repent or Perish!

The prophets were not opposed to the sacrificial system as such, but they make it quite clear that without a genuine repentance, accompanied by a life which is pleasing to God, all man's cultic acts are useless (16 f., cf. Hos. 6.6; Amos 5.21-24; Mic. 6.6 ff.). Isaiah and his fellow-prophets insisted strongly on social righteousness because of what they knew of the character of God. He was a holy, righteous God and since individual Israelites were linked with Him in the

covenant, they were linked with each other also, a relationship which was to show itself in brotherly love. The same is true of the Church today.

One of the great evangelical appeals of the O.T. sounds out in vs. 18-20. But notice how God, even when He desires our good, never forces His will upon us. The onus of choice rested squarely upon the people, who held their destinies in their hands. But salvation was not something they deserved, or could earn, it was purely of God's grace, given to those who would respond to Him in obedience.

The appeal to come to the lord for cleansing is underlined dramatically by a further unfolding of the desperate plight of Jerusalem and its rulers (21 ff.). Notice the three suggestive metaphors which Isaiah employs: the harlot (21), a common symbol of the nation's infidelity and uncleanness, especially in Hosea and Jeremiah; adulteration, in which there is an abnormal reversal of the refining process; and wine which has been watered down (22). In each case, something which was originally good has been spoilt. Two illustrations of this, as applied to Judah, are given (i) The complete corruption of the ruling classes and the courts is exposed (23). (ii) The fertility cults, imported from neighbouring heathen countries, are indicated in vs. 29 ff. The debased sexual element in these made a strong appeal to man's sensuous nature, but weakened his moral and spiritual fibre and made him fit only for judgement.

God cannot tolerate such iniquity, whether it be in the eighth century B.C. or the twentieth century A.D. (24-28). He who is 'the Holy One of Israel' (4) is also 'the Mighty One of Israel' (24), and He who would act decisively against those who had made themselves His enemies. The analogy used, that of the refining process (cf. Job 23.10; Ezek. 22.17-22; Mal 3.2 f.), shows that this judgement is strictly controlled and for a definite purpose. The evil alone will be eliminated, so that Zion might again be characterised by righteousness. Even in His wrath the Lord remains merciful (Hab. 3.2).

Isaiah 2

Future Blessing and Judgement

The title (1) probably refers to the collection of prophecies in chs. 2-4. In today's portion, we have two oracles, both of which concern the future, although markedly dissimilar in their contents. The ethical appeal of v. 5 links the two sections together. It expresses what ought to have been Judah's response in the light of the promises of v. 2 ff., and contrasts strongly with the actual conduct of the nation (6-22).

The golden age is foretold by Isaiah in vs. 2 ff. Jerusalem will become the centre of worship for the entire world, and universal peace will result from the Lord's rule. The same prophecy, in a slightly longer form, is found in Mic. 4.1-7 and a part of it is reproduced in Joel 3.10, showing that this message of hope was common to many, if not all, of God's prophets. Jerusalem was to be the teacher of the world, the focal point of divine instruction and enrichment. The missionary movement of the O.T. invariably has this theme of the nations converging upon the city of Zion (e.g. Isa 49.6,7; 60.3; 66.23; Jer. 3.17; Zech. 2.11; 8.2 ff.; 14.16). But a marked change is apparent in the N.T. The death of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit have made for a new dynamic in evangelism, in which Jerusalem is the starting point, and the end of the earth the ultimate goal (Acts 1.8). In this missionary programme every believer has a vital part to play (Matt 28.18-20).

The day of reckoning (6-22) is deliberately set alongside this conception, as though to indicate that mercy and judgement are complimentary. The frequent references to 'the day' (11, 12, 17, 20) recall the attack of Amos on his contemporaries a generation or two before Isaiah (Amos 5.18-20). They looked upon the Day of the Lord as the time when God would intervene on their behalf to slaughter all their enemies, but Amos corrected their false sense of privilege and insisted that judgement would begin with them. Isaiah has an identical emphasis, and in the terrible judgement of that day all the false supports of Judah, including their reliance upon heathen superstitions (6a), riches (7), weapons and fortifications (7, 15), idols (8, 20) and their own self-sufficiency (11, 17) would be swept away. Men would be left stripped and helpless, only the Lord would be glorified in that day (11, 17). Compare this O.T. judgement on the sins of God's people with the N.T. picture of the testing of the works of the Christian on 'the day' (1 Cor. 3.10-15).

Isaiah 3.1-4.1

A Sick Society

A situation bordering on anarchy is described in 3.1-15. Everyone capable of giving leadership would be removed. The all-inclusive nature of this operation is revealed in the expression 'stay and staff' (both of which come from the same root), equivalent to our 'bag and baggage'. Military and civil leaders are included, as well as those who had led the nation astray by false prophecy and heathen religious practices. The government would be in the hands of the immature and incapable (4) and all the normal values of life would be inverted. The intimidatory tactics of the militant Red Guard in modern China's 'cultural revolution' have produced the same kind of tragic situation as we find in vs. 4,5. So desperate would the situation be that men would seek to press-gang leaders on the flimsiest pretexts, only to be curtly rebuffed – no one would be anxious to take over in such chaotic times (6,7). Only one class is exempted from the general judgement – the righteous (10, cf. 2 Pet. 2.9). The reference in v. 12 is probably to Ahaz, king of Judah from 735-715 B.C., whose rule was weak and incompetent. In the absence of adequate leadership the Lord Himself would intervene as both Advocate and Judge (13 ff.). Notice the uncompromising language in which He condemns the constituted authorities for their avaricious cruelty – a reminder that all who wield authority have a sacred responsibility to those under them.

3.16 – 4.1 are concerned with the women of Jerusalem. The opening verses depict a contemporary fashion parade! The prophet intended his hearers to observe the sharp contrast between the intolerable condition of the poor (14, 15) and the pointless ornamentation of the Jerusalem matrons, matched by their suggestive gestures. The 'tinkling with their feet' (16) was caused by ornamental ankle chains which must have made walking quite an effort! One writer, reassuringly, points out that not all the items in vs. 18-23 were necessarily worn at the same time! So Isaiah satirises those who, at enormous expense and considerable inconvenience, tried to keep up with fashion, always a harsh mistress. It is, of course, foolish to suggest that the Christian should be drab or careless in dress, but of far greater importance to God is the adorning of 'the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit' (1 Pet. 3.3,4).

Judgement would fall upon these women, cruelly indifferent as they were to the needs of the oppressed. It would include the reproach of the childlessness (4.1) which G.T. Manley calls 'the awful curse of the East'.

Isaiah 4.2-5.7

Fruitfulness and Fruitlessness

A connection with yesterday's portion is indicated by 4.4. The intervention of the Lord is like a coin with judgement on one side and blessing on the other. In many of the prophets the blessings of the golden age follow swiftly upon the most sombre denunciations, a reminder of God's original plan which cannot ultimately be thwarted even by man's sin and waywardness. Some have given the oracle in 4.2-6 a Messianic setting, but since 'the branch of the Lord is parallel to the 'fruit of the land' (2) a more general application is probable. The righteous remnant who survived would enjoy perfect fellowship with their God, whose presence would be manifested amongst them as it was in the wilderness period (5, cf. Exod. 13.21,22). He would overshadow them with His protection like a canopy. The oracle was only partially fulfilled historically, and like many other prophecies, it points forward to a consummation at the end of the age.

The Song of the Vineyard (5.1-7) is a lyrical parable of judgement, which is the more impressive because it is in the form of a love-song addressed to Isaiah's contemporaries (1). Loving, lavish care had been bestowed upon this vineyard, nothing had been left to chance, nor was there any lack of expectancy – a wine vat had been prepared in anticipation of a bumper harvest (2). But the result was cruelly disappointing and the only recourse, humanly speaking, was to abandon the whole project and make a new beginning. Thank God that, in actual fact, He did not allow the infidelity of His people to turn Him aside from His redemptive purposes, but out of seeming disaster He made a new beginning. This prophecy was fulfilled in 587 B.C., when the Babylonians ravaged the countryside and battered Jerusalem to the ground, but God began to build up immediately through a godly remnant, under Ezekiel's leadership, in exile. He can do the same with our barren, fruitless lives if we will allow Him. Read carefully the second part of v. 7. What does the Lord look for in our lives? What does He find?

Isaiah 5.8-30

A Six-fold Woe!

- (i) Woe to land-speculators (8 ff., cf. Mic. 2.2). The promised land was a God-given inheritance, held in sacred trust by the individual Israelite, hence the importance of a continuity of possession (cf. 1 Kings 21.3). In both Israel and Judah the rich landowners used the plight of the poor as a means of enlarging their own estates, the wretched peasants being forced to sell cheaply to pay their debts. The Lord makes it clear that the punishment upon these unscrupulous men would match the crime, they would gain no advantage from their exactions. A 'bath' (10) was a liquid measure equal to about eight gallons; a 'homer' was the equivalent dry measure, but instead of an increase at harvest there would actually be a decrease, for an 'ephah' was a tenth of a 'homer'.
- (ii) Woe to the drunkard (11-17). The considerable number of references to drunkenness in Isaiah attests its prevalence (5.22; 19.14; 24.20; 28.1, 7). Drunkenness in the morning was considered to be particularly reprehensible (cf. Acts 2.15). Strong drink has brought ruin to many individuals and the dissolute character which it produces has brought nations low. Death and exile (national death) are foretold as the consequence of the misgovernment by these undisciplined leaders.

- (iii) Woe to the blasphemous (18 f.) who were enthusiastically pulling sin on Eke men drawing a heavily laden cart, meanwhile mocking God and taunting Him to act, if He could.
- (iv) Woe to the morally-perverted (20). Sin inevitably warps our judgement and affects our sense of values. It also makes a man insensitive towards God (12b).
- (v) Woe to the self-conceited (21). Such 'know-all's' have no conscious need of God, but their confidence is completely illusory (cf. Prov. 16.18).
- (vi) A further woe is directed against the drunkard, but the context limits it to the judges of Judah (22 f.). These men ought to have been the champions of the oppressed. Instead, they were mighty only in their drinking bouts.

Such a catalogue of sins merited a sudden and devastating punishment. This Isaiah foretells (24 f.). Even the mighty Assyria responds to the bidding of the Lord (26-30).

Isaiah 6

Encounter with God

A knowledge of this chapter, with its account of Isaiah's inaugural vision and call to the prophetic office, is of vital importance in understanding the teaching of this great prophet. It may well be that the death of good king Uzziah (742 B.C.), whose rule had resulted in the stability of the nation for almost half a century, had brought the young Isaiah to the Temple, the more so as the international situation was becoming increasingly dominated by an Assyria obviously bent on conquest. Four elements in this chapter deserve careful attention:

- (i) Isaiah was made aware of the majesty and holiness of God when he saw part of His glory ('train', 1, indicates the skirts of His garments) and heard the chant of the seraphim (1-4). This vision henceforth determined his conception of Judah's God. He was the One Sovereign God, and no power, whether it be a heathen emperor or a heathen deity, could stand before Him.
- (ii) Confronted with an absolutely holy God, Isaiah became acutely conscious of his own and the nation's sin (5). Our sense of sin is always relative, and it is the man who lives close to the Eternal Light who is most sensitive to sin. Many contemporary theologians have a weak view of sin, not so Isaiah.
- (iii) God took the initiative and provided the means of cleansing from sin (6 f.). This is the evangelical note which is characteristic of the Scriptures. He is ever the One who draws near to effect the salvation which man is utterly unable to gain.
- (iv) The cleansed Isaiah promptly aligned himself with the Lord, as His messenger. This was a natural and spontaneous response, paralleled by that of Paul (Acts 22.10, cf. 9.6 AV [KJV], RV). He was made to understand the difficult nature of his ministry, with many heartaches, disappointments and the inevitability of final judgement in spite of his warnings. But there was a ray of hope, for v. 13 speaks of a remnant which would survive the destruction and the holocaust.

There is a scene in which this experience of Isaiah's must have its parallel in our lives. We too are confronted with a holy, almighty God, whose very purity reveals the depth of our sin. But God, through His grace, has provided a way of forgiveness (2 Cor. 5.21; 1 Pet. 2.24). Surely our logical response is to volunteer, 'Here am I! send me' (cf. Rom. 12.1)!

Questions for further study and discussion Isaiah chs. 1-6

1. Make a catalogue of the sins which were prevalent in Isaiah's age. What, in your estimation, was Judah's cardinal sin?
2. Consider the bearing of sacrifice, etc. upon the Hebrew's relationship with God. Take Jer. 7.21-25; Hos. 6.6; Amos 5.21-24 and Mic. 6.6-8 into account. What relevance has this to our own situation?
3. What may we learn from these chapters about the fact of purpose in history?
4. What do these chapters teach us of the relationship between God and Judah?
5. Compare the call of Isaiah with other 'calls' in both O.T. and N.T. Can you detect a basic pattern? What is the importance of a 'call' in connection with the exercise of a Christian ministry of any kind?

Isaiah 7

Trust in the Lord Alone

The historical background of this chapter may be found in 2 Kings 16.5-18 and 2 Chron. 28.5-21. Israel and Syria had rebelled against their overlord, Assyria, and were attempting to force Judah into their alliance. As well as this threat from the north there were attacks upon Judah from Philistia in the south-west and Edom in the south-east. It was a major political crisis, with king Ahaz seemingly trapped. But Isaiah the prophet discerned something more important still, a major religious crisis, for Ahaz was about to appeal to Assyria to intervene and save him. Isaiah's message to Ahaz was to trust in the Lord alone. There is a play on words in v. 9 which may be rendered, 'If you will not be sure, you cannot be secure. Foreign alliances, Isaiah saw, were disloyalty to Yahweh, a virtual denial of His ability to save. Hence the urgency with which Isaiah invited Ahaz to request any sign as a confirmation of His power. Ahaz was a weak king, however and his seemingly pious words in v. 12 covered a decision which he had already taken. The shock-troops of Assyria seemed to him a more tangible asset than reliance upon the invisible Yahweh. It was a mistake which has been repeated many times since. Isaiah was right, of course. Politically, it was an error to call in Assyria, it only made Judah more subservient. Assyria was bound to crush this rebellion anyway. More fundamental was the fact that the Lord God can be relied upon.

The Immanuel oracle (14-25) was given in spite of the refusal of Ahaz. There must have been an historical fulfilment, for before the child about to be born was capable of choice the threat from Israel and Syria would be eliminated, but Judah itself would have suffered severely, as the rest of the chapter indicates, It remains true, however, that the world was saved by 'Immanuel', God with us, and Matthew was perfectly correct in seeing this prophecy as a germinal concept fulfilled in Christ.

Notes:

- i) If vs. 15, 16 refer to a choice between pleasant and unpleasant food the time indicated would be about three years; if they refer to moral discrimination, about fourteen years is required.
- (ii) Curds and honey (15,22) are the staple diet of a nomadic community, not an agricultural, and these references (cf. the general tone of vs. 17-25) indicate that Judah would be reduced to a nomadic state.

Isaiah 8

‘God is with Us’

The chapter introduces us to another of the sons of Isaiah. When the prophet confronted Ahaz (ch. 7) he took Shear-jashub, whose name, meaning ‘a remnant shall return’, was itself a symbol of judgement. This fact would be realised by the king and indicates that Isaiah had connections with the court. The name of the second son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, literally ‘speeds booty, hastens spoil’, was a further prophecy that Judah’s enemies in this particular crisis, Israel and Syria, symbolised by their capitals (4), would be destroyed.

The waters of Shiloah (5-8) have usually been taken as an allusion to the invisible presence and supply of the Lord (cf. Psa. 44.6, 5). The reference may be to the brook which flowed from the Gihon spring, which was connected by a conduit (the precursor of Hezekiah’s tunnel, 2 Kings 20.20) to Jerusalem’s water supply within the city. The symbol would then be of a city temporarily besieged but under Yahweh’s protection. This, Judah was not prepared to accept. Therefore the might of Assyria, suggested in the reference to the river (Euphrates, 7), would sweep upon them like a rushing, engulfing torrent. There is a further appeal by the prophet (9-15) to rely on the Lord alone, forsaking the way of worldly wisdom and political machinations (10).

Following the rejection by Ahaz of his advice in the national crisis Isaiah appears to have gone into partial retirement – no oracle of his can be accurately dated for at least ten years after 735 B.C. He took practical steps (16-18) to gather about him a circle of disciples who would form a nucleus of the remnant, which he foresaw would survive the impending judgement. There was little hope for a people who had forsaken the living God and His Law, and were resorting to the dubious practices of necromancy and spiritism (19, 20). Such a course could only issue in darkness. We may marvel at the clarity with which Isaiah saw the issues at stake and the way in which he was prepared to rely implicitly on the Lord. But then, is not the Lord Sovereign in all things, the Almighty? Isaiah did not fear and nor need we.

Isaiah 9.1-7

The Prince of Peace

This Messianic oracle climaxes the thought of the preceding chapter. The people of Judah, led by their apostate king, Ahaz, were like blind men passing through a desolate land, a situation of unrelieved gloom (8.21, 22). Here the prophet’s thought soars into the future. Zebulun and Naphtali felt the full weight of the reprisal raid made on Israel by the Assyrian king, Tiglath Pileser III, who deported many of the inhabitants of this area. But in this same region the Messiah Himself, the Great Deliverer of His people, would arise. God would not leave the land in perpetual darkness; in the area where the misery was most acute, Galilee of the nations, the Light of the whole world would arise. In that glorious day, the Davidic dynasty would be permanently established and the Messianic kingdom would be ushered in, leading to peace, prosperity, justice and righteousness (7). The triumph over the oppressor would be as convincing as the sweeping victory won by Gideon over the Midianites (4, cf. Judg. 7.19-8.12).

There is a natural connection of thought between the son of v. 6 and the Immanuel prophecy of 7.14, but here the ultimate fulfilment in Christ is uppermost. The name of the Messiah (6) is composed of four components which, taken together, reveal Him in all the perfection of His being:

- (i) Wonderful Counsellor. He will be a ruler of unparalleled wisdom. Here there may be an oblique comparison with the indecisive, childish government of Ahaz.

- (ii) Mighty God, or Hero God. Supernatural wisdom would be accompanied by the superlative strength needed to implement His counsels.
- (iii) Everlasting Father. The very attribute of God the Father Himself, revealed in a loving, solicitous care for His people, would characterise Messiah.
- (iv) Prince of Peace. King Ahaz had failed abysmally in the first requirement of a good king, i.e. to secure peace and to rule in peace.

