

Isaiah 1-5

Orientation talk by Lee Gatiss

This year in Central Focus and Homegroups we are going to be studying the book of the prophet Isaiah. Tonight we're actually going to dip our toes into the water and get started with chapters 1-5, before next week we have a proper introductory talk to the whole book from David Jackman. I thought it would be good to actually get our hands dirty and see what Isaiah sounds like before David comes to give us more of an overview of the whole book.

Because Isaiah is 66 chapters long, we're not going to be able to study it in minute detail a chapter or a paragraph at a time. That would take a year or two, and we're going to try and do it all in two terms. So rather than an exhaustive and detailed study of every verse in the book we're going instead to be getting an overview of Isaiah as a whole, while not neglecting to look at some important details.

It will be like going on a walking tour of the Lake District perhaps, so we'll stop every so often for a talk from the tour guide who will orientate us to where we are and point out some of the interesting features on the landscape. Then we'll look at some of the more interesting flora and fauna for ourselves in more detail.

So there will be a mixture of orientation talks and Bible studies. What we're going to do today for instance is, I'll talk for 10 minutes or so about Isaiah chapters 1-5 as a whole, so that we are orientated to this section of the book, and then we'll split into our groups to look in more detail at just chapter 5.

In a couple of week's time we'll be looking at chapter 6 and that will just be a group study. Then the next one will be a short talk again, on chapters 7-10, followed by a study on chapter 9 within that larger section.

So we'll have a mixture of short talks and group studies. If you want to know more about what's happening each week, there's a full run down of it all on the Central Focus website at www.centralfocus.org.uk, or on paper if you prefer that (just ask Mike, our Central Focus administrator, if you don't have access to the web).

Also on the website, or on your tables, will be prep questions for each study which you can look at and try to answer in advance of each week's studies. It really helps to get more out of our time together on Wednesdays if you've had a look at what we'll be studying and tried to think a little bit about it before you arrive. I know it's not always realistic to do several hours of advanced thinking before the study, but if you can at least have read the passage beforehand and maybe looked at the questions, that would be great. As I said, the more you do the more you'll get out of each week.

So without any further ado, let's pray and then dive in to Isaiah chapters 1-5.

PRAY.

The first verse tell us some historical information. It locates the book in the middle of the 8th Century BC. The kingdom of King David has split into two, with Israel in the North and Judah in

the South. The kings mentioned in verse 1 are all from the House of David, who reign in Jerusalem where the Temple of God stands. All this is straightforward.

The first puzzling thing about the book of Isaiah is that it starts with chapter 1. Because, if you have ever read any of this book before you will know that chapter 6 seems to be the record of the call of Isaiah. But if chapter 6 is all about how Isaiah became a prophet and was sent by God, then shouldn't it come first?

Well, maybe. But chapters 1-5 are not meant to be read as if they all refer to what happened *before* Isaiah became a prophet. Chapters 1-5 are the introduction to the book, the preface, or the backdrop to what comes next. In other words, these opening chapters ease us into the message of the whole book. This isn't just a collection of things Isaiah said and did arranged chronologically like a diary. It's a book with a message, carefully arranged in a particular way and in a particular order for a particular reason.

So what is the structure of Isaiah's introduction? Let's skip through it a bit and have a look. Well, broadly speaking, these chapters can be split up into five bits just as I have indicated on the handout. Chapter 1 is a stinging rebuke to the people whose sins are (according to 1:18) like scarlet, and as red as crimson.

The faithful city (verse 21) has become a harlot – in other words, God's people, even in the capital city of Jerusalem, are no more virtuous and upright than a brazen prostitute.

Then in the first 5 verses of chapter 2 there is a note of hope – “in the last days” it says, things will be gloriously improved. But then we sink back down very quickly into this long section between 2:6 and 4:1 where the sins of God's people are brought into the light and exposed again.

Then in 4:2-6 we again have a note of hope. 4:3 – “those who are left in Zion, who remain in Jerusalem, will be called holy...” and so on. Then the last chapter, chapter 5, is a song about a vineyard. 5:1 – “I will sing for the one I love, a song about his vineyard.” This is God's vineyard, his garden, and he cares for it tenderly and carefully. But it yields no fruit and goes sour.

