

Lesson 45 Isaiah 66:18-24 A Sign Among the Nations

Introduction

We have arrived at our final passage, not only of the Book of the Conqueror, but the final passage of the whole of Isaiah. We've experienced throughout Isaiah a tension between hope and judgment. That tension has been maintained in the last two chapters of the book; even highlighted by the chiastic structure we've been looking into. The structure of the text in chapters 65 and 66 has taken us from hope to judgment, to hope to judgment, to a central vision of hope in the New Heavens and New Earth, then back out again from judgment to hope, to judgment to hope. This structure expands on the tension in the Conqueror's Song in chapter 61, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me...to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of our God." Favor and vengeance, grace and wrath, hope and judgment.

God is gracious. And God is just. A sinful people that treats God lightly and considers His word with disdain should not – cannot - presume upon His compassion. But a sinful people aware of their state, repentant of their sin, crying to God for salvation, they can hope - should hope - in the promise of God's lovingkindness.

In our last lesson, we focused on the central promise of the chiasm – New Heavens and a New Earth, a new kind of everlasting environment where God's people will live in security and joy without sin or threat of violence. Moving from that center point back out we covered two types of judgment: judgment of those who use traditional religion hypocritically, and judgment of those who have turned completely from Old Covenant ritual, embracing the contemporary forms of spirituality in their society. In these two judgments, the paganism of the left and the religiosity of the right both are condemned.

That is where we ended our last lesson, but that is not the end of this chiastic message. As there was hope at the beginning for those who had not previously sought or known God (65:1), the chiasm ends here, in 66:18-21, with a parallel call to those who have not previously heard about God. This message of hope takes on a global scale as the invitation is propelled out to distant lands.

The end of the chiasm is not the end of the book. Three final verses heighten our scope even further. This in-gathering is the end of the age of fallen man, climaxing in Armageddon, the final conflict between good and evil.

I've organized this lesson into two main parts. In part 1, we'll address the two sections of the text, 66:18-21, and then 66:22-24. In part 2, we'll conclude our study of Isaiah by returning to our three big picture interpretation questions: 1. Who is the audience? 2. What further theological development is happening here? And 3. How does the gospel of Jesus Christ help me interpret this?

Starting with the text, I'll read the whole passage all together, and then we will address the two sections in turn. Our final text is Isaiah 66:18-24.

The Conclusion of Isaiah (66:18-24)

¹⁸ "For I know their works and their thoughts; the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and see My glory.

¹⁹ "I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations: Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory. And they will declare My glory among the nations. ²⁰ "Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the LORD, on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and on camels, to My holy mountain Jerusalem," says the LORD, "just as the sons of Israel bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. ²¹ "I will also take some of them for priests *and* for Levites," says the LORD.

- ²² “For just as the new heavens and the new earth Which I make will endure before Me,” declares
the LORD,
So your offspring and your name will endure.
- ²³ “And it shall be from new moon to new moon And from sabbath to sabbath,
All mankind will come to bow down before Me,” says the LORD.
- ²⁴ “Then they will go forth and see the corpses of the men who rebelled against me,
For their worm will not die And their fire will not be quenched;
And they will be an abhorrence to all mankind.”

A. Hope for the nations (18-21)

Verse 18 logically connects back to the previous verses. “For I know their works and their thoughts...” Who is God talking about? Whose works, whose thoughts does He know? The most natural connection is to the ones He is addressing in the second-to-last chiastic frame, which was verses 15-17.

- ¹⁵ “For behold, the LORD will come in fire And His chariots like the whirlwind,
To render His anger with fury, And His rebuke with flames of fire.
- ¹⁶ For the LORD will execute judgment by fire And by His sword on all flesh,
And those slain by the LORD will be many.
- ¹⁷ Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go Following one in the center,
to the gardens,
Who eat swine’s flesh, detestable things and mice, Will come to an end altogether,” declares the LORD.

In our larger passage, God speaks to the present wayward generation of Judah by describing what lies in the future for His people. A believing remnant of servants will be gathered into New Heavens and New Earth, while the apostate in Judah will suffer God’s blazing wrath. That includes both those who practice traditional religion hypocritically, and those who turn to the practices of their modern pagan societies. God knows them. He knows both what they do and what they think. He sees into the heart and soul. He is not misled. He knows. That’s how this passage begins, “For I know their works and their thoughts.”