As we contemplate these regal and divine qualities we remember that this promised Messiah is our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He is our divine king, who secured peace by the outpouring of His own life and love (cf. Eph. 2.13-18), and He will not fail in any aspect of His rule.

Isaiah 9.8-10.4

What Makes God Angry?

This section forms an epilogue to the attempt by Syria and Israel to force Judah into their anti-Assyrian alliance. It concentrates on the northern kingdom of Israel and it is apparent that the wrath of Assyria has already fallen upon it. At this point we may pause to note that Isa. 1.1-10.4 may have been the 'first edition' of Isaiah's prophecy, written on the occasion of the partial retirement from public life which we observed in connection with 8.16 f. This would include his early prophecies against Judah (chs. 1-5); the account of his call to the prophetic office (ch. 6), and the historical detail of the events leading up to, and following, the rejection of Isaiah's advice to Ahaz (chs. 7-10.4).

This section is divided into four parts by the grim chorus of the last parts of 9.12, 17, 21; 10.4. It occurs also in 5.25, but in this case it is Judah, not Israel, which is under review.

- (i) 9.8-12. The knowledge of v. 9 would not come through the word of Isaiah but by bitter experience which would destroy Israel's arrogant pride. Self-confidence (dressed stone instead of brick, cedar instead of sycamore, 10) is often a commendable virtue but in this case it was sheer presumption.
- (ii) 9.13-17. The disaster which would overtake Israel would remove all their leaders. So serious would the situation be that the Lord could no longer commend mercy to the fatherless and widows (17).
- (iii) 9.18-21 presents a graphic picture of a forest or scrub fire, an all too frequent occurrence in Palestine, especially in the heat of summer, when the land become like a giant tinder-box. The complete failure of the harvest would make men cast off all moral restraint, acting like animals fighting for what food remained.
- (iv) 10.1-4 brings a woe against Israel's corrupt judges which is reminiscent of Amos, the champion of social righteousness. In the day of judgement these evil men will have no shelter, certainly not in their ill-gotten gains. Death or a shameful captivity would be the only alternatives. There is a reminder here of that ultimate judgement day in which the only ones to stand before a holy God are the clothed in the righteousness of Christ (cf. Matt. 25.31-46; 2 Cor. 5.1-5; Rev. 3.5).

A question: Are there elements in our natural life which rouse God's anger?

Isaiah 10.5-34

How Big is Your God?

The immensity of Isaiah's faith is shown clearly in vs. 5-19. The insignificant kingdom of Judah, smaller than an average-sized county in England, worshipped Yahweh. The great world power was mighty Assyria, renowned for its cruelty and reliance upon massive force, whose armies had crushed all opposition. Its military achievements were matched by arrogant boastfulness (12-14). Whether the victim was Jerusalem or any other of the cities which had fallen (9-11), all were considered puny in the face of such irresistible might. It was as easy as robbing a bird's nest (14)! But Isaiah saw history in its correct perspective. Yahweh was not simply a national god, one of many whose power was confined to their own frontiers. He was the Lord of Hosts and His sway was universal. It was his will which was being worked out, and He used Assyria to this purpose just as a workman manipulates his tools. When that purpose was realised He would discard the implement, punishing it for its sins of cruelty and pride. The world-power of Assyria has long since vanished from the international scene, and the weapons of her twentieth century successors are not the sword, spear and sling. But the truths of this chapter remain valid. All power is subject to the will of God, and He is still on the throne of His universe. What an encouragement to the godly, especially to those who are suffering under the cruel yoke of our modern tyrants!

The key to vs. 20-34 may be found in v. 22, 'Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness'. However, a righteous remnant would survive this judgement against an apostate Judah, and for these there is a word of encouragement, assuring them of a divine limitation to the forces of Assyria. Vs. 28-32 convey a graphic picture of a massive army advancing swiftly upon Jerusalem. All the places named are within a three-hour march of Judah's capital, suggesting the imminence of danger. Nob (32) was the hill immediately to the north of the city. But just as a proud cedar comes crashing to the earth under the woodsman's axe, so Assyria will be suddenly smitten (cf. Ezek. 31.3-14).

Isaiah 11

The Rule of Christ

After the prophecy of Assyria's fall we are given another glimpse into the Messianic kingdom. There is no hint of exultation over the defeat of the tyrant. Peace reigns completely. The Prince of Peace (9.6) rules and wars have ceased. Another contrast is between the proud cedar (Assyria) which is felled, and the 'shoot from the stump of Jesse' which springs to vigorous life. Attention is focused first of all on the Messiah (1-5) and then on His kingdom (6-9). The character and spiritual endowments of the ruler would ensure the quality of His rule. Like the judges of ancient Israel, He would be One anointed with the Spirit of the Lord (2), but the effect of this would be more than a temporary deliverance and respite for His people. Six aspects of the Spirit's outworkings are given, in three pairs:

(i) 'The spirit of wisdom and understanding.' Such intellectual

gifts are essential for a ruler.

(ii) 'The spirit of counsel and might.' Counsel is the ability to apply wisdom and understanding in particular cases, whilst might is the means of implementing them.

(iii) 'The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.' The Messianic King would have a perfect knowledge of God (cf. Jer. 9.24) and a deep reverence for Him.

Unlike so many earthly rulers His management of the affairs of His people would be characterised by absolute integrity (3-5). Such rule would reverse the effect of man's original fall so that the whole of nature would be transformed (6-9, cf. Rom. 8.19-22). This aspect of Isaiah's prophecy still awaits its fulfilment, and the N.T. teaches that this will be realised at Christ's return. The remainder of the oracle (11-16) had a definite, if partial historical fulfilment in the return from Exile (c. 538 B.C.) which is compared with the Exodus from Egypt (16). Note that Isaiah's thought embraces Israel, whose capital, Samaria (after a rebellion subsequent to the one we noted in ch. 7) was destroyed in 721 B.C., its inhabitants being deported. There was no trace of bitterness towards Israel concerning its earlier unbrotherly conduct.

Note: 'The shoulder of the Philistines' (14) refers to the Shephelah, the low range of foothills between Philistia and the mountains of Judah. Philistia, together with Judah's traditional enemies, Edom, Moab and Ammon, would be subjugated.

Isaiah 12

Something to Sing About!

So certain was Isaiah that God would bring back His faithful remnant from captivity that he composed this psalm of praise in anticipation of the event! The chastisement of the exile is viewed as in the past (1) and has given way to the enjoyment of God's salvation. V. 3 may be an allusion to God's provision for the Israelites in the wilderness period. In any case, the return from exile is viewed as a second Exodus, a decisive turning point in the history of the nation, and a remarkable evidence of God's intervention. So just as Moses and his contemporaries celebrated the deliverance at the Red Sea in a rapturous hymn of praise (Exod. 15.1-21) those delivered from bondage in Mesopotamia would praise the Lord. Two centuries were to pass before this event, which Isaiah foresaw with such clarity, came to pass. In 538 B.C. the Persian king, Cyrus, issued his edict allowing the Jews to return to their homeland (Ezra 1.2-4) and 42,360 (Ezra 2.64) brave souls, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, began the long trek back to Zion. Soon after their arrival the foundation of the temple was laid, and at this ceremony the saving acts of the Lord were sung as Isaiah had foretold:

'For He is good,

for His steadfast love endures for ever toward Israel.'

(Ezra 3.11, cf. Jer. 33.10 f.).

Notice the call to gratitude, testimony and praise in vs. 4 ff. especially because of the presence in their midst of 'the Holy One of Israel (one of Isaiah's distinctive names for God, the other being 'the Lord of hosts'). Such a salvation, and such a Companion, were far too wonderful to keep to oneself! The sin of ingratitude is all too prevalent today, and we easily forget the extent of the blessings which God has given us. He has provided a salvation, through the death of His Son, which makes the miracles of the Exodus and the return from Exile pale into insignificance. Let us express our gratitude in praise and in testimony to others concerning His great work for us!

Questions for further study and discussion on Isaiah chs. 7-12

1. What are the permanent values of Isaiah's conception of a God who is active and powerful in history?
2. Consider the relationship between prophecies which have been fulfilled historically and those which appear to be related to the end of the present age.

3. How would you go about convincing an unbeliever that the prophecies in 9.2-7 and 11.1-5 relate to Jesus Christ?
4. What part do gratitude and praise play in the religious life?

Isaiah 13

God and the Nations

This chapter commences a section (chs. 13-23) dealing principally with foreign nations who at one time or another had persecuted Judah. There is one oracle against Jerusalem itself (22.1-14). One lesson which we may draw from these chapters concerns the universal sovereignty of God and His interest in the actions of all men. The religion of much of the ancient world was 'territorial henotheism', that is, the exclusive worship of one god amongst many, each deity being regarded as intimately connected with a particular nation (e.g. Chemosh the god of the Moabites, Milcom the god of the Ammonites, etc.). The power of these gods was considered to reach no further than the national frontiers, and when a man passed that boundary, he passed beyond the god's protection. The God of Judah (and Israel) was not on this plane. He controlled the universe and all world-powers were answerable to Him.

Isa. 13 is a magnificent poem depicting the fall of Babylon. Humanly speaking it was the Medes who sacked the arrogant city, but they are not even mentioned until v. 17. Instead, it is Yahweh who is pictured as a great General, calling up His battalions and preparing them for action (3 ff.) to punish Babylon for its cruelty and sinful pride (11). It was not so much the day of a Median triumph as the Day of the Lord (6, 9), a precursor of His final triumph over all the powers of evil.

The literal fulfilment of vs. 19-22 has often been noted. The 'Arab' (20) originally referred to a desert-wanderer. These were normally glad to utilise the shelter of a ruined city, with its water supply. But the fate overtaking Babylon would be so devastating that it would become an omen of ill-fortune, and so would be shunned by the nomadic peoples.

Note: The Medes (17) were an Iranian race who became associated with the Babylonians in the overthrow of Assyria in the late seventh century B.C. About the middle of the next century they linked up with the Persians to overthrow their former ally. Vs. 17 f. refer to an implacable hostility to Babylon which would not be diverted by bribery.

Isaiah 14.1-27

Pride Comes Before a Fall

The fall of Babylon will be followed by the return from Exile and a complete reversal of the situation (1-4a). This section forms a connecting link between two prophecies concerning Babylon.

There follows a remarkable 'taunt-song' against an unnamed king of Babylonia, Nebuchadnezzar being an obvious suggestion. Some scholars have suggested that since Assyria was the enemy in Isaiah's day the song originally referred to an Assyrian king, possibly Saigon or Sennacherib. This is not necessary, since Isaiah foresaw the rise of Babylonia and the captivity of Israel (39.5-8). The kings of these great world-empires were invariably proud men, indeed, many of them were regarded as the personification of the pagan deities. In graphic terms the fate of this particular monarch is depicted. Death, the great leveller, brings him down to Sheol, the shadowy abode of all the departed, irrespective of wealth or rank. There is even a hint that he was assigned to the deepest level of Sheol, possibly because of a dishonourable burial (11,15,18-20), causing the other inhabitants to marvel (10-20). The reference in vs. 12 ff. is to an ancient Canaanite myth where

Helal, the Morning Star, son of Shahar (Dawn), attempted to rise above all the other luminaries, but was cast down by the Sun. Our Lord's similar description of Satan's fall (Luke 10. 18) has caused the name of Lucifer (12, AV, [KJV]) to be regarded as synonymous with Satan. The passage is a solemn warning against human pride and a reminder that one day we must all give an account of ourselves before God (Rom. 14.10 ff.; 2 Cor. 5.10). Notice how vague is the view of the after-life at this period. Soon after, a more definite doctrine concerning life after death (cf. the note on 26.14,19) began to develop. Certain facts aided this, such as (a) the strength of fellowship with the Lord which, the righteous reasoned, could not be broken even by death (e.g. Psa. 16.10; 73.24); (b) the problem of suffering (e.g. Job 14.13,14; 19.25 ff.); and (c) the stress on the individual encouraged by the prophets. Jeremiah and Ezekiel fostered this, but no full doctrine of the afterlife was possible before Christ's resurrection (2 Tim. 1.10).

Vs. 22 f. form a prose conclusion dealing with the fate of Babylon itself (cf. 13.19-22).

Vs. 24-27 form a separate oracle, but since it tells of a similar destruction of Assyria, there is an affinity of subject. For the historical fulfilment of the prophetic word see 37.21-38. Note how sure Isaiah was of this fact (27), and consider the bearing of this upon those prophecies in God's Word which still await fulfilment.

Isaiah 14.28-15.9

Condemnation with Compassion

Since Ahaz died in 715 B.C. the first oracle (14.28-32) may be accurately dated. Isaiah foretells that the easing of Judah's control of Philistia will be followed by a more serious oppression from the north, undoubtedly a reference to Assyria (31). Judah must withstand any involvement with Philistia against Assyria; her trust must be in the Lord alone (32).

The attention of the prophet now turns to Moab, Judah's eastern neighbour (15.1-9). There was a relationship between the two countries, since Moab was the son of an incestuous union between Lot, the nephew of Abraham, and his elder daughter (Gen. 19.36 f). But there was little brotherliness between them. Moab refused to allow the Israelites to pass through her territory at the time of the Exodus, as a result of which Moabites were excluded from the congregation of Israel (Judg. 11.17, cf. Deut. 23.3-6). Henceforth, apart from occasional friendly contacts (e.g. Ruth 1; 1 Sam. 22.3 f.), there was general hostility between these two related nations.

Isaiah, who foresaw the judgement that was to descend upon his own nation, realised that other nations would also be involved. In Moab's case the aggressor is not named, but as the general movement of the campaign is from north to south, with the refugees streaming southwards into Edom (5), it may be assumed that Assyria was God's agent (cf. 10.5) in this case also. The attack would be a swift one: Ar was situated beside the Arnon; Kir was twenty-five miles to the south, but both would fall in the one night. The whole nation would be in deep mourning over this catastrophe (2-8).

One remarkable feature is the absence of any vindictiveness on the part of Isaiah. Many of his compatriots would have rejoiced in the downfall of their traditional enemy, but Isaiah was moved with compassion (5), especially as he foresaw still further bloodshed (9). All war brings untold misery and suffering and should call forth our sympathy, whatever our own political alignment. There must be also the understanding that through the events of history the Lord works His own will and purposes of judgement.

Isaiah 16

Moab's Plea Rejected

In their predicament the Moabites sent ambassadors from Sela (i.e. Petra, a famous and well-nigh impregnable natural fortress) to Judah, appealing for help (1-5). Their gift of lambs would be appropriate, since Moab is a pastoral country. The main purpose of the delegation was to secure entry into Judah for the considerable number of refugees displaced by the foreign invasion (3 f.). The appeal was backed up by a promise, couched in language which would appeal to the authorities in Jerusalem, that such a generous action would facilitate the establishment of the Davidic dynasty (5).

On humanitarian grounds the plight and plea of the Moabites may have had a considerable effect upon the Jews. But it was rejected (6-12). Almost certainly the reference to the traditional arrogance and boastfulness of Moab (6) shows that the authorities of Jerusalem detected a ring of insincerity in the specious language of the ambassadors. Moab had to face its own problems alone (7), without any official intervention from Judah, although the prophet himself was greatly moved (9,11).

We find an interesting sidelight upon the prophetic methods in vs. 13 f. Isaiah acknowledges that his prophecy concerning Moab, including probably 15.1-16.12, was not original. Suggestions concerning its original setting include: (i) the invasion of the Israelite king, Omri, which resulted in the annual tribute noted in 2 Kings 3.4; (ii) an invasion by a later king of Israel, Jeroboam II (cf. 2 Kings 14.25), when Uzziah was king of Judah. If either of these was the occasion then the name of the original prophet has been lost. But Isaiah may be referring to an earlier prophecy of his own, possibly connected with a known campaign of Sargon II of Assyria against the nomadic tribes of north-west Arabia in 715 B.C. If this be so, then the prophecy of a further campaign (14) would refer to either a second campaign by Sargon in 711 B.C. or to Sennacherib's invasion of the area in 701 B.C.

Isaiah 17.1-18.7

False Religion and Foreign Alliances

Two oracles are to be found in today's portion:

The first (17.1-14), which links together Syria (indicated by its capital, Damascus, 1,3) and Israel (Ephraim/Jacob, 3,4), clearly indicates the Syro-Ephraimitic alliance already referred to (7.1-9.21). The failure of this alliance and the downfall of its participants are noted in language with which we are already familiar (1-6). The main interest of the chapter concerns the references to the heathen cults practised so widely in Israel which, standing at the cross-roads of world-trade, absorbed much that was alien to its native faith. The elements of Canaanite religion are noted in v. 8. The indiscriminate erection of altars was forbidden in Exod. 20.24-26; they were only to be built 'in every place where I cause My name to be remembered', i.e. the place of a theophany (a divine manifestation). The Asherim were probably wooden pillars, the formal substitute for sacred trees and a symbol of the female sexual element in the debased Canaanite religion. In vs. 10b, 11 the reference may be to Adonis-gardens. These had little depth of earth, thus encouraging brief but rapid growth, symbolising the death and resurrection element in the heathen cults. One wonders how this kind of religion could ever have been substituted for a faith in the living God who had saved them (7,10). The Assyrian flood would sweep away such an apostate people (12-14).

The second oracle (18.1-7) was directed against the Ethiopian ambassadors. An Ethiopian dynasty, established in Egypt about 714 B.C., pursued a consistently anti-Assyrian policy which would match that of Hezekiah. The point of the prophecy, therefore, was to deter Hezekiah from involving

his country in any alliance with Ethiopia. He, and indeed all peoples (3), were to look to the Lord who controlled the destinies of all nations. He would cut off the oppressor at the appropriate time (5 f.). Nevertheless, there would be contact with the Ethiopians ('a people tall and smooth', 7), but this would be religious, not political, brought about by Yahweh's decisive defeat of the Assyrians.

Note: The 'land of whirring wings' (1) may allude to the insect-infested Nile delta or to the abundance of sailing boats in Egypt.

Isaiah 19.1-15

Our God is Able

A glance at a map shows the importance of Palestine, that narrow corridor between the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian desert. It was the land-bridge between Egypt and the successive empires of Assyria, Babylonia, Persia and Greece. Egyptian foreign policy, therefore, was vitally concerned with the small kingdoms which occupied this area, particularly Judah, Israel and Philistia. When Egypt was strong she sought to extend her influence more directly in this region, but at times of weakness she endeavoured to use these small States as a buffer against aggression by the major powers to the north-east. It was always a great temptation to Judah to link herself with Egypt, hoping thereby to guarantee immunity from attack by an aggressor. But Egypt was a notoriously unstable ally, making specious promises of help but offering remarkably little actual assistance, as Judah discovered to her cost on more than one occasion. Isaiah was acutely aware of the dangers of alliance with such an unreliable power, but he was equally alive to the spiritual peril of ceasing to trust in Yahweh, whose power was sufficient to deliver them from any foe.

In these verses Isaiah anticipates a period of great distress for Egypt. First of all, they would experience the horrors of civil war (2,3). Since Egypt was a federation of lesser states there was an underlying jealousy, and a predisposition towards disunity. The subsequent weakness would make her an easy prey for a harsh tyrant (4), which may allude to the Assyrian conquest of 670 B.C. or to the native tyrant, Psammetichus I (663-609 B.C.). There would be a natural calamity also, with the watery of the Nile failing, which would lead to the collapse of Egypt's main industries, farming (7b), fishing (8) and textiles (9). The wise men of Egypt (11-13), who were internationally famous, would be as helpless to avert disaster as the exponents of idolatrous and magical practices (3). What a comfort it must have been to the godly remnant grouped around Isaiah to realise that their God WAS able (1,4,14)!

Isaiah 19.16-20.6

God Controls History

Our first section (19.16-25) is a unity, subdivided into five by the introduction 'In that day' (16,18,19,23,24). The context requires a time when Egypt would be in considerable fear of Judah (16 f.), which may indicate the period immediately after the decimation of the Assyrian host and the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem (37.36 f.). The prediction of v. 18 anticipates the day when there will be Jewish colonies in Egypt. There is no documentation of such an event until the sixth century B.C., but it is conceivable that there were earlier settlements. The remaining three oracles are surprising, for they foretell a time when there will be a witness to the Lord in Egypt, and a day when His mighty acts would be wrought for Egypt as He had repeatedly delivered Israel in the period of the Judges (20). Moreover, both Egypt and Assyria, who had been thorns in Israel's flesh for so long, would become with Israel the means of universal blessing (23,24). Such

universalism, in a national context of suspicion of Egypt and fear of Assyria, is truly remarkable, and witnesses to God's care for all nations.

Our second section (20.1-6) is history rather than pure prophecy, but it has been included here because it connects with Isaiah's denouncement of alliances with Egypt. We regard visual aids as a modern innovation, but in fact such devices were regularly employed by the prophets, especially in times of crisis, when they endeavoured to enforce their messages by 'eye-gate' as well as by 'ear-gate'. Sargon, the Assyrian king (722-705 B.C.), is nowhere else mentioned in Scripture, but Assyrian records note the capture of Ashdod, a Philistinian city, in 711 B.C. Isaiah was commanded to dress and act like a prisoner of war (2 f.) for a three-year period, witnessing to the defeat of Egypt and the deportation of its inhabitants. Their route would lead along the narrow coastal plain, and the procession would be watched, in consternation, by the Philistines and the men of Judah. If this was the fate of those to whom they were running for help, what chance would they themselves have! The answer, unspoken by the people, had been voiced time and time again by Isaiah; there was One who was more than sufficient in this crisis Yahweh, the 'God of your salvation', and, 'the Rock of your refuge' (17.10). Those who trusted Him completely would find Him wholly true.

Isaiah 21

God of the Nations

In this chapter we find three apparently unrelated oracles:

- (i) The fall of Babylon (1-10). The prophet's thought is projected into the sixth century B.C. when Elam and Media (2) were associated in the onslaught which brought proud Babylon, itself the successor to the Assyrian power, to its knees. In vs. 1-5 the prophet appears to be an eyewitness of the overthrow of the city, and at the sight of the horrors attending such an event his own heart recoils in deep emotion (3 f.). In spite of the untold misery Babylon had caused, no one could exult in such circumstances. The picture of the festivities of the nobles (5), when they ought to have been preparing for action, calls to mind the licentious orgy of Belshazzar's feast on the night of his death (Dan. 5). In vs. 6-10 the prophet is no longer present at the scene of destruction, but rather waits for the messenger bringing the tidings of the final overthrow of Babylon. Such an end is certain, not because Isaiah has spoken, but because the Lord of hosts has spoken through him (10). The word of God cannot fail to be fulfilled.
- (ii) There follows a short, enigmatic oracle concerning Edom, often referred to as Seir, or Mt. Seir (11 f.). Since no known site of Dumah has been identified in Edom some scholars have preferred a plausible emendation of the first line, which then reads, 'A voice is lifted up from Edom'. If this be accepted, a link with the former oracle is probable. From Edom, languishing in the night of oppression (presumably from Babylon), a voice comes to the watchman of v. 8 to inquire how long the darkness of affliction is to last. The reply seems to suggest that the relief (morning) will be temporary; it will be succeeded by further suffering (night). But further inquiry is invited.
- (iii) This prophecy relates to Arabia (13-17). The Dedanites were members of an Arabian tribe who are pictured as seeking refuge from an unnamed oppressor. Driven from their normal haunts they fall back upon Tema, an oasis in the desert of Arabia. Another powerful Arabian tribe, Kedar (16 f.), appears to be involved in the same catastrophe. Again, it is worth noting that Isaiah saw clearly that the Lord controlled the destinies of all nations, from the powerful Babylon down to and including the inhabitants of the desert.

Isaiah 22

Unseemly Conduct

Commentators are divided as to whether the siege of Jerusalem depicted in vs. 1-14 is in the past, or the future. Most likely, as vs. 12-14 seem to suggest, it was actually in progress. The reference in v. 3 is probably to those who fell away to the enemy; an Assyrian inscription relating to the events of 701 B.C. (Taylor's Prism) speaks of mercenaries who deserted Jerusalem in this crisis. The day of the Lord which so many desired was one that began in judgement upon Jerusalem itself (5, cf. Amos 5.18 ff.). Certain precautions had been taken by the rulers to ensure an adequate water supply and to strengthen the defences (8-11, cf. 2 Chron. 32.2-8,30). But at this point of the siege, at any rate? there was no living faith in the Lord, no seeking His face in humility and penitence. Rather, there was a brazen 'devil-may-care' attitude akin to that of Belshazzar, who, when Daniel foretold the end of himself and his kingdom, applauded and honoured Daniel instead of humbling himself before Daniel's God (13, cf. Dan. 5.22-30). Such insensitivity to the challenge of the hour, such an obsession with eating and drinking, were criminal in God's sight. If, as we have suggested, the events here do relate to 701 B.C., it must be noted that God in fact, spared Jerusalem largely through the humility, piety and faith of its king Hezekiah and the Lord's prophet Isaiah. Such men were, and still are, the salt of the earth.

The oracle against Shebna (15-25) is remarkable inasmuch as it is the only case in Isaiah of a prophecy against a named individual. The position of 'steward' (15) was an important one, its parallel, 'over the household', indicates the position next to the king himself. Since no genealogy is given for Shebna it is surmised that he was a foreigner. This finds some support in the Aramaic form of his name - possibly he was a Syrian. Isaiah attacks him for his pretensions in hewing out a rock tomb, normally reserved for those of noble birth, and also for his ostentatious use of ornate chariots (16,18). The prophet shows that he will never use the tomb himself for he will be taken away violently and die in captivity. By the time of Isa. 36 Shebna had been demoted somewhat, being replaced by Eliakim as Isaiah foretold (20-24) but the complete fulfilment of Isaiah's words is not actually recorded.

A thought: Note God's concern about unseemly conduct both of a city and an individual. What about my country - and myself?

Isaiah 23

The Glory of the World Passes

The city of Tyre was one of the most famous in the ancient world. Its mariners were the explorers and merchants of the period. Their deeds are extolled in classical and Biblical literature, e.g. Phoenician seamen in both the Red Sea and the Mediterranean helped in the prosperity of Solomon's empire (1 Kings 10.11,22). Phoenician craftsmen were renowned throughout the region (1 Kings 5.6,18) and one of them, Hiram, was the chief architect of Solomon's magnificent Temple (1 Kings 7.13-45). The city of Tyre was virtually impregnable, surviving successive sieges by the Assyrian kings, Esar-haddon (671 B.C.) and Ashurbanipal (664 B.C.) and the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar (585-572 B.C.), when other great cities fell.

But the judgement of the Lord was to fall on Tyre also. The referents to Sidon (2,4,12), to the inhabitants of the coast (2) and to Canaan (11), show that the whole of Phoenicia was included in this divine punishment. The prophet imagines sailors from Tyre hearing of the desolation of their mother-city when they arrive at, or return from Cyprus (1). The startling news is pictured as spreading rapidly throughout the surrounding countries, causing consternation everywhere, but especially in Egypt (5), whose trade-links with Tyre were so strong. In particular, Tyre was

dependent on the grain supply of the fertile Nile valley (3). The reason for this destruction was the overbearing pride of Tyre, and the corruption which so often accompanies power (9,12).

V. 13 is a very obscure verse which seems to suggest that it was the Chaldeans (i.e. Babylonians), not the Assyrians, who fulfilled this oracle, but this is not certain. The apparent fulfilment of the prophetic word was the destruction of Tyre, after a long and skilfully executed campaign, by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. The promise of a partial restoration after seventy years (15-18) would then take place in the period of the Seleucid (Syrian) kings, whose kingdom, centred on Antioch, included all the small States of Palestine. No full revival of Tyrian power is envisaged, however, and the language is caustic rather than consoling. Tyre, like a harlot (17), will prostitute her gifts and resources, but these will finally be dedicated to the Lord (18). Tyre is a picture of all the glory of this world, which eventually passes away. Materialism has the appearance of permanence, but in fact, it is the unseen things of the Spirit which endure (2 Cor. 4.18).

Questions for further study and discussion on Isaiah chs. 13-23

1. What principles of judgement may we discern in these chapters?
2. Consider the action and influence of God upon the nations of Isaiah's day. What lessons may we draw and apply in the contemporary international situation?
3. With the use of a concordance and/or Bible dictionary, examine the part played by Babylon in history and in prophecy.
4. Notice how frequently the pride of nations, cities and individuals is condemned by the Lord. Why is this 'sin of the spirit' so grievous in His sight?
5. Starting from ch. 20, make a list of other occasions where prophets used 'visual aids' to press home their message. Note the degree of success in each case.

Isaiah 24

The End of the World

Chs. 24-27 form another separate section in Isaiah, often referred to as 'The Apocalypse of Isaiah'. Here the focus of attention changes from the present and the immediate future, to events at the end of the present world-age. Apocalyptic literature and thought became very popular in the inter-testamental period, e.g. the covenanters at Qumran, as the Dead Sea Scrolls indicate, were obsessed with an apocalyptic approach which foresaw the 'end' in their own period. Apocalyptic literature developed certain characteristics, especially in the non-biblical books, where the elements are often grotesque. Biblical apocalyptic thought, found principally in the books of Isaiah, Daniel, Zechariah and Revelation, is restrained and focuses on the sovereignty of God. There is a natural fitness in the presence of this kind of approach within the prophecies of Isaiah, for it deals with God's final victory at the end of the age. Who was better fitted to speak of this than the prophet who was so profoundly aware of the inevitability of God's Judgement upon a sinful world! His perception that God used Assyria as the rod of His anger (10.5) would lead on naturally to the view of God as the great World-ruler acting in final judgement against sin. Those who deny the insights of these chapters to Isaiah should bear in mind that he was not bound by the spirit and attitudes of his age. In touch with God, he was a spiritual giant, and it took the nation several centuries to catch up with him, if indeed it ever did!

The desolation which will overtake the whole earth is vividly depicted in vs. 1-13. The 'everlasting covenant' (5) connects more naturally with the universal covenant of Gen. 9.16 than with the

Sinaitic covenant with Israel. In vs. 14-16a the recital of destruction is interrupted by a song of praise from the Lord's people as they see the vindication of their faith, and the majesty of their Lord. The prophet foreseeing further catastrophies (17-23), finds it impossible to join in such a song at such a time (16b).

Note 'the host of heaven' (21) may refer to rebellious angels, in league with the world powers in their onslaught upon the people of God, pointing to a final conflict in heaven as well as on earth (cf. the imagery of Dan. 10.20 f.). Or it could refer to the heavenly bodies (cf. 23), in which case the reference would be to idolatry, since these were all objects of false worship.

Isaiah 25

The Day of Triumph

The prophet composes a hymn of praise in anticipation of the Lord's great victory (1-5). The city (2, cf. 24.10,12) is probably used representatively of the oppressor rather than one particular city. Even the great world powers (3) would be forced to acknowledge the immeasurably greater power of Israel's God, exercised on behalf of His chosen people (4 f.). The Lord is mighty to deliver His people, as Daniel's friends discovered (Dan. 3.17), a fact confirmed in the experience of God's people throughout the centuries. The N.T. reveals that this final day of vindication for the righteous will be heralded by Christ's appearance in glory, when the promise of Phil. 2.10 f., experienced already in the lives of believers, will be fully realised.

There is also the anticipation of a triumphant feast in honour of the victory (6-9, cf. Rev. 19.9,17). All signs of mourning will be removed (8), for God's people will rejoice in the completion of their redemption (9). V. 8 is quoted in Rev. 21.4 (cf. 1 Cor. 15.54) in a moving passage which springs from the assurance of final triumph through Christ's death, resurrection and coming again. In a situation of prosperity and security it is not always easy to realise the comfort this conception must be to multitudes who, because of their faith, are languishing in prison or facing daily persecution and privation. Let us pray that our persecuted brethren may endure through the strengthening presence of the One who will vindicate His own at His coming.

Notes: V. 6, 'wine on the lees well refined' is wine where the sediment has been allowed to remain, thus improving the quality, but calling for great care in straining off before use. V. 7, 'the covering' and 'the veil' (which are parallel) probably allude to the removal of every sign of mourning. There may be an associated thought that the spiritual blindness of all nations will be banished at this revelation of God's omnipotence.

Finally, there is a return to the earlier note of exultation at the overthrow of the aggressor (10 ff.). The specific mention of Moab in such a general context is surprising. There may be an allusion to some otherwise unknown historical incident, or Moab may be used to represent all Judah's enemies. Since the words for Moab and enemy are very similar, other scholars favour a slight emendation.

A thought for today: 'Let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation' (9).

Isaiah 26

Thy Dead shall Live!

The prophet breaks out into yet another psalm of thanksgiving (1-6). Those who are conscious of God's delivering power cannot too often celebrate His saving acts. Vs. 3 f. come very close to expressing the essence of Isaiah's faith. Israel's God was a God of power who could be relied upon. This had been proved in many a political crisis, e.g. the occasion when Jerusalem was threatened by

Syria, Israel, Philistia and Edom (Isa. 7). Whereas weak King Ahaz feared to put God to the test, and turned in desperation to cruel Assyria, Isaiah knew the peace of an absolute trust. It was the same in 701 B.C. when Sennacherib's host seemed certain to overwhelm the beleaguered city (37.21-35). It is the same today, whether our crisis be political, economics emotional or physical- there can be perfect peace where there is perfect trust.

A prayer of faith (7-19), uttered during the crisis, is met by the assurance of vs. 20 f. Notice the sincerity, loyalty to Yahweh and heart-hunger for Him expressed in vs. 8 f., 12-15, even in a time of great distress (16 ff.). There is an awareness that the Lord is already at work, but the plea is for the full manifestation of His glory, that their adversaries may be made aware of their folly in resisting the Lord God.

One of the remarkable features of this chapter concerns the doctrine of resurrection. The fate of the ungodly is depicted with grim finality in v. 14. In stark contrast to this is the promise to the faithful who have perished in the persecution. These, humanly speaking, would be deemed certain to miss the joyous moment of God's final victory. But, Isaiah avers, they would not be excluded from the thrilling experience of ultimate salvation, for God Himself would work a miracle in raising them from the dead. It appears unrealistic to limit this to a national resurrection in the return from Exile (the undoubted meaning of Ezek. 37.1-14). It is equally carping to deny that this can be Isaianic because a doctrine of individual resurrection was late in emerging. This is the first clear reference in Scripture to an individual resurrection and it comes most naturally from this God-filled, divinely inspired prophet. But a full doctrine of resurrection was not possible until Christ was raised from the dead (1 Cor. 15.12-26).

Isaiah 27

God's Victory

The Ancient Near East had a rich mythology, in which the land of Canaan shared, as evidenced by the archaeological discoveries at Ras Shamra (the site of ancient Ugarit, whose final destruction coincided approximately with the time of Moses). In particular, at the Autumn New Year Festival, there was the celebration of the gods' victory over the forces of chaos, based upon the Creation-epic. The story is known to have been diffused over a wide area, including Mesopotamia, where creation was conceived to be the result of a victory over the chaos-monster, Tiamat. It is evident that the O.T. writers were familiar with this theme, and they employed it frequently to illustrate the almighty power of the Lord, and His victory over all His enemies. It goes without saying that the tale was not conceived to have any substance or historicity; in using it Isaiah and others had completely 'de-mythologised' it. In much the same way we may refer to Hercules or Atlas without accepting that these characters ever existed. Other instances of this imagery in the O.T. include references to Leviathan (Psa. 74.13,14) and Rahab (Job 26.12). Some have seen in our reference (27.1) an allusion to Judah's principal enemies: 'Leviathan the fleeing serpent' may indicate the swift-flowing Tigris and, together with 'Leviathan the twisting serpent' (possibly the meandering Euphrates), point to the great Mesopotamian powers of Assyria and Babylon; 'the dragon that is in the sea' may similarly indicate the Nile, the symbol of Egypt. Isaiah's contemporaries would understand this reference to a victory as decisive in its effects as the transformation effected by God's creative acts.

But first there must be a process of judgement, in which Israel itself would be disciplined, as indicated in the picture of a beating rod being used to separate the precious grain from the chaff (12). It would include the devastation of Jerusalem (10 f.). No real blessing could come to a nation so void of spiritual discernment (11) that it forsook the living God for an empty idolatry (9). After this judgement would come the final blessing in the ingathering of Israel (13) which would then become a source of fruitfulness for the whole world (6). Whilst the world has been enriched

immeasurably by the Jewish people throughout the ages the complete fulfilment of these promises may still lie in the future.