And in this knowing of their thoughts and their actions God will, at some moment in the future, say, “It is time....It is time to gather all nations and tongues.” That’s not a gathering of Jews. That’s a gathering of all peoples. So, perhaps it is the knowing of the works and thoughts of His people that factors into God’s decision that it is time, or perhaps, we are supposed to expand that out and it is a knowing of His people, but it’s a knowing of all peoples: everyone’s works and thoughts, that moves Him to determine, “It is time.”

Time for what? He says, “It is time for all peoples to be gathered in ... They shall come and see my glory.” That sounds hopeful. But it is not necessarily hopeful. It is hopeful for those who turn back to God. It is not hopeful for those who see God and shake their fist at Him.

Verse 19 continues, “I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations...” I’ve got two questions for this verse. What is the sign and who are the “them” that the sign is set among? The answer to those questions are confusing if we take verse 19 to follow chronologically after verse 18. In verse 18, God responds to the apostasy of His people with a final in-gathering of all peoples, Jew and Gentile, coming to see His glory. According to chapters 60-62, that final gathering will be one of favor and vengeance, a final execution of God’s wrath followed by the eternal security of a new kind of Zion.

But in verse 19, God is going to send some out from the survivors. If we are thinking of the final in-gathering, who are the survivors? Or, more problematically, who are they going out to? The final battle has already happened. Evil, sin, rebellion has all been removed and a remnant has survived. Now there is no one among the nations for the survivors to go out to. The problem is resolved if we take verse 18 to introduce God’s decision to bring about the final in-gathering, and then we understand verses 19-21 as a process God initiates that leads up to that final in-gathering. So, in this process God is going to set a sign among survivors, and some of these are sent to the nations. People then see God’s glory, and afterwards the final in-gathering happens.

So, if the survivors are not survivors of a final Armageddon, who are they? What did they survive? In the latter half of Isaiah, mention of survivors most naturally leads the mind to think of Jews returning from Babylonian exile. I think that's what we are supposed to think. But we are not limited to thinking this applies only to the first generation back from Babylon. The succeeding generation of Jews who have returned to the Israel are conceivably all survivors.

And a long view like that is in keeping with the perspective of future prophecy we often get in Isaiah. Isaiah's vision of the far future allows for the rebuilding of the Temple, the first coming of Jesus, and the second coming of Jesus to all be concentrated in a short amount of text without clear distinction. It is that perspective we have talked about, of a towering mountain. And seen from a distance, it may look like one enormous peak, but up close we begin to discern a collection of peaks and valleys. So the term, "survivors," could refer to any generation after the return from Babylon.

God will set a sign among them, a sign among the survivors, that is some generation of Jews who have returned after Babylonian exile. What sign will be set among these survivors? The word, "sign," connects to the repeated idea of a standard or banner in Isaiah. It is a visible rallying point. The king has lifted his standard or sign, and his army - his people - flock to the sign. Interestingly, this sign is not set among the nations. This sign is first set among the survivors and then some of the survivors are sent with the sign out to the nations.

Before trying to identify the sign, let's consider the nations to which the survivors are sent.

¹⁹ "I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations: Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory.

Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Tubal, and Javan. How familiar do those names sound to you? Do you know where they are? I'm assuming they don't sound familiar at all, and that's the point. We are used to the smaller nations surrounding Israel, like Philistia, Moab, Edom, and Syria. We've heard those names before. And the major players to north and south - Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia. So where are Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Tubal, and Javan? They are the ends of the Earth, nations hardly known, far from Israel. That's where the survivors are sent, not necessarily to the exclusion of closer peoples. I imagine they'd go to the closer peoples first, but they continue on further out, you know: this is an emphasis that this message goes to the ends of the Earth.

Scholars looking into these places cannot identify them with certainty. Tarshish on the coast of Spain we have heard of because Jonah. That's where he was going: as far away as he could get. Put and Lud may have been in North Africa. Tubal may have been to the northeast in the Caucasus mountains. Meshech means, "those who draw the bow," which makes us think of the Persians or the steppe nomads beyond the Tigris and Euphrates. Javan was on the far coast of modern Turkey. And then, the last reference to distant islands takes our minds even further out beyond the known world.¹

So, a sign is set among survivors who are then sent out to the far nations. What is the sign? Something comes immediately to my mind, I don't know about your mind, but let's not rush to any conclusions. Let's think about what are some of the possibilities in the Old Testament context.