Isaiah 28

The Wise Farmer

The pride and drunkenness of the northern kingdom of Israel (called Ephraim after its chief tribe) are condemned (1-6). The oracle, therefore, must be before 721 B.C., the year of the final defeat of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians. But even in this catastrophe the Lord will preserve a remnant (5 f.).

Isaiah is also concerned with the rulers in Judah who are guilty of the same sins that caused the fall of Israel. There is a sickening picture of drunken debauchery, the more horrifying since it involved the religious leaders, making them incapable of exercising effective leadership (7,8). Isaiah records the indignant expostulation of these men at this point (9 f.). They regarded themselves as adults, not children, to be lectured in this way. Possibly there is mimicry in their words (10) as they mockingly refer to his persistent condemnation of their deeds. Isaiah indicates that the Lord has other ways of speaking than by the lips of His servants the prophets. When these are rejected (which includes the rejection of the Lord Himself, the only source of rest and security, 12), He will employ another weapon, an alien army (11), doubtless the Assyrians, to effect His will.

With an even greater clarity, this catalogue of the sins of Judah's rulers continues (14-22). They brazenly reject Yahweh's covenant and form their own plans to meet the emergency. The 'covenant with death' and the 'agreement with Sheol' (15,18) may indicate a dependence upon the dubious forces of necromancy and spiritism. Or it may be an ironic allusion to an alliance with Egypt which is pre-doomed to failure. She would be unable to hold back the flood of Assyria (15,18). The reference in v. 21 is to David's convincing double-defeat of the Philistines (2 Sam. 5.17-25). Since the nation had rejected its sure foundation of a quiet, unruffled faith in the Lord (16) the 'strange work' of chastisement would fall upon them (21).

Reassurance is given that God's employment of the Assyrian is not purposeless (23-29). Using a series of agricultural analogies Isaiah shows that the diverse actions of the farmer are all suited to particular crops. If one can commend the wisdom of a farmer, how much more can one depend on the greater wisdom of God directed towards His gracious purposes of ultimate blessing!

A thought: 'Why should I start at the plough of my Lord, that make the deep furrows in my soul? I know He is no unwise husbandman, He purposeth a crop'. (Samuel Rutherford.)

Isaiah 29

'God ... Exists' (Heb 11.6)

Once more Isaiah takes up the solemn theme of judgement against Jerusalem (1-11). The modern reader may become weary at such repetition, but he must bear two facts in mind: (i) There is a judgement upon the sin of individuals and communities. This stems from a sovereign, holy God who controls all the forces of nature and nations. The Bible takes the fact of sin seriously, and so must we, if we are to retain any relationship to its revealed truth. (ii) The very repetition of these oracles, warning of impending judgement, speaks of God's patient forbearance. He does not act precipitantly, but allows full opportunity for repentance and reformation. But let no man mistake this for weakness or imagine that God will not act in final judgement.

'Ariel' (1 f.) obviously indicates Jerusalem, it could mean 'lion of God' but this hardly suits the context, unless it be used ironically. More likely is the suggestion that it means 'altar-hearth', and that

the whole city is viewed as a place of sacrifice, the offering being the citizens themselves. The details of the siege, worked out in the following verses, are like a ghastly nightmare to the besieged (8). They were morally and spiritually blind, as were the false prophets in whom they trusted, so that they were quite incapable of understanding the principles behind the Lord's drastic dealings (9-12).

Hypocrisy in religion (13) is surely one of the most abhorrent sins. To go through a form of prayer, mouthing insincere words which mean nothing! may win the approbation of men. But they will not please a living God, who merits our full attention, our choicest gifts and our outpoured adoration. Let us be on our guard against insulting God by going through a pretence of honouring Him. Positively, 'let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith' (Heb. 10.22). In politics also (15 f.) Isaiah's contemporaries were acting as though God, their Creator, did not exist. They would find out their mistake, to their great cost, but after the judgement God would reveal His ultimate purpose of blessing, security and prosperity, accompanied by true worship (17-24).

Note: V. 17 symbolises the renewed prosperity. The forest would come under cultivation, and the growth on arable land would be so prolific that it would look like a forest (cf. 32.15).

Isaiah 30.1-17

Trust in God Alone

Bad politics are often associated with false religion. Isaiah had consistently stressed that the nation's security lay in its faith in God, who was mighty enough to protect them from all adversaries. His compatriots in general, and their rulers in particular, had no such faith, and as a substitute for reliance upon the Lord they sought alliances with Egypt. The utter folly of this was apparent to the prophet, whose faith gave him a true perspective, but it was not obvious to the rulers, frantic as they were for some kind of security. At a period of internal unrest and external weakness in Egypt the ambassadors of Judah flocked to her for help against a wellnigh invincible Assyria! The incongruity of it was apparent; Egyptian alliances could bring only shame and disgrace (5). In caustic tones Isaiah refers to Egypt as 'Rahab who sits still', an apparent contradiction, since Rahab was the turbulent chaos-monster of mythology. Isaiah saw that her deeds would not correspond with her boastful assurances of massive help against Judah's enemy. In vain would the richly laden caravans carry the price of this alliance across the desert sands (6).

Instead of listening to this merciless exposure of their folly, the men of Judah sought to silence the prophets (10) and even to eliminate from their consciousness any recollection of 'the Holy One of Israel' (11). They were not the first, nor the last, of those who have sought to stifle the voice of truth. It was the expedient of Amaziah the priest of Bethel (Amos 7.12); of the princes of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's time (Jer. 38.4); of the men of Nazareth (Luke 4.29) and the murderers of Stephen (Acts 7.57 f.). It was especially characteristic of Jerusalem (Matt. 23.37). The Lord shows the result of such folly: their alliance would be like a jerry-built wall, which would collapse and crush them (13 f.); the promise of Lev. 26.8 would be reversed, and instead of victory over superior forces they would be routed by insignificant numbers (17). What unutterable folly to forsake the One who could save (15)! The same danger confronts us today, to rely upon 'the arm of flesh', be it wealth, power, organisation, technique or ingenuity. Nothing can substitute for a humble, complete trust in the Lord 'who alone does wondrous things' (Psa. 72.18).

Isaiah 30.18-31.9

Five Pictures of God

- (i) The Lord as Teacher (30.20). The affliction which had fallen upon Jerusalem was motivated by God's gracious purposes (18) and by His desire for their spiritual healing (26). But when a

teacher's instruction is ignored, as Israel so wilfully ignored the counsel of God given through the Law and the prophets, the rod of correction has to be applied. This is not a pleasant process but it becomes bearable when it is realised that the chastisement is in love, designed to produce 'the peaceful fruit of righteousness' (Heb. 12.5-11).

- (ii) The Lord as Judge. His sovereignty extends over all nations (30.28), and Assyria, in particular, will feel the full force of His rod (30.31). The 'burning place' (30.33), as the RSV margin suggests, may be a place name, Topheth, a site in the valley of Hinnom where children were sacrificed to Molech. The grim promise is that the Assyrians will provide such a sacrifice. But God was concerned with the judgement of His own people as well as their enemies and His control of the international situation was directed towards that end (31.9b).
- (iii) The Lord as Wise (31.2). Human wisdom prompted Judah to turn to Egypt for help. Isaiah ironically reminds His hearers of a higher wisdom and a greater strength (31.1 ff., cf. 1 Cor. 1.20-25). Flesh and blood are not to be compared with Almighty God (3) and at His direction both helper (Egypt) and helped (Judah) would come tumbling down.
- (iv) The Lord as Shepherd (31.4). The natural interpretation of this verse is that Assyria is the lion, savaging his prey, Jerusalem. Such a powerful beast is not to be frightened away by a group of shepherds, representing Egypt and Judah's other puny allies, who can make a lot of noise but display no real power. But when the Lord intervenes, such intervention is decisive, and the victim is delivered.
- (v) The Lord as a mother-bird (31.5) hovering over her young to protect it from attack by a bird of prey, brings a final picture of His tender dealings with His own. Our Saviour Himself used similar imagery when describing His own attitude to the Jerusalem of His day. But His offer of protection was rudely rebuffed (Luke 13.34).

Isaiah 32

The Lord our Refuge

Scholars are divided as to whether vs. 1-5 refer to the Messiah. Strictly speaking, the section is not Messianic in the same sense as 7.14; 9.2-7; 11.1-9. The mention of princes in conjunction with a king appears decisive. Isaiah is probably contrasting things as they were—an incompetent king (Ahaz) and corrupt officials, with things as they ought to be—both king and rulers standing as bulwarks against vice and oppression. But since this ideal was never to be realised in the reign of any subsequent monarch, Jewish or Gentile, and since such Idealism can never be achieved before the Messiah reigns, we may be forgiven for including these verses with the other Messianic sections. Certain it is that no one but Jesus Christ fulfils the requirements of v. 2. Notice again the stress on justice in dealing with one's fellows, with one's vision and judgement uninfluenced by bribes.

Isaiah then departs from his earlier line of thought, being led from the ideal to the actual observation of the surrounding evil (6-8). Once more there follows the familiar threat of judgement upon such an inversion of true values (9-14, to which v. 19, out of place in its present context, should probably be added). But judgement is never the prophets' last word. They were vividly aware that God's will could not be made of non-effect by man's disobedience; He would bring about His kingdom of peace, prosperity and happiness when His punishment, meted out in absolute equity, was completed. So Isaiah anticipates the age when God's Spirit would be poured out upon men. In this post-Pentecost age (Acts 2.1-4) we see these promises worked out in spiritual, not material terms. The righteousness so sadly lacking in ancient Israel is now made possible and each child of God is called to display the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5.22 f.). The same indwelling Spirit gives us power to witness to Jesus Christ, the source and secret of the transformed life (Acts 1.8).

Look again at v. 2, thinking of the imagery of each line. Is the Lord all this to you?

Questions for further study and discussion on Isaiah chs. 24-32

1. Consider the relationship between prophecy which connects with the prophet's contemporary situation and that which relates to the end of the age.
2. What reasons underlie the teaching of a final judgement?
3. Make a list of the prophecies in this section which still await fulfilment.
4. Discuss the use which the prophet and other Biblical writers make of heathen mythology.
5. Why was Isaiah so strongly opposed to alliances with Egypt?

Isaiah 33

A Hymn of Victory

The whole chapter, with such apparent diversity in its sections, is probably a psalm composed to celebrate the amazing deliverance from the Assyrian army in 701 B.C. It may be compared with Psa. 46 which, in all likelihood, was composed at the same time and for the same purpose. Notice the dramatic movement of thought; the cruelty of the besieging power (1); the plea of the besieged (2); and their assurance, based on past mercies, of the Lord's Intervention (3-6); the disorder in the land, brought about by the invasion (7-9); the intervention of the Lord (10-13); the reaction of the ungodly (14) and the answer to this of the Lord's people (15, 16); and finally, the reiteration of a complete victory over the Assyrians (19) and the security and prosperity of Jerusalem (17-24). The significance of v. 17 is that the king will be able to assume his rightful position. No longer will he be cooked up in his capital, the ancient frontiers of the realm will be retained. It is one of the great tragedies of Jewish history that this singular deliverance of Jerusalem became the central theme of a false theology which, over a century later, led to the downfall of the capital at the hands of the Babylonians. Jerusalem had been spared in Isaiah's time, subsequently its inhabitants believed that it would never fall, that the Lord of Hosts was bound to deliver it, irrespective of the character of its inhabitants. This was the fatal dogma of Jerusalem's inviolability. No doubt the Jerusalemites of Jeremiah's age quoted Isa. 33.20 (cf. 31.5; 32.18; 37.35) in support of the orthodoxy of their doctrine. But Jeremiah hit hard at this popular heresy and prophesied that a moral God would destroy an Immoral city, however favoured it may have been in past history, just as He destroyed the sanctuary at Shiloh (Jer. 7.8-15; 26.1-6). It is a solemn thought that there can be a dead, barren orthodoxy, apparently supported by Scripture (or by an appeal to eminent church leaders and saints of earlier ages) which merits only the judgement of God.

Finally, look at the contrast between vs. 2 and 14. Isaiah knew what it was like to experience the burning holiness of God (ch. 6). We too may draw near to such a God on the basis of Christ's atonement, and in this relationship the prayer of v. 2 may be our experience as we face each new day.

Isaiah 34

'Our God is a Consuming Fire (Heb. 12.29)

It is generally agreed that chs. 34 and 35 form a unit, the one foretelling a decisive Judgement on the Lord's enemies, the other speaking of the return of His people to their own land. Much of ch. 34 concerns Edom, which had a long-standing enmity against Israel. It began (Gen. 25.23; 27.40,41) during the lifetime of Jacob (the progenitor of Israel) and Esau (the founder of Edom), and

continued subsequently, reaching a new peak in the time of Isaiah (2 Kings 16.6). Long after Isaiah's death this bitter animosity flared up again in the crisis of 587 B.C., when Edom, like a jackal slinking after the Babylonian lion, helped in the final humiliation of Jerusalem, an intervention which called forth a bitter protest from the prophets and psalmists (Obad. 10-16; Lam. 4.21,22; Ezek. 15.12-14; 35.5,10-15; Psa. 137.7). In this gruesome oracle Isaiah speaks of Edom's final Judgement, resulting in the complete desolation of her land. The 'book of the Lord' (16) refers not to any collection of Isaiah's oracles or any other portion of the O.T. but to what might be called 'the book of fate', decreed by the Lord. Edom's fate is irrevocable, and all the creatures named in vs. 13 ff. will occupy her territory, now denuded of its human inhabitants.

There is evidence, however, that Edom is here used symbolically of all the heathen nations who are opposed to the Lord. In v. 1 all the nations are summoned together to hear God pronounce the sentence of doom (2) upon them and the present world order. As we noted in an earlier section, this will include the astral bodies themselves (4, cf. 24.21,23). This theme of a final judgement, of a hell as well as a heaven, of a God who will call men to account, is not a popular one in this twentieth century and is rarely heard from our pulpits. But if preaching and teaching are to retain any relationship to Biblical truth, they must take this well-documented fact into account. There is going to be a great white throne (Rev. 20.11), with a final division of all men (Matt. 25.31-46). It is well to ponder on the significance of that awesome phrase, 'the wrath of the Lamb' (Rev. 6.16), and to recall that 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb. 10.31). This realisation will keep us from complacency in our Christian service, for the fate of the lost cannot be a matter of indifference to the redeemed who understand these things.

Isaiah 35

Waters in the Wilderness

It is fitting that the last oracle of the first section of Isaiah should be one which rejoices in God's salvation. In the preceding chapters we have frequently noted the certainty of judgement, which included the deportation of many of the survivors to Mesopotamia, the seat of the great world-power: of Assyria and Babylon. Such was the vision of Isaiah that he looked beyond the period of chastisement to the time when God would fulfill His gracious purposes to His people, in their own land. This inevitably involved the return from captivity, and it is this which is depicted so movingly in ch. 35. This future event would be as great a miracle as the Exodus from Egypt in the time of Moses, when God led, protected and supplied the needs of those whom He had redeemed. The route from the Tigris-Euphrates basin involved traversing some desolate, arid areas, but these would be transformed and the journey of the returned exiles would be a march of triumph. Those who were weak and crippled in spirit or tongue-tied because of despair would be encouraged and liberated as the Lord opened up His way before them (3-9). Once more there was the prospect of worshipping the Lord in Jerusalem in an atmosphere of radiant joy which banished for ever the shadows of the past (10).

The writer was 'introduced' to this lovely psalm by a fellow officer on H.M.S. Indefatigable during the war years of 1944/45. A Christian, with a glowing testimony to a living Christ, he revelled in this passage. Our 'desert' was not one of sand but a waste of sea, at action stations, with danger and privation in close attendance and so many of the normal amenities of life removed. But God, we realised, was able to transform the most desolate situation, and the small Christian group on board enjoyed 'waters in the wilderness' and 'streams in the desert' (6). Situations vary from year to year and from individual to individual, but God never changes. He remains the God of the impossible, there is nothing too hard for Him. The 'desert' through which you are passing today, or may be called to pass through in the future, can 'rejoice and blossom abundantly' (2) and you too may see His glory and majesty in His work of deliverance (2,4).

Isaiah 36.1-20

An Impossible Situation

Chapters 36-39 form an historical interlude between the two sections of the book. So often during these notes we have mentioned the events of 701 B.C.; today's portion narrates the gripping events of that momentous year. This is history at its best, no dull recital of statistics and dates but an account which enables us to sense the haughty arrogance of the Assyrian and the chilling clutch of despair at the hearts of the Israelites. The enemy was not only a massive military power, there was clearly an excellent intelligence service and a first-rate propaganda machine. Indeed, so efficient was the latter that the Jerusalem authorities wished to conduct the negotiations in another tongue (36.11). There was an element of truth in the eight-pronged argument of the Rabshakeh (a civilian post equivalent to 'chief steward' or 'envoy'): (i) Mere words seemed a futile defence against the legions of Assyria (5). (ii) Egypt was a completely unreliable ally (6) - Isaiah had been telling his compatriots this for a generation! (iii) Hezekiah, in his reformation, had closed down all the sanctuaries tainted by the Baal cults and had partially centralised worship in Jerusalem (7). The unenlightened Assyrian interpreted this as an insult to Yahweh who had been falsely worshipped at these outlying shrines (cf. 2 Chron. 31.1). (iv) The men of Jerusalem, unskilled in cavalry or chariot warfare, were confronted with an army which could easily spare two thousand horses (8,9); (v) Their presence at the walls of Jerusalem, the Rabshakeh suggested, was at the behest of Yahweh Himself (10). (vi) There was a personal attack on Hezekiah, designed to weaken his leadership (14,15,18). (vii) Observe also the appeal to self-interest. If they surrendered they would not only save their lives but would be taken to a much better land (16,17). (viii) Finally, there was the appeal to hard facts. No other great city had withstood the Assyrian steamroller and so their gods had been thoroughly discredited (18 ff.). The mention of Samaria, the capital of Israel (destroyed in 721 B.C.), would bring the lesson perilously close to home. Already Lachish, twenty-five miles to the south-west, had fallen (2), together with most of the other cities of Judah (1). But the Assyrians were unaware that Judah's God was not to be put on the same level as impotent idols of wood, stone and silver, and the protestation of faith in Him was not 'mere words'.