Isaiah uses the word, "sign," eleven times. A sign can be a symbolic action. In 20:3 Isaiah went naked or stripped down as a sign against Egypt and Cush. That's the only use of "sign" as symbolic action in Isaiah. A prophesied event can also be a sign, revealing the sovereignty of God. For example, in 37:30 God declared,

"This shall be the sign for you: you will eat this year what grows of itself, in the second year what springs from the same, and in the third year sow, reap, plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

¹ J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 689.

The prophecy becomes a sign, not because of some great miracle that's done, but the miracle of bringing these things about. After people live to see its fulfillment, people know that God has spoken truly. God declared the same kind of sign to Moses in Exodus 3:12 when he said,

Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.

So when Israel arrived on Mount Sinai, their presence there proved God's sovereignty to bring them out of Egypt just as He said he would. It was a sign that affirmed His word after it was accomplished.

Miracles, like the ones Moses performed in Egypt, are also sometimes called, "signs." They point us to the nature and sovereignty of God. Isaiah used the word, "sign," that way at the beginning and the end of the Book of the King. Ahaz was given this sign in 7:14,

"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel."

That could be the previous type of sign, a non-miraculous event prophesied ahead. But I understand, "maiden," to be rightly translated as, "virgin," making this a miraculous sign. Later, Hezekiah's sign at the end of the Book of the King was the miracle of the shadow moving the wrong direction on the steps. He was told in 37:30,

"This shall be the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do this thing that He has spoken."

A select few covenant markers are also called, "signs." God names the rainbow, "a sign," when He covenants with Noah after the flood (Genesis 9:13). Circumcision is given to Abraham (Genesis 17:11) and the Sabbath to Moses (Exodus 31:13), both as covenant signs. That's a very specialized use of the word that has not yet occurred in Isaiah, but we don't want to count it out as a possibility. You know, is this some new covenant sign that God is going to establish?

So how do we decide? What kind of sign will be set among the survivors before they are sent to the nations? The New Testament suggests a few interpretative options. If the prophesy of a final ingathering sets our minds on the end of days, we might think of the two witnesses in Revelation 11 who do great miracles in Jerusalem before dying and returning to life. That would be a miraculous sign set among the survivors.

Or better yet, we might think of Matthew 24:30,

"And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory."

That reference has the benefit of actually using the word, "sign." But I have already said I do not think we should be looking at the end of the end of days. I don't think "survivors" here points to a particular belief about tribulation and rapture that happens at the end of time. I think "survivors" here points to the Jews who have returned from Babylon, and the sign propels Jewish survivors outward in worldwide mission.

So what sign in Jerusalem propelled Jews to the outer ends of the Earth? I believe the sign is the cross of Jesus. That is the standard that God is going to raise among the survivors. And those survivors will not wait in Jerusalem for Gentiles to flock to God's banner. They will take the sign of the cross from Jerusalem, to Judea, and Samaria, and from there to the ends of the Earth (Acts 1:8).

I am not saying that Isaiah knew the sign was the cross of Jesus. It is not clear to me that God revealed that level of detail to Isaiah. Though it is worth pointing out that the cross has already been part of Isaiah's prophecy of the future, even if not seen with full clarity. God led him to prophesy in chapter 53 that the Suffering Servant would be led like a lamb to the slaughter, he would be pierced for our transgressions, he would be buried in a rich man's grave, he would justify the many, and bear their iniquities as a guilt offering. That's the cross, or what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

There is a two-part purpose of the mission to take the cross out to the ends of the Earth. First, in verse 19, God sends survivors out with the sign to people “that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory. And they will declare My glory among the nations.” So the first purpose is the worldwide declaration of God’s glory. It’s a worldwide worship. That’s purpose number one.

The second purpose described in verses 20-21 is tightly connected to the first purpose. God’s glory is proclaimed, so that people from every nation and every tongue will respond in faith. These who have believed constitute the in-gathering. These are the Gentiles who will stream into Zion.

²⁰ “Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the LORD, on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and on camels, to My holy mountain Jerusalem,” says the LORD, “just as the sons of Israel bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD.

²¹ “I will also take some of them for priests *and* for Levites,” says the LORD.”

They come in to God because missionaries went out to them. Those missionaries went out under the sign of the cross. That does not mean that they had the cross emblazoned on their tunics, or hanging on a chain around their neck, or this big flag of the cross raised above their heads. Going out under the sign of the cross means they proclaimed the cross of Jesus Christ. That was their message, their identity. This is what we’re about. We are about faith in the God who died on the cross. They proclaimed that God is so holy sin must be punished, and that God is so loving He took the punishment for us. They proclaimed the glory of God that is manifested in the cross, and the invitation of God that is enabled by the cross.

I take the reference in verse 20 that these missionaries will “bring in all your brethren” as a reference to Jew and Gentile, brethren by faith, not just by blood. That fits with the gathering of nations referenced in verse 18 and the presence of all humankind described in verse 23. And in this in-gathering they come by every means of transportation: planes, trains, and automobiles or, as Isaiah has said in his time: horses, chariots, camels, and mules. They are coming to the holy mountain of Jerusalem. It is holy because the Temple of God is there. Isaiah likens the in-gathering to faithful Jews bringing offerings of grain on a feast day. Faith in Jesus has made them clean. They come washed by blood and the Spirit. Some of these Jews and Gentiles will be taken as priests. That can’t happen! You can’t have Gentile priests! But it can happen! This is the new order of a New Covenant. They will not be Levites by birth, but Levites by declaration.

And with this wonderful newness of the clean Gentiles brought in together with the Jews and being declared priests, we conclude the message of hope that ends God’s chiastic response to the lamenting watcher. God will fulfill His promises - all His promises. We now turn from that note of hope to the climax of our final three verses of Isaiah. Here again exist hope and judgment. There are only two options at the end: worship God or be destroyed. Let’s read this again. This is Isaiah 66:22-24.

B. Worship or Destruction (22-24)

²² “For just as the new heavens and the new earth	Which I make will endure before Me,” declares the LORD,
²³ “And it shall be from new moon to new moon All mankind will come	So your offspring and your name will endure. And from sabbath to sabbath, to bow down before Me,” says the LORD.
²⁴ “Then they will go forth and see For their worm will not die	the corpses of the men who rebelled against me, And their fire will not be quenched;
And they will be an abhorrence to all mankind.”	

The dire tone at the end of Isaiah reflects the dire state of the generation he is writing to. The rejection of God is not something God takes lightly. Let’s review how we got here. The first third of the Book of the Conqueror started with an invitation to all people to worship, but then moved to a condemnation of the current generation in Judah and ended with a prayer of confession – “there is no justice among us.” In the middle section of the book, Isaiah gave us four Songs of the Conqueror. In each one, God or His intermediary took up the responsibility to establish justice on Earth. He girds

Himself with righteousness and salvation to provide for His people. But His justice also includes vengeance against His enemies. And the majority of Judah is not excluded from that vengeance. In the final third of the book, the watcher lifts up a very human prayer, lamenting the coming exile and Judah's seemingly hopeless state of sin. The lament became accusatory at points, blaming God for not doing more to save His people. God then responded with this chiasmic passage of chapters 65 and 66, which punctuated His resolve to both provide hope and to execute judgment.

The beginning of our last three verses verset of this short passage links back to the central statement of hope in that chiastic response. This is verse 22,

²² “For just as the new heavens and the new earth Which I make will endure before Me,” declares
the LORD,
So your offspring and your name will endure.

God reassures His people that He will indeed keep His promise. Their offspring will endure forever, as long as the New Heavens and New Earth endure, which will be forever. Their name will be wrapped up with His glory. The legacy of Israel will be a legacy of survivors sent out under the banner of God's sign, and bringing brothers and sisters from all nations into joyful worship of the one true God. Verse 23,

²³ “And it shall be from new moon to new moon And from sabbath to sabbath,

That is from one feast to the next feast and from one sabbath worship to the next sabbath worship...

“All mankind will come to bow down before Me,” says the LORD.

And that worship – this is the tough part - will include an awareness of God's wrath as just punishment towards the sin of those who persisted in rebellion. Verse 24,

24 “Then they (the worshipers) will go forth and see the corpses of the men who rebelled against me,
For their worm will not die And their fire will not be quenched;
And they will be an abhorrence to all mankind.”

That is an image of Hell, a truly awful image of Hell. And it's not an expression that stays in the Old Covenant. Jesus picks up and uses these very words in Mark 9:47–48.

⁴⁷ “If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, ⁴⁸ where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.”

The wrath of God is one aspect of God's glory. It is the fearful reality of true justice. God is holy, holy, holy. His holiness demands a just response to sin. He cannot ignore humankind's rebellion against Him. That rebellion is a rejection of goodness, a rejection of beauty, a rejection of truth. The rebellion of humankind results in corruption of mind and heart, and leads inevitably to wickedness and harm. Our worship of God in spirit and truth moves us to increasingly acknowledge the rightness of His wrath. That was Isaiah's experience when he saw God as God is. "Woe is me! I am undone, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among the people of unclean lips!" We might not understand the rightness of Hell at the beginning of our faith journey. We might not be ever able to wrap our emotions around the concept. But I suspect, the more we come to understand the reality of our own fallenness and the more we come to see the pure goodness of who God is, the more we will be able to recognize, at least intellectually, that God's just punishment of the wicked flows from the glory and goodness of His nature and it's right.