Isaiah 36.21-37.13

'Our Eyes are upon Thee' (2 Chron. 20.12)

Hezekiah's men, whatever may have been their inward reaction to the challenge of the Assyrian envoy, remained outwardly loyal to their king (36.21). His chief officers, including Shebna, whose ostentatious pride we observed in 22.15-19, even showed signs of humility and repentance (or was it despair?) in this crisis (36.22; 37.2). Hezekiah was equally aware of the obvious danger which confronted him, his capital and his people. Jerusalem was held in a vice-like grip, with no prospect of breaking free.

The king's reactions are instructive. He was one of the better kings of Israel indeed he had already gained quite a reputation for his major religious reformation (2 Kings 18.3-7). This championing of Judah's native faith would itself be regarded by Assyria as a rebellious act, for all subject peoples were required to pay deference to the Assyrian gods. Hezekiah's great mistake was in seeking to hasten this process by enlisting Egyptian help. This policy, as we have observed, alienated Isaiah, who saw that an unqualified reliance upon God was a sufficient guarantee of protection. Now Hezekiah found himself at the end of his tether. Assyrian troops, having shattered his country, were poised for the final assault against Jerusalem, whilst his ally, Egypt, had failed him. It is not surprising that he went to God's house in this time of need, for he was no stranger to its courts (37.1). But it was an admission of the error of his policies, a public eating of humble-pie when he turned to Isaiah for help (37.2). The prophet's response was immediate and a model of graciousness without the slightest suggestion of an 'I told you so' attitude (5 ff.). The siege was finally ended in

precisely the way indicated here, unrest in Babylonia forcing Sennacherib to return home in haste, leaving the remnant of his army to follow at a later date.

Before this deliverance, however, the threat from Assyria increased in intensity (8-13). Jerusalem was granted a temporary respite by a brief appearance of the Egyptian army which compelled the Assyrians to withdraw. To crush any spirit of rejoicing in Jerusalem a threatening and insulting letter was sent to Hezekiah by the Assyrian king himself, reminding him of the impossibility of deliverance. The pall of gloom over Jerusalem must have seemed even more intense. It was a time for God to act.

Isaiah 37.14-38

‘Nothing is too hard for Thee ...’ (Jer. 32.17)

Hezekiah’s response was the same as on the occasion of the earlier threat (14, cf. 37.1). What a wise king to take to the Lord the burden of the peril which confronted Judah, for He too was included in the Assyrian insult! The safest thing to do with all things which hurt or imperil us is to share them with God in prayer. ‘Cast your burden on the Lord,’ said the psalmist, ‘and He will sustain you’ (Psa. 55.22). Hezekiah’s prayer (15-20) was a model of brevity as well as of beauty. It contained a worshipful reminder of God’s greatness (16) and it reached to the very heart of the situation - Sennacherib’s blatant insult to the living God (17). It recognised the point which the blasphemous Assyrian had failed to perceive, that there was an essential difference between the heathen gods of the nations and the Lord God of Hosts. It is upon this one, true God that Hezekiah rolled his burden (20). It is an instructive study to compare Hezekiah’s prayer with those of other men of God who were ‘up against it’ (cf. Jehoshaphat, 2 Chron. 20.5-12; Jeremiah, Jer. 32.17-25; the disciples, Acts 4.24-30).

The ‘virgin daughter’ defies Assyria (21-29). Hezekiah did not need to send messengers to Isaiah on this second occasion, for the two were now in close contact. The prophet’s oracle connects with his earlier prediction of God’s use of Assyria (10.5-19). Arrogant in her consciousness of the merciless power of her troops, Assyria was ignorant of the fact that God was manipulating her to execute His own carefully designed plans (26 f.), after which He would compel her to return homewards like a brute beast (29).

Promise and fulfilment (30-38). There was an unconditional promise that Jerusalem would be spared (33 ff.), and that, within three years, ravaged Judah would be restored to normal (30 ff.). The army of Sennacherib was smitten, probably with a particularly virulent plague. Herodotus, the Greek historian, records that the Assyrian camp was infested with mice (or possibly rats) which could have been the carriers. Twenty years elapsed before the Assyrian king was murdered by his sons, but the historian who noted this fact (38) had not forgotten the prophecy concerning this event (7).

A thought: The God who humbled proud Assyria is still the ‘God of the impossible’, able to deliver His people.

Isaiah 38

The Lord of Life - and Death

A king’s life extended (1-8, 21 f.). There is no suggestion that Hezekiah’s illness was a punishment from the Lord. Generally speaking, he had been a good king, indeed, he and Josiah, of all Judah’s kings! are given exceptional praise (2 Kings 18.5; 23.25). In part, his grief may have been caused by the plight of the nation, under threat from Assyria (6), or by uncertainty concerning the succession, for since his life was extended by fifteen years (5), Manasseh, who followed him, was

not yet born (2 Kings 21.1). Manasseh's long reign was one of apostasy, corruption and bloodshed, and it has been suggested that Hezekiah's request for an extension of life was a mistake, leading to a period out of the divine will. There is not the slightest hint of this in our chapter, although it remains a wise general counsel to leave the ordering of our lives in God's hands. Vs. 21 f. probably came before v. 7 originally, and should be read in this sequence. The 'dial of Ahaz' (8) is literally the 'steps of Ahaz', not a sundial as we know it, although it would serve the same purpose, but a westward facing flight of stairs. Normally the declining sun (a fitting picture of the approach of death) would cause the shadow to move slowly up the steps-now, at Isaiah's word, the movement was reversed a full ten steps. We are not told the mechanics of this miracle.

Hezekiah's psalm (9-20). It was the custom in ancient Israel, following any experience of answered prayer, to come to the Temple with an appropriate sacrifice which was frequently accompanied by a psalm of gratitude. The underlying principle is as desirable today, although the temple of the human heart may be substituted for a material building (1 Cor. 3.16; 6.19). The grace of gratitude to God is something which merits cultivation. The chief interest in Hezekiah's psalm is the evidence it provides of his conception of the after-life in Sheol, a dim and dismal region in which the bitterest element was the severance of all conscious fellowship with God (11,18 f.). Even a godly king did not share the insight of Isaiah, who saw that God was able to break the dread power of the grave (26.19). Our Lord's death and resurrection have brought such light and liberty that abject fear of death (such as Hezekiah's) has been abolished (1 Cor. 15.54-57). Is this not a sufficient reason to lift our hearts in a psalm of praise to God throughout this day?

Isaiah 39

Ulterior Motives

A kindly, courteous, 'get-well-quick' delegation from Babylon. That is how this chapter reads at first sight but was it quite as innocent and well-meaning? Two facts make it clear that there was much more in it than a purely social occasion; first, the stress on the fact that Hezekiah showed the Babylonian envoys all his treasure and resources (2,4); secondly, the violent reaction of Isaiah, the prophet who was so opposed to involvement in foreign alliances.

Two more facts help us to form a clear picture of the pattern of events. First a close examination of the dating of chs. 36 and 37, compared with chs. 38 and 39, reveals that Hezekiah's sickness and recovery (38 and 39) came before the Assyrian invasion of Judah of 701 B.C. ('the fourteenth year of Hezekiah', 36.1). Accepting the fifteen-year extension to Hezekiah's life (38.5) and working back from the date of his death, his near-fatal sickness must have occurred about 703-702 B.C. Further proof may be found in 38.6, where the deliverance from Assyria, already narrated, is still in the future. Secondly, we know that Merodach-baladan of Babylon was the principal agent behind the widespread revolt against Assyria, follow up Sennacherib's accession in 705 B.C. The motive behind the embassy to the newly-recovered Hezekiah was to link him in with this general revolt against Assyria. Hezekiah showed his willingness to comply by revealing all his resources, which would be essential to the success of any revolt. It was this involvement with Assyria's chief opponent which brought upon Judah the devastating attack of Sennacherib's army. No wonder Isaiah was so deeply concerned! His prophecy of the rise of Babylon was fulfilled less than a century later, when Assyria was finally crushed, and in 597 B.C. a descendant of Hezekiah, Jehoiachin, was taken captive to Babylon (cf. 7), where the royal line of Judah continued until the return from exile in 538 B.C.

The reason for the inversion of chapters in this section (chs. 36-39) is clear. Assyria is the world-power which dominates the scene in Isaiah's early prophecies (1-35), so chs. 36,37, telling of God's victory over the Assyrian host, are appropriately placed. In the second half of Isaiah's book the overthrow of Babylon and the return from exile is the dominant theme, so that chs. 38,39, which

foretell the captivity (39.6 f.), are a fitting prologue. Spiritual connection was of greater importance than chronological exactitude to the Hebrew historian.

A point to ponder: The devil, like Merodach-baladan, often conceals his evil motives by a flattering, conciliatory approach. We need to be on our guard against his wiles: (2 Cor. 11.13 ff.; 1 Pet. 5.8 f.).

Questions for further study and discussion on Isaiah chs. 33-39

1. The Lord promised deliverance for Jerusalem in Isaiah's age (31.5; 32.18; 33.20; 37.35). What factors could cause Him to permit the later destruction of 587 B.C.?
2. With the background of oppression and deliverance in ch. 33 trace the parallels from your own experience of salvation.
3. Why are such passages as Isa. 35 applicable to God's people in every age? What comfort have you derived from it?
4. What were the essential weaknesses in the Rabshakeh's attempt to undermine the morale of the Jerusalemites (36.4-10,12-20)?
5. What is the significance of the 'historical interlude' (chs. 36-39) in Isaiah?

Isaiah 40-66

INTRODUCTION

This section of the scroll of the prophet Isaiah divides up naturally into two parts. Chapters 40-55 have their setting towards the end of the Babylonian captivity (c. 540 B.C.), when the return from exile was imminent. The prophet's mission was to encourage his faint-hearted people to step out (literally as well as metaphorically!) upon the promises of God. Nowhere else in the O.T. is the absolute uniqueness of Yahweh, central in Israel's monotheistic faith, so clearly revealed. The other great feature of these chapters is the concept of the Servant of the Lord. In chs. 56-66 the scene appears to change to Judah and Jerusalem. The Temple is in ruins but about to be rebuilt (63.18; 64.11; 66.1). The twin dangers of this period are formality in religion and the adoption of heathen practices. The most likely setting, therefore, is the period between 538 B.C., when the Jews returned home, and 515 B.C., when the second Temple was completed (Ezra 6.15). Since there is no allusion to the ministry of either Haggai or Zechariah, who prophesied between 520 and 515 B.C., this setting can be reduced to 538-520 B.C. The reader will detect similarities of style, language and theology between the three sections of Isaiah, but since the matter cannot be fully discussed here, reference to authorship may be made in the standard Introductions. (The New Bible Dictionary, or E. J. Young's 'An Introduction to the Old Testament', will provide a convenient starting point for the conservative student.)

Isaiah 40.1-11

Comfort and Encouragement

An historian might have stressed the fact that the crumbling Babylonian Empire was about to give way to the more virile power of the Persians and their allies, the Medes. But the prophet saw an event of greater importance than the emergence of Persia, an enlightened world-power which dominated the scene for more than two centuries. God was about to act in a new and decisive way in bringing back His people from exile in Babylonia. Here was an example of His grace and power in salvation which would compare with the Exodus from Egypt! A new day was breaking for the

Jews, and the prophet, seeing the first faint gleam of light against the eastern sky, lifted up his voice to exhort and to encourage his people to return.

But why should they need encouraging? Surely, once they realised that the full period of their captivity, foretold by the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 25.11 f.; 29.10), was completed there would be no holding them back! It is apparent, however, that the exiles shrank from venturing on what must have seemed a foolhardy adventure. It involved leaving behind the comfort and relatively high standard of living which many had attained in the Exile for a dubious future in a ruined city and a desolate land. Hence the prophet's ministry of encouragement. First (1 f.), there was the assurance of God's complete forgiveness. His hand of chastisement, laid upon the nation for its multiplied sins, was regulated by mercy. Here was assurance for the Jew, conscious of the nation's sin, and perhaps feeling that the Lord had irrevocably cast off His people (cf. Psa. 77.7-10)! Then follows (3 ff.) an assurance that the Lord would go before them, opening up a way through the wilderness. Nine hundred miles, and a journey of some four months (cf. Ezra 7.8 f.) lay between Babylon and Jerusalem, but the Lord, like a multitude of labourers preparing the way for a royal procession, would smooth their path. Best of all was the comfort which derived from the character of God Himself (6-11). The beauties of nature, and man himself, were transient, but God was eternal and His word unchanging. He was almighty, but His immeasurable power was balanced by His incomparable gentleness (John 10.1-18). What He promised, though still future, was certain, so that the herald could proclaim over battered Jerusalem, 'The hour of deliverance has come' (9 f.).

A prayer: O Lord, show me this day Thy tender comfort, and make Thy way smooth before me.

Isaiah 40.12-31

The Incomparable One

The key to this magnificent section is the lament of Israel in v. 27. The nation was 'down and out', its optimism sapped by the long years of exile. It was passing through a phase when God seemed far away and even, perhaps, unconcerned for His people. The Lord is the speaker here, and His words have the same relevancy and power as when they were first uttered to encourage a wilting Israel. Four pictures emerge in vs. 12-26:

God is the almighty Creator (12 ff.). The whole universe is on a Lilliputian scale when compared with Him! The oceans fit into the palm of His hand and the outstretched heavens are no more than a span, the distance between the thumb and the little finger of an outstretched hand! Creation, in all its complexity, is His work alone (cf. Job 28.20-28; Prov. 8.22-31; Rom. 11.33-36).

God is sovereign over the nations (15 ff.). We live today in a man-centred universe, but God, in a few verses, cuts not only man but the great world-powers, down to size. The 'drop from a bucket' (15) is that which drips from the outside of the bucket when it is drawn up from the well! Equally 'not worth bothering about' is 'the dust on the scales' which a buyer would never dream of demanding from a vendor! How ridiculous to compare such a God to impotent idols, themselves created by puny man (18 ff.)!

God is the Lord of history (22 ff.). Every period of history has its proud, strutting dictators; lording it over their fellow men; regarding themselves, and being regarded, as all-powerful. 'Grasshoppers', is the divine estimate of such (22). Changing the metaphor, He speaks of their transience (24). God is the controller of the heavens (25 f.). The giant telescopes of our generation were undreamed-of in the prophet's generation, but there was the awareness of a vast but ordered complexity in the movement of the astral bodies (cf. Psa. 8; Job 38.31 ff.). The prophet concludes this hymn of praise with a glorious climax (28-31). Failure, of any kind, is inconceivable to such a God. But more thrilling than this, almost breathtaking in its audacity, is the promise that frail man

may, by the waiting of trust, worship and prayer, share in the divine omnipotence! The reverse climax of v. 31 is intentional. Not only is there grace given for the exceptional task, there is also that spirit of brave, persistent endurance for those many days which can only be described as ordinary, when we seem to be plodding along.

Isaiah 41

The One, True God

Monotheism, the view that there is only one God, was not a new concept in Israel. It was implicit in the Mosaic period, when Israel's God was shown to be so irresistibly great that the gods of other nations were driven completely out of reckoning. Similarly, in Amos 1.1-2.3, the prophet, in his survey of neighbouring nations, shows that God is not only concerned with their misdeeds but is able to punish them. But Isaiah, in these chapters, reaches the fullest expression of a monotheistic faith. Not only does he demonstrate the supremacy of Yahweh, the God of Israel, but with withering satire he shows the utter stupidity of idol worship, concluding that no gods exist apart from the Lord (24,29).

One of the essential attributes of God is His ability both to foretell and to control future events. This He challenges the idols to do but they are completely incompetent (21-24). Not so Yahweh! Summoning the nations as to a great tribunal (1) He declares what He is about to do. The oracles supposed to come from the false deities were so vague and elastic that, no matter what happened, their devotees could claim that they had foretold it. But God speaks in clear, precise detail (2 ff., 25-29). In 44.28 and 45.1 He names this conqueror who was to effect Israel's deliverance. Cyrus, before his conquest of Babylon in 539 B.C., had extended his kingdom from the east of Babylon in a great arc as far as the Aegean Sea, so he is fittingly described as 'one from the east' (2), and 'one from the north' (25).

There are two other sets of contrasts in this chapter. In vs. 5-13 the false trust of idolatrous worship is compared with the secure foundation which Israel has in relationship to the Lord. V. 8 introduces the 'Servant' concept which is so important in these chapters. This is a fluid conception; at times (as here) the whole nation of Israel is the servant; at times it is the remnant, a spiritual Israel; but at certain points, and especially in 52.13-53.12, the Servant is an individual who can be no other than Jesus Christ. A servant in Israel, was a slave, but since Israel was linked with its Master in the covenant, the servant was in a position of privilege, based on God's saving acts, which was accompanied by solemn responsibilities. The second set of contrasts, in vs. 14 ff., is between what Israel felt itself to be, i.e. a worm, and what God would make it. A 'threshing sledge' (15) was made of heavy timbers, studded on its underside with iron or basalt teeth. Notice also the renewal of the theme of a triumphant progress across the desert, in which the Lord makes tender and gracious provision for every need of His children (17-20, cf. 35; 40.3 ff.). He is just the same today.

Isaiah 42

The Servant of the Lord

In vs. 1-4 we find the first of four passages which are generally called the 'Servant Songs'. The other three are 49.1-6; 50.4-9; 52.13-53.12. Since there are other allusions to the 'Servant' in these chapters a unity of authorship is generally accepted. But as these four passages have a distinctive view of the Servant some scholars believe that they were once a separate collection which the prophet incorporated into his work. Our view is that they are an original and integral part of the text. It is important to realise that, whether the Servant be Cyrus, Israel, the remnant in exile, the prophet himself or the Messiah, he is viewed as the one who fulfils the Master's will. In our chapter we find three distinct interpretations of the Servant:

The Servant as Messiah (1-4). At our Lord's baptism He was commended in words (Mark 1.11) which combine phrases from Psa. 2.7, generally recognised as a Messianic Psalm, and Isa. 42.1. Thus, at the outset of His ministry He was aware of the fact that He was both the Davidic Messiah and 'the Servant' of Isaiah's prophecy. The meekness and fortitude of the Servant, His gentle but faithful ministry of encouragement which realises the hopes of the nations were perfectly fulfilled in Jesus Christ. 'Justice' (1,3,4) is here equivalent to 'true religion', in the sense of conforming to all the ordinances and requirements of God.