Establishing the glory of God's just wrath here at the end of Isaiah serves at least two other purposes. Seeing God's wrath highlights His grace, and seeing God's wrath creates a final warning: a right fear in regard to the destructive consequences of sin.

Throughout the book of Isaiah, the redemption of Israel has been described as a gift of true grace to a terribly lacking people. God steps in. God provides a way. Looking out over the field of human rebellion and destruction, not only on this final day, but stretching back through every generation,

the believer cannot help but to say, “If not for the grace of God, so too am I.” If God did not provide a path of return, if God did not open the eyes of my heart, I would have been the one shaking my fist at God. I would be laying on this field, separated from Him for all eternity.

And when the sweet call of grace falls on deaf ears, a fearful awareness of what comes next might be the only mercy that turns us from our stubborn path. Judah has refused repentance. The only just end of human rebellion is death, eternal separation, a worm that does not die, a fire that is not quenched. These last verses are saying, “Turn to his grace while today is still today.” Because a time is going to come when God says, “It is time.”

Concluding Isaiah with our three big picture interpretation questions

That’s the concluding message of Isaiah, invitation and warning. To conclude our series, let’s step back and consider these final verses in the larger context of the whole book. I am going to use our three big-picture interpretation questions to give some structure to my final thoughts, and I’m going to start with the question of audience: the audience for the whole book of Isaiah.

1. Who is Isaiah’s audience?

These three verses in 66:22-24 create a literary bookend for the whole of Isaiah through the use of a key word that links the first poetic verse of 1:2 with the last poetic verse of 66:24. The key word in Hebrew is, “pasa,” (פָּשַׁע) translated as, “revolt,” in 1:2 and, “rebelled,” or, “transgressed,” in 66:24.

1:2 “Sons I have reared and brought up, But they have revolted against Me.”

66:24 “Then they will go forth and see the corpses of the men who rebelled against me.”

We noted this idea at the beginning of the watcher’s prayer in 63:9-10.

“In His love and in His mercy He redeemed them, And He lifted them and carried them all the days of old.
But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit;
Therefore He turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them.”

This is the concept Oswalt called, “the most heinous of sins in Isaiah’s mind.” Two Hebrew words make up the word group, “mara,” (מָרָה) and, “pasa” (פָּשַׁע), appearing together only 13 times in Isaiah. And that relatively limited use of the word group makes it stand out particularly when it occurs in our first poetic verse and our last poetic verse. The repetition of the words in these places creates a link. And a closer look shows us there is more to the link than just the use of that one word.

The sin highlighted in 1:2 is characterized as filial rebellion. “My sons, the ones I reared and brought up, they have not known me.” Isaiah continues in chapter 1 with the image of a man beaten from head to foot with no sound spot at all on his body. He has turned from God and God has turned from him. Foreign powers ravage the country. God’s hope is that the child who turned away from His grace will see the pain that he’s caused and turn back, like the prodigal son experiencing the damage of his own sin and, finally, crying out, “I’m not worthy but make me a servant!”

Chapter 1 goes on to describe in more detail the nature of transgression in Israel. And what we see is that, even though the generation being described here at the end may have changed from the beginning, the description of their rebellious behavior is rather consistent.

1:10-17 charges its audience with hypocritical worship. They give lip service to God while oppressing their fellow man. The same charge is made at the end of Isaiah with the description of the false fast in chapter 58 and the empty sacrifices of 66:3. Isaiah goes on in chapter 1 to charge his audience with passionate rituals under pagan oaks and in pagan gardens. Similar charges to these also appear at the end. In 57:5, the people “inflamm themselves among the oaks, under every luxuriant tree, and slaughter children in the ravine.” And again in 66:17, they purify themselves to go to the gardens and eat detestable things, pigs, and mice. Isaiah begins and ends with a generation in Judah that syncretizes empty Old Testament ritual together with the contemporary pagan practices of the day, resulting in immoral sexual practices and oppressive behavior towards one another.

So, though the literary audience changes as we move from the time of Ahaz to the time of Hezekiah, the whole work speaks dead center to the present generation living in Judah at the end of Isaiah's ministry. There is a parallel between the beginning and the end, though it's not exactly synonymous. Isaiah is not repeating the exact same things at the end. There is actually a heightening effect. Isaiah began with sons and daughters rebelling. He is ending with all of humankind rebelling. Isaiah began with the rebels staggering as a wounded man. He ends with the rebels strewn dead on a field of battle.

All of Isaiah is spoken to the present generation. Isaiah has fulfilled the role a Covenant lawsuit prophet. And through the whole, he has developed the ideas he introduced in the first chapter. In 1:15-20 he brings this charge against Israel.

- 15 "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you;
Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen.
Your hands are covered with blood.

He then calls Israel to repentance.

- 16 "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Cease to do evil,
Seek justice,
Defend the orphan,
17 Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight.
Learn to do good;
Reprove the ruthless,
Plead for the widow.

He follows with a promise to make atonement for their sin.

- 18 "Come now, and let us reason together," Says the Lord,
"Though your sins are as scarlet,
Though they are red like crimson,
They will be as white as snow;
They will be like wool.

He concludes with a summary of the consequences for obedience versus rebellion.

- 19 "If you consent and obey, You will eat the best of the land;
20 "But if you refuse and rebel, You will be devoured by the sword."
Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Those themes trace through the three books of Isaiah. The Book of the King affirms the obligation for God's people to live righteous lives. The Book of the Servant highlights the inability of God's people to live righteously and promises atonement through the grace of the Servant. The Book of the Conqueror reaffirms God's call to righteousness. Grace is not freedom to sin. Grace is freedom from sin.

The last verses of the book paint for this rebellious generation of Judah the scene of their dreadful end if they do not turn from the path of rebellion. They will share in the end of all people who reject God. They will not be sons wounded, but enemies eternally separated in death. The prophecy of Isaiah stands as a witness against the fateful generation that refused to turn back and as an invitation to redemption for everyone that follows.

2. What further theological development does Isaiah make in the Book of the Conqueror?

Let's consider the second big-picture interpretation question, "What further theological development does Isaiah make in the Book of the Conqueror?" The last verses of Isaiah, not only bookend the whole of Isaiah, those last verses also create a bookend just for the Book of the Conqueror. And looking at how this is done highlights one of Isaiah's major theological themes.

Earlier, when we discussed theological development in Isaiah, I focused on two major themes. We are going to see a third now. The first major theme of theological development has been the nature of the Messiah. Human kings fail to establish righteous leadership. Human servants fail to live in righteous obedience. Human conquerors fail to execute righteous judgment. And yet, Isaiah promises a human king, the son of David, who is also a servant and a conqueror. But He is human! How can He succeed? He succeeds where no other can because he is not merely human. He is human. But He is also divine. He is mighty God. He is Wonderful Counselor. He is Prince of Peace. He is Eternal Father.

That's the first major theme that is developed through all three books. Who is the Messiah? The second major theme that we followed through all three books is the theme of human righteousness. In the Book of the King righteousness is demanded. In the Book of the Servant, righteousness is provided as a gift. In the Book of the Conqueror, that gift is shown not to be an excuse to ignore sin or continue in rebellion. It is both a means for forgiveness and a motive for obedience. The gift transforms.

This development of the idea of human righteousness was our second major theme. There is a third major theme developed through Isaiah. It is the theme of worship. A theme that pervades the whole of Isaiah, that is particularly present at the beginning and end of the Book of the Conqueror. Grace of the Book of the Servant is going to lead to the worship we see in the Book of the Conqueror.

Now consider the language of Old Covenant worship here in 66:23,

²³ "And it shall be from new moon to new moon And from sabbath to sabbath,
All mankind will come to bow down before Me," says the LORD.

And in the two verses just before this believing Gentiles from far nations are described as a "grain offering in clean vessels." Some are taken as priests and Levites. This is the language of Temple worship. And it is a heightening of the promise that we got at the beginning of the Book of the Conqueror in 56:4-7. They are "eunuchs and foreigners" who keep the Lord's sabbaths, who hold fast His Covenant and who delight in His name, are themselves given a new name, called to His holy mountain and invited into His Temple to offer sacrifice. Verse 7b,

^{7b} "For My house, a house of prayer will be called for all the peoples."

The invitation made at the beginning of the Book is realized at the end of the Book. And not only are the Gentiles invited to worship at the end. They are made priests and Levites according to the new order of a New Covenant.