The Servant as Cyrus (5-9). A minority of scholars regard this as a continuation of the first section, i.e. as still referring to the Messiah. But a comparison with other sections (e.g. 44.28-45.7), and the reference to a great deliverance near at hand (9, cf. 41.1-4, 21-27) show conclusively that Cyrus, the Persian king, is in mind. So there follows naturally a psalm of praise (10-17) in which the Lord is viewed as a mighty warrior, exerting Himself to effect His people's deliverance (13), and as a travailing woman (14), a picture which indicates how imminent His deliverance is.

The Servant as Israel (18-25). There is a tragic irony in these words. Israel was commissioned to an exalted task, which serves to underline the ignominy of her failure. Because of this, judgement had fallen, not simply as a result of military or political weakness, nor because of the invincibility of their foes, but because of the Lord's righteous anger, resulting in His chastisement of Israel. Israel the Servant failed, but Jesus Christ, the Servant par excellence, knew no such failure.

Isaiah 43

'You are My Witnesses'

To appreciate the full significance of vs. 1-9 it is necessary to scan through the final verses of the previous chapter (42.18-25). Here is a miracle of grace indeed! In spite of Israel's infidelity and waywardness He continued to love her still, and she remained precious in His sight (4, cf. Hos. 11.1-9). The constancy of God's love can never cease to be a source of amazement, not only to ancient Israel but also to the twentieth-century Christian. How little we merit the divine favour! How often the confession of the psalmist rises from our hearts, 'He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities' (Psa. 103.10). But in both Testaments a work of redemption is necessary, and of this the Lord speaks (1,11-14).

Notice the tender promises of help and protection given to those who venture forth at the word of their Redeemer-God (2). But since Israel was held captive in alien Babylonia there was, of necessity, the overthrow of the oppressor (14). Redemption, although it was included in the Lord's overall dealings with the nations, was costly. In the N.T. the purpose of redemption is spiritual and the cost was borne, not by the blood of an enemy, but by the offering up of the sinless life of God's only-begotten Son. God's redemption, then, could not be merited, but nor could it be gained by punctilious devotion to cultic act: (22 ff.). The reference appears to be to an elaboration of the sacrificial offerings, devoid of any inward, spiritual content, an attitude strongly deplored by the prophets (cf. 1.11-15; Amos 5.21-24). Sin could never be dealt with by such superficial ceremonies (24). But now God, of His own volition and graces would blot out their sins and paradoxical as it may appear, an omniscient God would forget (25)! There was, however, a pertinent corollary to the Lord's redemptive activity. Israel, the servant, was to be God's witness (10,12). Those redeemed by such spectacular activity were not to be slow in speaking of these things (cf. Psa. 107.2), they must also live in the light of them. The same principle holds good today.

Note: V. 27: 'your mediators' includes both prophets and priests. Even such a great leader as Moses was not exempted from this condemnation (e.g. Num. 20.10-13, cf. Deut. 4.21 f.).

Isaiah 44

God and the Desolate

Sometimes even Christians can be extremely critical of those who are dejected and depressed, or unable to face a new and challenging situation, possibly because of an awareness of their own past failures. It is instructive to observe how patiently and gently our Shepherd-God (40.11) dealt with Israel. His was indeed a ministry of comfort and encouragement (40.1), as chapter after chapter reveals. We too may experience that same understanding sympathy which never condones sin but puts new heart and assurance into us (Heb. 4.14 ff.).

So it was in our portion. Israel, chosen of God, is termed 'Jacob' (1,2,21), a reminder of that weak and very human ancestor who was at last brought to the point of full trust (Gen. 32.24-30). The intimacy of the Father-son relationship is shown in the use of the poetic Jeshurun (2), a term of endearment meaning 'upright' (cf. Deut. 32.15; 33.5,26). There is a reminder of His elective-choice of Israel before its birth as a nation (2,21), a mystery in which both a prophet and an apostle shared (Jer. 1.5; Gal. 1.15). In each case this was an election to service, in the Master-servant relationship (1,2,21). A promise of His outpoured blessing upon future generations (3b,4) was important to a nation like Israel, with its rich sense of a corporate life which embraced successive generations. Even the Gentiles, seeing the evidence of God's hand upon His own people, would join them as proselytes (5), an indication of the missionary heart of the prophet. Once more this incomparable God reveals His authority in His ability to foretell the future (6 ff.), using the most powerful king of that generation, Cyrus, as His instrument (26 ff.). Assurance after assurance follows in comforting succession, each so certain of fulfilment that all nature is invited to form a choir to celebrate in advance His redemptive work (23)!

We must not overlook the devastating attack upon idolatry in vs. 9-20 (cf. Jer. 10.1-16). Nowhere in the O.T. is the utter incongruity and stupidity of idol worship revealed so clearly. In the light of our relationship with our Saviour-God, modern-day idolatry, whether it be of wealth, possessions, a pop-group or a sportsman, or anything else, is equally as absurd.

'The dearest idol I have known, whate'er that idol be,

Help me to tear it from Thy throne, and worship only Thee.'

Isaiah 45.1-19

Cyrus and Yahweh

The terms used to describe Cyrus are startling. In 44.28 he is called 'My shepherd' but here he is actually styled 'His anointed', or, in the more familiar transliteration of the Hebrew, 'His Messiah'! Israelite kings, and even priests, were anointed (e.g. 1 Sam. 24.6; 2 Sam. 19.21; Psa. 2.2; Lev. 4.3) but this reference to a heathen king is unique in the O.T. Roland de Vaux observes that, in the ancient world, the great kings of Egypt and the Hittite empire, etc., were not themselves anointed, but their vassal kings were. From this he infers that the king of Israel was anointed because he was conceived to be the vassal of Yahweh, the true King (cf. Judg. 8.23). Such a usage would fit admirably into this present section, where Cyrus is viewed as the Lord's subordinate (cf. 44.28).

Was Cyrus himself a believer in the Lord? His decree in Ezra 1.1-4, which allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, suggests that he was, but this was drawn up to suit the religion of the people he was addressing. Archaeological discoveries come to our aid at this point, for in the Cyrus Cylinder he ascribes his victories to Marduk, the Babylonian deity, whilst in another text discovered at Ur he gives the credit to Sin, the moon-god. Decisive use must be made of v. 5, where it is

categorically stated, 'You do not know Me'. Such was the power of the God of Israel that He could take up a heathen king who had no desire to serve Him, and use him to work out His divine purposes. There are interesting parallels with 10.5, where the mighty Assyria is called 'the rod of My anger', and with Jer. 25.9; 27.6; 43.10 where Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, is designated 'My servant'. Dictators and tyrants, great and small, still strut across the stage of world-history and it is comforting to realise that they, too, are as much subject to the Lord's overruling as were these ancient world-powers.

This raised a problem in the minds of many of the prophet's contemporaries, and it is only fair to observe that this doubt was shared by the prophet Habakkuk, in connection with God's similar use of the Babylonians, viz. 'How could a pure and holy God employ such an impure instrument?' (Hab. 1.13). Habakkuk saw that his course was to remain faithful to his ministry, even though he did not fully understand the ways of God with men. Isaiah (9-13) relates the objection to the sovereign will of God, about which there must always be an inscrutable element. Man may not be able to comprehend the ways of God, but he can trust Him.

Questions for further study and discussion on Isaiah chs. 40.1-45.19

1. List and consider, the ways in which 40.1 is worked out in this section.
2. How may 40.3-5 be applied to Christian service and witness (cf. Matt. 3.1 ff.)?
3. Consider the ways in which monotheistic religion is revealed in these chapters.
4. In what ways does Cyrus, 'His anointed' (45.1), anticipate the Messiah, our Lord Jesus? Can you detect the profound dis-similarities?
5. What encouragement have you been able to derive from these chapters?

Isaiah 45.20-46.13

Who Carries Who?

There are indications that the prophet's message did not find a ready acceptance amongst certain classes. Some 'were incensed against Him' (i.e. Yahweh, 45.24); others are described as 'transgressors' (46.8) and 'stubborn of heart' (46.12). It is a mark of our human fallibility to blame our misfortunes upon God and to close our hearts and minds to His offer of salvation. Notice the effect upon Isaiah's contemporaries in 46.12; God was about to do a great work (46.13), but they would miss it completely if they continued in such an intransigent attitude. The invitation of 45.22 still heralds forth, but it is no longer limited to a deliverance from Babylon, it relates to freedom from the bondage of sin, on the basis of Christ's atoning work on Calvary. Paul refers the promise of 45.23b to the Saviour in Phil. 2.9 ff.

There is another telling contrast between the effective power of Yahweh and the impotence of idols. The heathen gods of the nations needed to be carried, and 45.20 speaks of them as being borne along by their devotees in a religious procession. There is a procession of an entirely different kind in 46.1 f., however. The picture is of a fallen city, with a pitiful stream of refugees in flight. The few household possessions and personal treasures salvaged from the disaster are heaped high on the backs of their overladen beasts. Amongst these are their idols, useless encumbrances, strapped to the backs of their donkeys and preventing them from carrying a more profitable load, the very epitome of ineffectiveness! Israel's God is completely other (3 f.). He created Israel, dealt tenderly with her in her infancy and would not forget or forsake her in her advancing years. Notice the emphasis on His ability to carry His people. Sir George Adam Smith comments on this passage,

‘The truth is this: it makes all the difference to a man how he conceives his religion—whether as something that he has to carry, or as something that will carry him.’ The latter is the faith of the Bible and it is the only faith worth having.

Note: 46.1: Bel and Nebo were two of the most important Babylonian deities. Bel, which corresponds with the Canaanite Baal, was one of the titles of Marduk. The name of Nebo (or Nabu) is compounded in the names of three Babylonian kings, Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus.

Isaiah 47

The City which Made Itself God

From the earliest chapters of the Bible (Gen. 11.1-9), until the final chapters of the book of Revelation (14.8; 17.5; 18.1-24), Babylon is the symbol of an organised humanity proud in spirit and rebellious against God. It is the theme of the prophets (Isa. 13; Jer. 50; 51) and of the psalmist (137.8). Of necessity, the return of the Jews to Zion involved the overthrow of Babylon, who had deported them and innumerable other peoples, and held them, against their wilts, in an alien land. The prophet now concentrates on this element, showing the complete humiliation of the oppressing city, but demonstrating also that this is a moral judgement.

The first charge is of the overweening pride which made her exalted, in her own consciousness, as the ‘mistress of kingdoms’ (5,7). Her self-commendation, ‘I am, and there is no one besides me’ (8,10), was an arrogation of the very place of God Himself. Here was a nation which regarded itself as the Supreme Power! Such an attitude, which casts off God, discards also the responsibility of care and compassion for others, and this forms the second charge (6). The people of Judah had been committed to Babylonia for chastisement but she had treated them with abominable cruelty. Historically, this is attested in the small number of those who escaped the destruction of 588-587 B.C. and went into exile (Jer. 52.28 ff. notes a total of only 4,600 in three deportations), whilst archaeology reveals that an equally pathetic number, no more than 20,000, remained in a desolated land. Four out of every five Jews perished at this time. Charge number three concerned Babylon’s reliance upon sorcery and divination (9,12-15); such rank superstition was an insult to the intelligence of those created in the image of God. There could be no sure word, and certainly no salvation, from such, and the prophet’s withering condemnation, ‘they wander about each in his own direction’ (15), applies equally to the multiplicity of false cults which abound today.

Babylon has long since been in ruins, but the attitudes which it personified remain today. False pride which pretends to find security apart from God; false religion which makes a fair show outwardly but cannot satisfy man’s basic needs, and the spirit which abused or oppresses others, these are all anti-God and are destined to be dealt with in God’s righteous judgement.

Isaiah 48

Israel in the Classroom

There is a marked change of tone in this chapter and the notes of consolation and encouragement are not so evident. They are there none the less. God, the all-wise Heavenly Father, is pressing home the lessons which Israel ought to have learned by experience. The key to the understanding of this chapter is in v. 17, where God reveals Himself as the Teacher and Guide.

Israel is reminded firmly of the sin which brought upon her the judgement of God (1-11). There had been a false trust (1 f.) which honoured Him in words only. From its birth (8b), presumably a reference to the period of the Exodus and the covenant at Sinai, Israel had been rebellious, stubborn

(4) and idolatrous (5b). On account of this the prophets, for centuries had denounced the people, foretelling in detail the downfall of the nation (3). These prophecies, as well as the history books of the O.T., show us how impervious Israel was to these warning voices. Indeed, not until the Exile, and then largely because of the ministries of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, was there any awareness of the apostasy which had been Judged so summarily. One of the puzzling facts of human experience is the incurable slowness of individuals and nations to learn and retain the lessons which experience teaches. But the Lord was a very patient Teacher and never gave up (9), continuing the refining process until all the dross was burnt away (10). Now a new chapter of events was about to be inaugurated and He again demonstrates His superior power in foretelling them (6 ff., 12-16).

The Lord's lament over His people is comparable with the anguish of our Saviour over rebellious Jerusalem (18 f., cf. Matt. 23.37 f.). The one condition attached to the covenant which the Lord had graciously made with them was that they should be loyal, loving and completely obedient (e.g. Deut. 30.20). This they had withheld, and so they forfeited peace, which can never be the portion of the ungodly (18,22). The promises made to Abraham of a numerous seed also remained unfulfilled (19, cf. Gen. 12.2; 13.16; 22.17). Now they were being given a second chance in a new Exodus (20 f.) and the prophet urges them to seize it without hesitation. A similar urgency attaches to the decision which we are called upon to make when we are confronted with the challenge of Christ (Luke 9.23-26,57-62; Acts 26.28 f.; 2 Cor. 6.1 f.).

Isaiah 49

God Still Cares

Reading this chapter, one is prompted to ask the question of the Ethiopian eunuch to Philip on the Gaza road, 'About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' The context of Acts 8.26-40 makes it clear that the eunuch was reading Isa. 53, but the problem of the identity of the Servant is also relevant to our chapter (vs. 3,5,6,7). At times the Servant appears to be the prophet himself (e.g. v. 2), and v. 3 gives an identification with all Israel, but this is further qualified in v. 5, with its picture of a ministry to Israel. There is an anticipatory hint of the Messiah in v. 7 (cf. 53.3). As so often in Scripture, an intelligent observation of the context is decisive. This shows that these oracles, or sermons, were addressed to the godly remnant of the Jews in Babylonia. Notice the prophet's eight-fold appeal:

1. He points out that God had called and prepared the true, spiritual Israel for a unique purpose (1 ff.).
2. He assures them that God, far from rejecting them completely because of their failure, was vindicating and restoring them (4 f.).
3. He foretells that, exceeding this ministry to Israel, there would be a witness and a ministry to the whole world (6).
4. Instead of being the underdogs, the rulers of the nations would do them homage (7,22 f.).
5. He predicts the restoration of the exiles to their homeland, an event which is so certain of fulfilment that he composes a hymn of praise in advance (8-13, cf. 2 Chron. 20.21)!
6. In a passage which reveals the faithful and compassionate heart of God there is the assurance that they were not forgotten by Him (14 ff.).
7. This is followed by the promise of a glorious home-coming to a restored and repopulated Jerusalem (17-21).

8. Finally, God reveals Himself as the God of the impossible, the Champion and Redeemer of His people (24 ff.). So this chapter takes its place in the overall ministry of comfort and encouragement to the insignificant company of Jews in mighty Babylon.

The revelation of a saving-ministry to the nations (6b) is one of the outstanding conceptions of the O.T. Israel was a highly privileged nation, but the divine choice involved considerable responsibilities, e.g. Exod. 19.6, which envisages a priestly ministry of mediation to all the world. So often privilege passed over into presumption, accompanied by an attitude of superiority to the Gentiles, as revealed in the unlovely Pharisaic Judaism of our Lord's time. The new Spiritual Israel (Rom. 9.6 ff.; Gal. 3.29; 6.16) has greater privileges than ancient Israel, but the temptation of spiritual pride must be strongly resisted. Rather, a humble compassionate and sacrificial ministry to all men is to characterise its members.

Isaiah 50

Faith in the Darkness

Who is to blame (1-3)? We often display a special ingenuity when it comes to shifting the blame for our own misdeeds! Instead of accepting our own responsibility, we so often lay the blame on circumstances, on hereditary factors, on others, on fate or on God. This is just what the exiles were doing. Instead of accepting captivity as God's chastisement for sin (2) they attributed their fate to His rejection of them (1). God points out that when He spoke to them, doubtless through the prophet himself, their lack of attention or response was tantamount to a rejection of Him (2a)! The reference of the allusion to God's power in nature (2b,3) is not clear; it could be to the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod. 14) or to some natural phenomenon in Babylonia itself, possibly a severe drought accompanied by sand-storms. But the lesson drawn is plain enough; God has effective power to deliver His people.

Patient endurance in God's service (4-9). This is the third of the Servant Songs (see note on Isa. 42), in which the prophet seems to be referring to his own experience. His was a ministry of encouragement to his dispirited compatriots (4a), but he speaks to the hearts and consciences of all those engaged in pastoral work when he alludes to the source of his message, and indeed, of his own strength (4b). To strengthen others demands far more than our human resources we need to wait on the Lord regularly morning by morning, letting His Word, and the sense of His presence, flood our waking thoughts. We know that the prophet faced opposition (cf. 45.9 ff.; 46.12), and the physical violence which he suffered (5-8) may have come from his fellow-countrymen, unwilling to accept his exhortations to return to Jerusalem. On the other hand, such opposition may have come from Babylonians who were scented at his forecast of their overthrow and the triumph of Cyrus, their enemy (e.g. 45.1 ff.; 46.1 f.; 47). There is more than a hint of a connection with Jesus Christ, the Suffering Servant, in the meek acceptance of humiliation and suffering (6 f., cf. Matt. 26.67; 27.28-31,39-44, etc.).

Trust in the darkness (10 f.). A faith that cannot venture out into the unknown, that fears to hazard itself upon the word of God, is no faith at all. So the prophet gives his challenging invitation to others to venture all upon God (10). But the self-reliant, who try to illumine the darkness by their own feeble efforts, know no such assurance (11).