We should not be surprised that Isaiah frames the call to live for God as an invitation to worship. Worship was central to his own calling: the calling in chapter 6 that we've referenced a lot.

¹ "In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. ² Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called out to another and said,

"Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory."

Isaiah sees God in His Temple, but the Temple cannot contain the glory of God. The whole Earth cannot contain the glory of God. He fills the Earth as He fills the Temple.

And when Isaiah sees God in worship, when he sees Him as He truly is, the reflected light of God gives him a clearer view of himself, "a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips." A man who cannot perform true and holy worship, not with his heart and the words coming out of his lips. And as a fellow sinful human being I easily focus on what is done for Isaiah. He cries out and he receives atonement. But Isaiah is not the central figure in Isaiah's vision. The atonement enables Isaiah to enter back into right worship of God. His lips are atoned. He can praise. He can recognize God as truly central to all things. God is the source of everything that is good, everything that is beautiful, everything that is holy and true. Turning from God is a turning from that goodness, that beauty, that truth. So however we rationalize our desires and priorities, a clear look into the face of God unmasks our idols as distortions of the good. Goodness can only be experienced through right relationship with God, through humble submission to Him as the center.

Worship invites us to see God, and seeing God protects our hearts from the natural drift to idolatry. This is what God says – 45:5,

^{45:5} "I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God.
^{42:8} "I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another,

Nor My praise to graven images.

We gather to worship every Sunday, to see God, and to remember that He truly takes central place in all of life.

We do not worship only to protect us from the idols of our heart. That is one reason we worship. Even more importantly, we worship to set our heart's desire on that for which it was created. There truly is a God-shaped void at the center of every human heart. Our deepest longings and needs can only find satisfaction in Him. He is our reward. We were created to exist in relationship with Him.

Isaiah experiences this reversal in his own life. He saw the glory of God, he immediately knew his own sin, he received the atonement of God and he humbly, joyfully submitted himself into obedient relationship with God. "Here I am, God! I am yours! Send me!"

Now at the end of Isaiah, we see a similar reversal on a global scale. Judah has turned from God. Humanity has turned from God. But God sets a sign among His people. They believe in Him and say, "Here we are! We are yours! Send us!" And God does send them out to the outer ends of Earth, where they proclaim His glory. And seeing this glory, many believe and turn back to worship God. They stream into Zion as grain offerings to the Lord.

The apostle Paul used the same language describing the right response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the letter to the Romans. At the beginning, in 1:22 he says that humankind has become wise in their own eyes, they've exchanged the glory of God for the created world, they have turned from God, and their foolish hearts were darkened. And God lets them go. He gives them over to their own sin. Paul then takes 11 chapters to explain the greatness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: how we're saved and we're brought back in, and we're empowered to live for God. Then, speaking to believers at the beginning of chapter 12, he is done with the argument, he is ready for life application. He exhorts them to respond to God's grace by giving their whole lives as an act of worship. We turn from worship. That's our greatest sin. The gospel brings us back to worship.

¹ "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is your spiritual service of worship.*"

The gospel is a way back to worship.

3 How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me to understand this text?

And so we come to the final interpretation question and the conclusion to our series on Isaiah. The final big-picture interpretation question is this, "How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me to understand this text?" How does He fulfill what we are reading about now right now, here in Isaiah? My reference to Paul just now is one example. The Gospel helps us to understand all of life as a turning away from worship and then turning back to worship. John gives us more help in interpreting this passage.

John is famous for his use of the word, "sign." He describes seven signs in the first half of his Gospel. These point towards the supreme sign of the cross in the last half of Gospel. The first seven signs are miracles of Jesus that tell us something about His nature. In the purpose statement of John, at the end in 20:30-31, John tells us,

"Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."

The signs help us to believe in the name of Jesus. Believing in the name of Jesus results in life. John wants us to experience life. The name of Jesus refers to the true nature of Jesus. That is what name means in John. The name of Jesus is the true revelation of Jesus. That's where we find life and coming to see Him and know Him as He truly is. Understanding the name of Jesus is closely connected to seeing the glory of Jesus. That's the revelation of His name. And that's the language of the prologue, John 1:14,

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

So this cluster of words is all connected with knowing God as He has revealed Himself to be: c.

We encountered this same cluster in Isaiah, in the same way as references to the true nature of God. I just earlier quoted 42:8.

⁸ “I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another,
Nor My praise to graven images.

Another example is in 59:19,

¹⁹ “So they will fear from the west the name of the LORD
And His glory from the rising of the sun,
For He will come like a rushing stream Which the wind of the LORD drives.”

Now, these words - “name, glory, light, seeing” - are also connected to the concept of signs in John. He makes an explicit connection right after Jesus performs the first sign of turning water to wine at a wedding. John 2:11,

¹¹ “This beginning of *His* signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.”

So the sign helps people to see the glory of who Jesus really is. There is another conceptual link between John and Isaiah in the way John uses his three famous “lifted up” statements. So, in Isaiah God is regularly lifting up His standard, or banner, so that His people will see and then know it’s God and they’ll stream to Him. In John 3:14-15, something else is lifted up.

¹⁴ “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”

In John 8:28,

²⁸ “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *He*, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.”

And in John 12:32,

³² “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.”

Jesus ought to be lifted up in praise as the Messianic King, so that people will see His glory. Ironically, He is lifted up in shame on a cross, but that cross proves to reveal His true glory: the glory of the Suffering Servant who gives Himself to justify the many. On the cross, justice and love kiss. The cross become a sign showing us who Jesus really is and a standard to which men will rally. That was the last quote,

“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.”

The cross is the sign and standard. Did John make these connections to Isaiah intentionally? Did the theology of Isaiah help John to understand things that Jesus said and did? Well, there is really good reason to believe that John was very well aware of Isaiah’s theology. John’s Greek word for “sign”, “σημεῖον,” is the same word Jewish scholars used in the Septuagint when translating Isaiah’s word for “sign.” More importantly, John quotes Isaiah directly. And the quotes appear right after this third reference to Jesus being lifted up. This is what John writes in 12:36-40.

³⁶ “While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light.” These things Jesus spoke, and He went away and hid Himself from them. ³⁷ But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him. ³⁸ *This was* to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: “LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT? AND TO WHOM HAS THE ARM OF THE LORD BEEN REVEALED?” ³⁹ For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, ⁴⁰ “HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART, SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED AND I HEAL THEM.”

There are two quotes there. The first quote is from Isaiah 6, which is all about Isaiah seeing the glory of God. The second quote is from Isaiah 53, which is all about the Suffering Servant dying for us, pierced through for our transgressions.

John absolutely saw Jesus in Isaiah. John uses these quotes to affirm the hardness of heart Jesus experienced on Earth. He came to His own but His own rejected Him. The darkness hates the light. John is not surprised that many Jews turned away from Jesus, and eventually crucified Jesus. Isaiah prophesied that kind of hardness.

John's quotes do not only affirm the negative majority response. He goes on to affirm the positive minority response represented by Isaiah. That's in the next verse, John 12:41, "These things Isaiah said because he saw his glory, and he spoke of him."

This is John's conclusion. Isaiah saw the glory of Jesus Christ in his prophetic visions. Isaiah is writing about Jesus. I think we can be quite convinced that the sign of Isaiah in 66:19 is the cross of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Jesus Christ helps us to interpret the end of Isaiah, because the end of Isaiah is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

¹⁹ "I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations: Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Tubal and Javan, to the distant coastlands that have neither heard My fame nor seen My glory. And they will declare My glory among the nations. ²⁰ "Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the LORD, on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and on camels, to My holy mountain Jerusalem," says the LORD, "just as the sons of Israel bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. ²¹ "I will also take some of them for priests *and* for Levites," says the LORD.

The Great Commission precedes the final in-gathering. Jesus is the divine-human Messianic King. The King stepped down from His throne of glory to die on a cross as the Suffering Servant. He scorned its shame. He revealed His glory. He provided our atonement. He will come again as the Anointed Conqueror to establish final justice on Earth. This is the wonderful promise of the year of favor for all who believe and the terrible promise of the day of vengeance for all who persist in rebellion. God will be glorified in all things. He will be glorified in His mercy. He will be glorified in His judgment.

²² "For just as the new heavens and the new earth Which I make will endure before Me," declares the LORD,

So your offspring and your name will endure.

²³ "And it shall be from new moon to new moon And from sabbath to sabbath,
All mankind will come to bow down before Me," says the LORD.

²⁴ "Then they will go forth and see the corpses of the men who rebelled against me,
For their worm will not die And their fire will not be quenched;
And they will be an abhorrence to all mankind."

If you would like the text of this lesson with some reflection questions or if you would like the overview chart or other resources that go with our study of Isaiah then check out our resource page at observetheword.com. You can also find there our previous series on the book of Romans, the Pentateuch, the Gospel of John and the Book of Acts.