Isaiah 51

Numbers are Not Everything

The major part of this chapter (1-16) is addressed to those who responded to the prophet's appeal (50.10) and prepared to embark on an adventure of faith, leaving the known and venturing out into the

unknown. Were they appalled at the smallness of their numbers? There is evidence to suggest that they were, and that their relative insignificance appeared to magnify the obstacles to be overcome, viz. a proud and still-mighty Babylon; a long, hazardous journey; and a devastated Judah. The prophet invites his hearers to look back to the very source of their national history. God had brought into being a nation through a single couple, an old man and a woman well beyond the age of child-bearing (2, cf. Gen. 16.2; 17.17; 18.11-14; Heb. 11.11 f.). What the Lord had done before He was surely able to do again! What a comfort it is to realise that God is not, 'always on the side of the big battalions', as Voltaire's contemporaries said! He defeated the Midianite host with 300 men who did not strike a blow until the enemy was in full retreat (Judy. 7). He brought the giant Goliath crashing to the ground through the sling of a shepherd-boy (1 Sam. 17). With a handful of dedicated men He turned the world of the first century A.D. upside down (or was it 'right way up'?! - Acts 17.6). The Lord is never bound by numbers, and we must eschew this feeling of crushed impotence brought about by the fact that few today seem wholly dedicated to Him.

So the prophet again lifts up his voice, heralding forth the words of God, to assure His people. The imminent deliverance was more certain than the continuance of the universe itself (4 ff.). They need not fear, for their opponents would descend into oblivion (7 f., notice the similar promise given to the prophet himself, 50.7 ff.). Further confidence is engendered by the timely reminder of the Lord's power revealed at the Exodus (9 f., where Rahab, the chaos monster of mythology, symbolises Egypt, as in Isa. 30.7), and this leads on to the 'Psalm of the Returned Exiles' (11, cf. 35.10) and yet more assurances of divine comfort and help (12-16).

Finally, the prophet's imagination wings over hundreds of miles of inhospitable territory to a battered Jerusalem, nestling in the brown hills of Judah (17-23). He pictures her as she was after Babylon's savage attack, but now the Lord's cup of chastisement was passing to her persecutors. Her darkness and humiliation were about to end, the dawn was at hand and it was time for her to bestir herself (17).

A point to ponder: 'Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few' (Jonathan, in 1 Sam. 14.6).

Isaiah 52.1-12

Good News!

The opening verses (1 f.) follow naturally from the picture of Jerusalem's humiliation in 51.17-23. The prophet's mind leaps to the final impression (1), returning secondarily to the necessary first step (2). This is the first clear reference to a new and purified Jerusalem, which doubtless encouraged the religious separatism characteristic of post-exilic Judaism. This conception of a New Jerusalem was taken up by the Christian Church, projected into the future, and associated with the complete renewal at the end of the age, when Christ returns in power and glory (Rev. 21.1-22.5).

The structure of vs. 3-6 is so difficult that the RSV does not attempt to render it in poetry, but there is no ambiguity about its meaning. The mention of a release from the degradation of slavery (2) might suggest the necessity for the payment of a ransom. Yahweh makes it clear that this is not so. The punishment of the nation for her sins was solely due to Him, and there was no obligation whatever to Babylonia; both the enslavement and the deliverance derive from His sovereign will. Two other oppressing powers in Israel's history, Egypt and Assyria, are cited in support. The family of Jacob had gone down to Egypt of their own volition, only to be enslaved subsequently. The Assyrians, although acting as the Lord's instrument (Isa. 10.5 f., 15-19), were motivated by entirely selfish desires (Isa. 10.7-11, 13 f.). The Jewish rulers, generally, looked upon the Exile as an indication of Yahweh's inferiority, and some even despised Him for what they imagined to be His weakness (5). They would soon learn otherwise (6).

Three stanzas concerning the great deliverance climax this section. In the first (7 f.) the steps of the herald bringing the good news to Jerusalem are traced, and the watchmen of the city are seen looking expectantly for the first signs of his appearing. A few years later, 42,360 (Ezra 2.64) returned exiles marched into the ruined city. It might seem incongruous to speak of this as 'the return of the Lord to Zion', but the prophet, in faith, saw that this would be the small beginning of a new and decisive phase in the Lord's redemptive purposes. In the second stanza (9 f.), the city itself is invited to celebrate the divine comfort (cf. 40.1; 49.13; 51.3,12) and redemption (cf. 43.1; 44.22 f.). Finally (11 f.), the scene switches to Babylon, and the captives are urged to make their departure in terms which suggest a second Exodus. One remarkable feature is the anticipation that Cyrus would allow the Temple vessels to be returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 1.7-11). Normally, a victorious nation placed the gods of the defeated in its own temple as a sign of the superiority of its own gods. But since Israel's faith was imageless (Exod. 20.4 ff.) the Temple vessels had been taken instead. Miraculously preserved in this remarkable way, they were now to be restored to their rightful place.

Questions for further study and discussion on Isaiah chs. 45.20-52.12

1. In what way does the prophet demonstrate the greatness of Israel's God?
2. For what sins is Babylon condemned in ch. 47?
3. Follow the history of Babylon, both actual and symbolical, in the Bible.
4. What may the Christian learn from the teaching on 'the Servant' in this section?

Isaiah 52.13-53.12

The Suffering Servant

Amongst all the treasures of devotion and prophecy in the O.T. this passage is surely one of the most significant. Possibly only Jeremiah's conception of the New Covenant (Jer. 31.31-34) equals its tremendous insights into the final outworking of God's redemptive purposes. In the preceding chapters we have seen how the interpretation of the Servant passages flows between the nation Israel, the godly remnant in Exile and the prophet himself, with more than a hint of the Redeemer. But here, whilst there are still echoes of the suffering endured by the nation and the persecution heaped upon the prophet, there is a projection into the future which centres upon a unique Person, different from even the greatest of the prophets. His majesty and victory appear both at the beginning and the end (52.13,15; 53.12), which connects with the other O.T. prophecies concerning the triumph and kingly rule of the Davidic Messiah (e.g. Isa. 9.2-7; 11.1-9).

But in between there is the revelation of unique suffering and humiliation, borne humbly yet vicariously for all men. Mirrored here we have a summary of all those dreadful events in the last day of our Lord's life upon earth: His silence before His accusers; the rejection and hatred of the religious leaders; the faithlessness of the disciples; the cruel lacerations of the scourge, the crown of thorns and the gaping wounds caused by the rough, iron nails which held Him to the cross; His death between two thieves and His burial in the tomb of a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23.50-53). It has been observed by C. R. North that prophets like Jeremiah suffered in the course of their ministry, but in the case of the Servant, suffering was not merely an incidental but the means whereby His ministry was brought to a triumphant conclusion. In this He can be no other than our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet Israel, to whom this prophecy came, with incredible blindness of heart refuses to recognise Him! Such passages as Mark 10.45; Luke 4.16-21; 9.22; 18.31 ff., etc., show clearly that our Lord conceived His ministry after the pattern of the Servant of the Lord, and the light from this fourth Song, especially, irradiated the stony pathway which led to Calvary.

Here we stand very close to the loving heart of God, who suffers to redeem. But we must not overlook the triumph which is revealed. The Servant, buried after His vicarious suffering, is supernaturally vindicated and sees the fruit of His travail (10 ff.). Nothing less than a resurrection is involved, which, at a time when the view of the after-life in Israel was so vague, makes this prophecy yet more remarkable. Christ is still alive!

Isaiah 54

Trust God - Prove God

The prophet, using three striking illustrations, speaks of the restoration of Judah and Jerusalem:

Barrenness (1-3) was a mark of shame in ancient Israel (cf. Peninnah's taunt, 1 Sam. 1.6), but more than this, it meant that one was cut off from sharing, through one's children, in the future of the nation. The promise to the exiles was that there would be a new fertility after their return to Zion, with the nation again becoming numerous. During the exile, Edom from the south, and Samaria from the north, had encroached upon Judah's territory, but this would all be regained (3). A change of picture in v. 2 uses the illustration of a Bedouin tent. The enlargement of one's home was a relatively simple matter, simply the incorporation of extra skins into the tent, allowing for extra-long cords because of the reduced pitch of the tent, and more substantial stakes to bear the increased weight. The Jews were being challenged to an act of faith, depending solely upon the Lord's promises. As such, it provided the text and the inspiration of William Carey's memorable sermon at Nottingham on 31st May, 1792, with its complementary themes:

'EXPECT GREAT THINGS FROM GOD

ATTEMPT GREAT THINGS FOR GOD'

History records the effect of this sermon in the birth of the Baptist Missionary Society and the genesis of the modern missionary movement. And to modern Christians, as well as to exiled Judah and eighteenth-century Baptists, there comes the continuing challenge to 'make longer cords and stronger stakes'.

In vs. 4-10 Judah, in exile, is viewed as a wife judicially separated from her Husband, Yahweh, because of her sin. The prophet's bold conception of such an intimate relationship between God and His people is paralleled in Hosea, whose heart-breaking relationship with his faithless wife taught him so much of the Lord's travail for wayward Israel (Hos. 1-3; cf. Jer. 2,3). Not for one moment did He cease to love Judah (8,10), and the joy consequent upon reconciliation would make the long, frustrating years of exile seem but a fleeting moment (4,7,8). The constancy of the divine love, even in the face of provocation, is one of the many wonders of Biblical revelation and human experience.

The New Jerusalem (11-17). We have already noted the antecedents of this conception in 52.1 f., but the parallels with the Christian view in Rev. 21.18-21 are even more apparent here. Note carefully that material well-being is to be coupled with that spiritual and ethical prosperity (13 f.) which was so lacking in pre-exilic Jerusalem.

Isaiah 55

True Satisfaction

The Jews in Babylon, after the first shock of exile, settled down in their new sphere, encouraged by the letter which Jeremiah wrote to them (Jer. 29.4-7). As the years passed, and many of them prospered, their sense of vision dimmed. God had called Israel into covenant with Himself, they

were His people, a kingdom of priests, with a priestly ministry of mediation for the whole world (Exod. 19.6). Apart from Him they could find no true satisfaction. Now, as the hour of liberation approached, many of them were unwilling to respond. They were in danger of becoming a nation of tradesmen (note the bustling energy of v. 2a) instead of a nation of priests. To these the prophet gives his invitations to 'solid joys and lasting treasure' which 'none but Zion's children know', all free through the covenant-grace of God (1-3a). He promises them the stability of a covenant-relationship as enduring as that with the Davidic house (2 Sam. 7.12-16; a number of scholars suggest a connection with the promise of the Davidic Messiah in Jer. 30.9; Ezek. 34.23 f.; 37.24 f., in which case the reference would be to the establishment of the Messianic kingdom). What David was (4), Israel would be (5), in this glorious future.

Nowhere in the O.T., however, is there any suggestion that Israel's position was divorced from responsibility. Obedience, the offering of love and loyalty, were the requisites of the Mosaic Covenant (Exod. 24.7), and this is again required (2b,3a, where 'hearken', etc., involves obedience). There was also the Imperative to forsake sin and to seek the Lord earnestly and repentantly (6 f.), in a call to salvation which is as richly significant today, through Jesus Christ, as it was when it was first uttered (cf. Acts 2.21,38; 3.26; 13.38 f., etc.).

The remainder of the chapter (8-13) contains three stanzas of encouragement to the Jews to return. The first (8 f.) gives the assurance that what God has prepared for them far surpasses their power to conceive (cf. 1 Cor. 2.9 f.). The second (10 f.), speaking of the certainty of fulfilment of the divine promise, is amplified in the third (12 f.), where the familiar themes recur of a triumphant departure from Babylon and the renewal of nature itself as they journey homewards. It reinforces the prophet's invitation to the things that really satisfy, away from the bustling city to the glorious universe and the wonderfully ordered world of nature, created by the One who leads them home (12a).

Isaiah 56

Too Small a Circle

Large-hearted religion is the theme of vs. 1-8. It is usually agreed by scholars that chs. 56-66 of Isaiah relate to the period after the return from Exile in 538 B.C. There are a number of connections with the condition of Judah in the eighth century B.C., but on the other hand, the judgement of the Exile appears to be in the past (e.g. 56.8; 57.16 f.). In any case, the setting is Judah and Jerusalem, not Babylon, as in chs. 40-45. The reference to the Temple (5,7) suggests a date for this oracle after 515 B.C., when the Second Temple was completed.

The Lord's people, in both O.T. and N.T. periods, have always been confronted with problems of membership. How is older legislation governing those eligible to belong to the group to be interpreted in the light of new situations? On the one hand there were prophecies that, on the return from Exile and the re-establishment of worship at Jerusalem, the Gentiles would respond and would share with the Jews (e.g. 45.22 f.; 49.6, cf. 2.1-4). Obviously, this prophecy was being fulfilled, for Gentiles were being attracted to the worship of the Jerusalem community (3,6). But this was not without opposition from those who, concerned with the purity of the group, wanted to exclude all non-Jews. A complicating factor was the presence of a number of eunuchs, which was probably a legacy of court-service in Babylonia and Persia. According to the provisions of Deut. 23.1 these unfortunates were specifically excluded from the Temple-worship. Isaiah, declaring the mind of the Lord, not simply his own opinion (1,4,8), advocates a generous attitude and rejects exclusivity. The outreaching mercy of God (8) condemns the attitude of those who draw so narrow a circle. The real standard is not birth, but obedience to God in both religion and morality (2). Note the stanzas below.

The rebuke of the final verses (9-12) is directed at the nation's leaders. Elsewhere 'watchmen' (10) is a synonym for 'prophets' (Jer. 6.17; Ezek. 33.7). It is tragic when the spiritual guides of a nation

are so self-indulgent that the flock entrusted to them is completely unprotected (cf. Jer. 23.1-4; Ezek. 34). The Lord makes clear the severe condemnation which attaches to those who abuse their responsibilities in this way (Ezek. 3.16-21; 33.1-17).

‘For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of man’s mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.
But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.’

(F. W. Faber.)

Isaiah 57

God Does Care

Two classes are to be distinguished in this chapter, the ‘righteous’ (1) and the ‘wicked’ (21). The former group were probably those who had recently returned from Exile, the latter were those who, remaining behind in Palestine, had become virtually semi-heathen through inter-marriage. Between these two there was an ever-increasing gap.

The opening verses (1 f.) state the problem, which is a recurring one in the O.T., that misfortune and even death make no distinction between the righteous and the ungodly (Eccl. 9.1-6; 12.1-8). What is the use then of being righteous? The psalmist faced this problem (Psa. 73), and here the righteous endured the taunts of evildoers on the same issue (4). In reality, however, they were mocking Yahweh, who therefore summons them to judgement (3). First of all, He condemns them for their evil and idolatrous practices (3-10), using the analogy of spiritual adultery employed by other prophets (e.g. Hos. 1-3; Jer. 2,3; Ezek. 16). The references show that this was a continuation of the Canaanite nature worship, which included ritual prostitution and child-sacrifices. Probably, as Jer. 44.15-23 indicates, this kind of worship, characteristic of the worst periods of the monarchy (2 Kings 16.3 f.; 21.1-9), had continued in Palestine whilst the exiles were in Babylonia. The ‘symbol’ (8) is an allusion to the mezuzah, the leather receptacle containing portions of the Law of Moses which was attached to the doorpost of every Jewish home (Deut. 6.9), signifying a life lived in obedience to God’s commands. The sign which characterised the ungodly was their fornication. They interpreted the silence of the Exile, when no prophetic voice was heard, as an indication of God’s impotence (11), but they would find out, to their cost, the inability of their idols to deliver them (12 f.).

In sharp contrast to the fate of such evil men, the promise concerning the righteous (13b) leads on to a passage of encouragement (14-19). The people who had returned to Jerusalem with such high hopes were crushed in spirit (15) by adversity, which suggested the continuing anger of God (16). God seemed to be hiding His face (17). The result of this was that despairing Israel continued to backslide (17b). God promises that all these barriers would be broken down (14), and that there would be a living communion (15) and peace (19) with Him. Human weakness and unworthiness are very evident in this passage, and it is the God of grace who alone can revive (15 f.), heal and comfort (18), and give peace (19). In this final state of blessedness the wicked can have no share (20 f., cf. 48.22).

Isaiah 58

Religion on the Cheap?

Isaiah, in 56.10, had condemned the religious leaders as blind watchmen and dumb dogs, unable to give any warning bark. Such men were prophets in name only, for the essential function of a prophet is to herald forth, in unmistakably clear tones (1), the divine proclamation, whether it be one of condemnation (as here) or blessing. Amos spoke of his ministry as the roaring of a lion (1.2; 3.8). There is a superficial view that the prophets were concerned only with the future, but in actual fact, the bulk of their oracles were concerned with the present—they were the critics of contemporary life. The withering exposure of a purely formal religion which we find here should be set alongside 1.10-17 and our Saviour's trenchant words in Matt. 23.13-36. No doubt the message which the prophet brought would be highly unpopular, since it stabbed hard at the consciences of men who resented having their smug complacency disturbed. In our own generation the man who would speak out for God in condemnation of contemporary ethical standards or practices must expect the snarls of a generation which has largely cast off restraint and abandoned traditional standards. But the man of God knows that real happiness, satisfaction and true prosperity can only come as God is honoured and His standards accepted (8-14).

In this chapter the prophet attacks two practices: fasting (2-7), and Sabbath observance (13). There is no suggestion that these were wrong in themselves, but the way in which they were observed made them simply the hollow shells of a hypocritical religion, empty of any real content. They fasted as an outward form (5) that they might be in credit with God (3), but their actions were the very reverse of the humility symbolised in the outward forms (3b, 4a). The true purpose of fasting (4b) was that prayer might be reinforced, but such communion with God must, inevitably, result in compassion to one's fellow men (6 f, 10, cf. Jas. 1.27). This is not to be expressed in that token-involvement with the world's need which masquerades under the description of 'charity'; it necessitates 'pouring oneself out for the hungry' (10). Such costliness is, however, compensated abundantly by the blessings which are promised here.

Isaiah 59

Conditions of God's Intervention

Condemnation (1-8). Isaiah's scathing denunciation of hypocrisy in religion (ch. 58) is followed by an equally blistering attack upon the corruption and violence prevalent in the law courts (3-8). The people were complaining of God's inability to deliver them in much the same way that the exiles in Babylon had lamented His lack of power to release them from captivity (1, cf. 50.2). The prophetic diagnosis is that the separation between God and His people was the direct consequence of their sin (2). Sin separates between man and his Maker. Here the emphasis is upon the initiative of God, but in Gen. 3 it was Adam and Eve who, conscious of their sin, hid themselves from the presence of God (Gen. 3.8). Sinful man cannot abide the presence and scrutiny of a holy God, hence the desire to avoid the light which John notes (John 3.19 ff.). The bloodletting which vs. 3,7 imply was probably due to the misuse of the death penalty by lies, bribes and dishonest witnesses. Only as the way was made straight could the glory of the Lord be revealed (40.3 ff.), but the lives of these men were twisted and distorted (8).

Confession (9-15a). Here the people confess the sin of their rulers and judges which has involved them in such a predicament. There is a connection (9) with Amos 5.18,20, where the prophet, attacking the false notion of the day of the Lord as a time of national vindication, declares that judgement will begin with God's sinful people (cf. 1 Pet. 4.17). 'This fate', Isaiah's contemporaries declared, 'has now overtaken us.' They also accepted for themselves the verdict on the nation as

God's blind servant (10, cf. 42.18 ff.). There is hope for an individual or a nation which is aware of its true condition before God!

Divine Intervention (15b-21). When sin is confessed and forsaken the Lord can intervene in salvation, proving that His arm has effectual power (16, cf. 1). Vs. 18 f. speak of the physical vindication of Israel before her adversaries, but the parallelism of v. 20 indicates that His redemptive work also operates on a higher, spiritual plane, concerning itself with Jacob's (i.e. Israel's) sin. The final verse (21) reveals the complete certainty of His promises.

A thought: Compare the armour of God (17) with the armour of the Christian in Eph. 6.10-18 and 1 Thess. 5.8.

Questions for further study and discussion on Isaiah 52.13-59.21

1. In what ways does 52.13-53.12 remind us of Jesus Christ?
2. What application has 54.2 f. (and its context) to the condition of the Christian Church?
3. Do we ever get 'something for nothing' (55.1)?
4. What are the sins which caused the withholding of God's deliverance (chs. 56-59)? Is there any abiding principle here?

Isaiah 60

Glory

The glory of the Lord is one of the distinctive themes of the O.T. It was revealed at Mount Sinai when God entered into a covenant with His people (Exod. 24.15 ff.; Deut. 5.24); at Kadesh-barnea its manifestation prevented the slaughter of Moses, Aaron, Caleb and Joshua by a disillusioned Israel (Num. 14.10); at the dedication of Solomon's Temple its appearance was the climax of the ceremony (1 Kings 8.11); the psalmist saw it revealed in the thunderstorm (Psa. 29.9); its association with the inaugural vision of Ezekiel strengthened him for his difficult ministry to the Jews in Exile (Ezek. 1.1-28), whilst his contemporary, Habakkuk, looked forward to the golden age when the whole earth would be filled with God's glory (Hab. 2.14).

Here the prophet foretells the imminence of another spectacular manifestation of divine intervention. Jerusalem is called to awaken (1, cf. 52.1) to meet what the prophet envisages to be the establishment of the Messianic age (2, cf. 9.1-7). No longer would the Lord's glory be revealed only on rare and fleeting occasions, it would shine continually in its full splendour, making the sun and moon quite superfluous (19 f.). A magnificent pageant is depicted, in which scene follows scene in vigorous, breath-taking succession, Jerusalem itself being the principal setting for the action. First, Zion is likened to a once-desolate mother, made radiant with joy at the restoration of her children (4 f., cf. 54.1-10). Next, an immense camel caravan approaches from the south, reminiscent of the celebrated visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon (1 Kings 10.1-10). There follows a remarkable scene as multitudes of sheep converge on the holy place and offer themselves as sacrifices (7). Scene number four focuses attention westward to the Mediterranean, where the white-sailed ships skim the ocean bringing their precious human cargo (8 f.). In the remainder of the chapter attention is on Jerusalem itself. A foreign army had battered down its walls in 587 B.C.; now these would be rebuilt with non-Israelite labour (10), yet, paradoxically? they would be completely unnecessary in an age of peace (11,18)! 'The Temple would be rebuilt in greater splendour than the Solomonic original (13,17, cf. 1 Kings 5.8-10), and the people, no longer forsaken (15), would enjoy universal homage (16), security (21) and prosperity (22). All this is

assured because of the name and character of Israel's God, as the climaxes at the end of vs. 9,16,22 make clear. A portion of it was fulfilled historically, but perhaps the greater part awaits fulfilment in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21.22-27).

Isaiah 61

The Difference God Makes!

Commentators are divided as to the relationship between 61.1-4 and the four 'Servant' passages in 42.1-4; 49.1-6; 50.4-9; 52.13-53.12. It is true that the name of the 'Servant' does not appear in it, as in the other Songs, but it is full of the spirit of the Servant of the Lord. We have frequently observed the fluidity of the Servant-conception. Referring to one who is in a peculiar relationship of privilege to God which issues in faithful ministry, it includes Israel the nation, the righteous remnant in Exile, the prophet himself and the Messiah. Here the primary reference is to the ministry of the prophet himself, the herald of good news to his distressed compatriots, for, if v. 10 refers to the same person as vs. 1-4, the speaker is not the bestower but the recipient of salvation, and so not Messiah Himself. But our Lord Jesus Christ, who, as we have seen in the note on 52.13-53.12, assumed for Himself the role of the Suffering Servant, made the opening verses of this chapter the first public utterance of His ministry in Galilee. In the synagogue at Nazareth He deliberately selected this portion and claimed that it found fulfilment in Him (Luke 4.16-21). There is no hint in this section of a salvation won through suffering but then, no single prophecy, or type, gives an all-inclusive picture of Christ. Rather it highlights the Joyous aspects of our Lord's life, as He brought light, liberty, healing and comfort to men. For our prophet, the historical context involved the prosperity of Jerusalem (4-9) and vengeance upon her enemies (2, line b). It is significant that our Lord, in reading from this chapter, stopped short of 'and the day of vengeance of our God'. Christ, in His incarnation did not come to condemn the world (John 3.17), but to bring deliverance from sin's bondage, and yet, such was man's reaction to His presence, that he condemned himself by rejecting the Light (John 3.19).

Notice how, in this chapter, there is a combination of external and internal events. God was moving on a massive scale on the political scene, re-establishing His afflicted people in their war-ravaged land. But His concern also included the afflicted, the broken-hearted, those in bondage (of what kind is not specified), those who mourned and those who were faint-hearted. The Sovereign Lord of the Universe still exercises this tender ministry in the lives of needy men.

Isaiah 62

Pray without Ceasing

The emphasis of this chapter is upon intercession. In the previous two chapters the prophet has spoken of the imminence of the Lord's work of deliverance, both material and spiritual, for Israel. Now he declares (1) his resolution to 'pray constantly' (1 Thess. 5.17, cf. Acts 12.5; Rom. 1.9, etc.) until he sees the fulfilment of his prophecies. It is of the utmost importance to observe that, in this call to prayer, he is as much the Lord's spokesman as when he was delivering the Lord's oracles. In this prayer he associates others with him (6 f., where 'watchmen' is best understood as 'prophets', as in 21.8-12; 56.10; Ezek. 3.17), urging them to give the Lord no rest, an injunction which is suggestive of our Lord's parable of the importunate widow (Luke 18.1-8).

The function of prayer in the God-man relationship is one which is perplexing to some who question whether God answers prayer, or wonder why He doesn't answer a particular request first time. The answer, surely, lies in the Father-child relationship. No human father always answers, 'Yes'; sometimes the answer is in the negative; sometimes delay, or some moderation of the request, is advisable. A child whose every whim was satisfied immediately would undoubtedly be

spoilt, precocious and unappreciative. But the relationship with the parent, regarded as a kind of 'universal provider', would suffer most. God is our Heavenly Father aware of our real needs (Matt. 6.25-33), and all His dealings with us are to encourage us in our love and trust. The enriching of our characters is of far greater importance to Him than the satisfying of our clamour for material prosperity. God could provide for every need of His children, without delay, but He limits Himself, in His wisdom, so as to allow us, in the prayer of loving trust, to cooperate with Him.

Not all are able to give this kind of response. Their God is too small, merely the genie who answers when they rub the magic lamp. It is certain that many Israelites were unable to share the prophet's vision. But to those who were, there came the assurance of a new relationship (2-5); a new prosperity (8 f.); a new Jerusalem (10-12) upon which pilgrims would converge. No longer would Zion be forsaken like a divorced bride (4, cf. 49.14-18; 50.1), or desolate like a barren wife (cf. 54.1-8; 49.19 ff.). Isaiah's view of God as the bridegroom of His people finds its fulfilment in the relationship between Christ and the Church (2 Cor. 11.2; Eph. 5.21-33; Rev. 21.2).

Isaiah 63

Our Father

If God is sovereign and righteous then He must act against sin, whether it be personal or national. A God who tolerated evil, and stood idly by, would not be God in any ultimate sense. But the sombre scene of His judgement is always qualified by the realisation that, in His gracious but righteous love, He has provided the means whereby the pernicious effects of sin may be dealt with. In vs. 1-6 the theme of judgement is dominant. The heart trembles at the imagery used, depicting the total overthrow of an oppressor, but the mind lays hold on the fact that there is no human caprice or revengeful spirit here, God's dealings with men are in perfect equity. There is good reason to believe that Edom and its capital, Bozrah (cf. Jer. 49.13; Amos 1.12), are here used representatively of all the Lord's enemies. Certainly there is justification for this attitude, for a long history of bitter animosity between Israel and Edom culminated in events shortly after the overthrow of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. It was the Babylonian lion which laid Judah low, but it was the Edomite jackal which fell upon her as she lay helpless. Obadiah's brief prophecy is a bitter protest against such unbrotherliness, and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the psalmist joined in the lament (Lam. 4.21 f.; Ezek. 25.12 ff.; 35; Psa. 137.7). For this reason Edom became the epitome of the enemies of the Lord's people.

The remainder of the chapter, and the whole of the next, contains the prophet's prayer for the deliverance of his distressed people. Like Samuel, faced with the Philistine onslaught, he first raised his 'Ebenezer' (lit. 'stone of help', 1 Sam. 7.12), reminding himself of all God's mercies in the past, particularly at the Exodus, and thereby strengthening his faith (7-14). What God had accomplished in the past He could do again! It is one of the remarkable features of Jewish piety that they believed that the whole power of God, revealed in the significant events of their history, could be brought to bear upon their own personal problems (e.g. Psa. 22, especially vs. 4 f.). God does not dole out His aid in minute rations.

From this there springs the plea for present help (15-19). The events of destruction and exile might seem to belie their ancestry, but God was still their Father, He had not cast them off (16). In the O.T. period the concept of God as Father was rarely used possibly because it suggested a physical connection, as in the Canaanite fertility cults. Jeremiah (3.19), Hosea (11.1,3) and our prophet employed it, however, and so prepared the way for its richly significant use in the N.T. period, when a new dimension was added by the incarnation.

Isaiah 64

Man Waits - God Works!

The humanistic thought and theology of the past generations have left the legacy of a man-centred universe. Man achieves this and explores that; man's mind becomes the arbiter and touchstone of all things; even in religion the emphasis is upon what man believes and does, sometimes in such a way as to rule out any possible intervention by God and, indeed, to make His very existence superfluous! The emphasis of Isaiah in this chapter brings the man who thus defies himself down to earth with a bump; salvation is God's work, not man's. He continues his prayer with an impassioned plea to God to act decisively, to reveal His awesome glory as He did at Sinai, and by the River Kishon (Exod. 19.16-20; Judg. 5.4 f.). Israel's part was to wait for the divine Worker (4), to yield to His touch, as inanimate clay is moulded by a skilful potter (8).

There is a lesson here which both humbles and inspires. God still works for the one who waits for Him. But this verse must not be wrenched from its context and made to support a doctrine of passivity. The kind of person for whom God works in this wonderful way is specified. 1. He is a man of prayer, pleading with passion even as the prophet did. 2. He is a man of faith, mindful of God's past mercies and certain that He can renew them. 3. His life reveals the moral standards of God, not with a chill, formal correctness but with the joyous warmth of heart obedience (5). God meets such. He is not remote and untouchable willing to be found by man but unwilling to find; His is a questing love which seeks and surprises the believer at every point (cf. Psa. 59.10; 79.8). 4. He is a man humble and realistic enough to face up to his sin and shortcomings (5b-7). 5. He is a man deeply concerned for the honour of God (2b, 9-12). Observe how v. 11 and 63.18 show conclusively a setting after the destruction of the Temple. 6. Finally, the promise of v. 4b must be set within the wider context of the prophetic activity. Isaiah and his fellow-prophets were not men given to inactivity, dwelling at ease in Zion (Amos 6.1) as immobile spectators of God's exploits. But in all their strenuous endeavours there was that quiet spirit of waiting upon God. Such waiting has a trustful yet thrilling expectancy about it, for its object is the covenant-keeping, almighty God, whom we too may address as 'our Father' (8, cf. Matt. 6.8 f.).

Isaiah 65

God is Near - and Active!

The two final chapters of Isaiah contain God's answer to the prayer of His prophet (63.7-64.12). The Jews were asking, 'Where is He . . .?' (63.11,15), to which God replies, 'Here am I . . .' (65.1). All the while His hands had been outstretched in a loving, welcoming invitation (2) but the nation has not responded. Several centuries later the descendants of these Jews rejected God's Son in much the same way (Luke 13.34). There are still those who hear the gracious invitation of Christ (e.g. Matt. 11.28 f., or Rev. 3.20), but keep the door of their lives fast closed in His face. The prophet, in his intercession for his people, had linked himself with the nation in its apostasy (64.9 f.), not standing apart in critical condemnation. In this attitude of identification he was in good company (e.g. Ezra 9.6-15; Neh. 9.16-37; Dan. 9.4-20), and an example to all would-be intercessors. But God quickly makes it clear that there are two sharply differentiated classes: on the one hand, those who, like the prophet, were waiting upon Him in humility and faith, as we observed in yesterday's portion; on the other hand, those who worshipped Him in name only, whilst indulging in the practices of false religious cults (3 ff., 11). He illustrates the distinction by quoting from what was probably an ardent song of the vintage harvest (8), when the clusters of grapes were being sorted according to their quality. This decision as to the ultimate destiny of the two groups within the nation was not an arbitrary one. Grapes have no control over their condition, but people have, and these faithless Israelites had rejected God's advances over a lengthy period (1 f., 12).

Destruction, therefore, would come upon them (6 f., 11-15), but the godly would enjoy all the blessings of the Messianic age (9 f., 17-25), in which their former calamities would be forgotten.

Notes: The false worship of vs. 3-5,7,11 seems to combine elements from ancient Semitic heathenism and the Mesopotamian practices of spiriting and necromancy. The nature cults are indicated in 'sacrificing in gardens' (3, cf. 1.29 f.; 57.5 f., 66.17). V. 4a suggests consultation of the dead and possibly dream-oracles. 'Swine's flesh', prohibited in the Torah (Lev. 11.7), was connected with certain extreme celebrations in the worship of the Babylonian god, Ninurta. V. 11: 'Fortune' and 'Destiny' best rendered as the proper names of gods, Gad and Meni, known in Syria, Palestine and Egypt. They were probably astral deities of fate.

Isaiah 66

The True Temple

For an understanding of this chapter it is essential to bear in mind the two groups which we distinguished yesterday, the righteous remnant, and the mass of the people whose religion was depraved. The Temple was apparently not yet rebuilt (1, cf. 63.18; 64.11) but already many were regarding it in formal and material terms, as though it was God's house, to which He would be confined. It was a superstitious faith akin to that of the Israelites of Samuel's time, who took the ark into battle against the Philistines, thinking that thereby they would compel God to come and fight for them (1 Sam. 4.3-11). The prophet was not against the Temple worship (cf. 23), but like Solomon at the dedication of his magnificent sanctuary, he recognised that an almighty, universal God could not be confined within four walls (1 Kings 8.27). Amos, attacking the formal religion of his day, went so far as to declare that God was not to be found at any of the major sanctuaries, but the individual Israelite could still seek Him (Amos 5.5 f., cf. 4.4). So it has been in every age; the dwelling which the Lord, the Creator of all things, most desires is the humble and contrite heart (2, cf. 57.15).

The same dead formalism obtained in the acts of worship of these apostates. V. 3 sets four idolatrous acts alongside four authorised elements in the Israelite cultus. The meaning could be that the empty fulfilment of 'orthodox' religion is as unacceptable to Yahweh as rank heathenism, but more likely these idolatrous elements were superimposed upon the legitimate cultus. The Jews were completely indifferent to the God they professed to worship (4) and maltreated and mocked His true worshippers (5). But the vindication of the godly and the overthrow of idolaters would begin at the very spot where God's name was profaned (6). All the judgement about which the remainder of the chapter speaks concerns the opponents of the righteous remnant, but the Gentile nations, responding to the declaration of God's glory (19), would come to worship Him (23). This prophecy received a greater fulfilment when the Jews, perpetuating the same tragic policy of reliance upon the outward forms of religion, rejected Christ, whereupon the door of salvation was opened to the Gentiles (Acts 13.46 f.).

So our prophecy ends on the solemn note of judgement, never a pleasant or a popular subject, especially to a generation with easy standards. But the picture of a God who finally judges must not be misrepresented. In His patience and long-suffering He waits with outstretched arms (65.2). This element of divine grace is one of the distinctive elements in the O.T., as in the N.T. Equally so, judgement is an essential theme of the N.T., and at the end of this present age, Christ, whose gracious invitation to men is 'Come' (Matt. 11.28), will say to those who, in their wilfulness never really knew Him, 'Depart' (Matt. 7.23).

Questions for further study and discussion on Isaiah chs. 60-66

1. What do you understand by the 'glory of the Lord' (60.1)? With the help of a concordance trace its manifestation in Scripture.

2. In what ways is 61.1-4 representative of: (a) the prophet himself; (b) Jesus Christ; (c) the modern-day Christian?
3. What is the relationship between prayer and the sovereign will of God?
4. Using a concordance and a good Bible Dictionary (e.g. the New Bible Dictionary, IVF) trace the relationship between Israel and Edom (see note on ch. 63).
5. Beginning from the plea of 64.1, make a list of the times when God intervened decisively in the lives of individuals and nations. What lessons may we draw from this?

(30,463)

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