This is, of course, a song about God's people. 5:7 explains it to us – “the vineyard of the Lord Almighty is... the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight.” And yet, the verse goes on, when God comes to look around his lovingly cultivated garden what does he find? Verse 7 again, “He looked for justice, but all he saw was bloodshed. He looked for righteousness, but all he heard were cries of distress.”

And so the introduction ends with judgment and woe. 5:8 “Woe to you...!” and verse 11 – “Woe to those...” and verse 18, and verse 20 and verse 21 and verse 22 – “woe, woe, woe, woe!”

So you'll notice in that quick run through that there seems to be this structure of sin and judgment followed by hope, followed by sin and judgement again followed by hope again, and then the whole section finishes on a downbeat note of judgment and woe. The question it leaves us with then, is will darkness have the last word? Is sin and judgment the end of the matter?

So there's one way we can get orientated – by looking at the structure of the section and how Isaiah 1-5 pans out as we go through it. Once we've done that, it seems that there are three main themes to pick up here.

So on our roadmap of Isaiah 1-5 we've sketched out the broad outline of our route and we know it goes from sin and judgment to hope and back again and then finally ends on judgment. Now we'll look at these three major themes of the chapters – the big roads, the motorways of Isaiah 1-5. Naturally, we will leave the A roads and the B roads of detail for another time, and you can look at some of those in chapter 5 in a few minutes.

What are the three main themes then? The first is the sin of God's people. What have they been up to? This is described in various ways throughout chapters 1-5. The centre of it all is in 1:2 – *“Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.”* God's people have rebelled against God.

Notice that it is all directed against God's people. These verses are not directed against the world and its sin. That would be understandable of course, because the unbelieving world rebels against God all the time. No, this is worse because it is God's children, his own special people, who have rebelled against him. That's where the real bite of these chapters is. They describe sins which we believers are not immune from. And there are some quite uncomfortable verses...

Such as 1:10 where God even compares us with Sodom and Gomorrah! Cast your eyes over 1:10-17...

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah! “The multitude of your sacrifices--what are they to me?” says the LORD.

*“I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. ... **onto verse 13** Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations--I cannot bear your evil assemblies. **Verse 15** When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood...*

In other words, God is not interested in all our outward religious rituals. There's no point coming to church and saying all the right things if our hearts are set against God, and we ignore the things which are more important to him – things like justice.

And what about 2:6 where Isaiah says to God: *“You have abandoned your people, the house of Jacob. They are full of superstitions from the East; they practise divination like the Philistines and clasp hands with pagans.”* That's a word for today's church too isn't it? How much of our “Christianity” is really just a load of superstition, and magic, thinly disguised as biblical religion? Do we have our own equivalent of magic charms? Certain items or rituals or incantations maybe? We know that the world these days enjoys “superstitions from the East” but what about *us*, what about the Church? Have we been infected with these things without realising it?

The second major theme, another big road that runs all the way through these chapters is the theme of judgment. Look for instance at what God says awaits his disobedient people in 5:13 –

“Therefore my people will go into exile for lack of understanding; their men of rank will die of hunger and their masses will be parched with thirst.” And according to 3:9 – *“Woe to them! They have brought disaster upon themselves.”*

So Isaiah exhorts the people, in view of all this, 2:22 – *“Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?”* There is only one person to trust, and that is God. Only he can be relied on when the day of final judgment comes. This is a theme which we’ll return to again and again in Isaiah – trusting God and him alone for salvation.

And the third big road or theme through these chapters is the theme of restoration. Yes, there is sin. Yes, it will be judged. But for those who trust in God there will be a way through. Look for instance at 1:18 – *“Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”* God can cleanse us from sin. There will be survivors when he judges.

Look for instance at 1:7 – *“Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire... and verse 9... unless the Lord Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom and Gomorrah.”* In other words, judgment day will be devastating. Without God we’d literally be history, like Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities that were judged by God and disappeared from the face of the planet forever. But God will save some people. There will be survivors.

The restoration, the salvation comes *through* judgment. People are not saved by side-stepping judgment. No, sins must be punished. God must do what is right. There must be justice in the universe, and God will see that evil and sin are judged. That’s what we all want, after all.

Until we realise that this means *we too* must be judged for *our* sin. And then we cry out for mercy, as Isaiah himself will do in chapter 6: *“Woe to us! We are ruined!”*

Unless, of course, someone can rescue us from judgment. Unless someone else could endure the consequences of our sin instead, so that we can survive. Unless someone without any sin of his own could take the punishment for our sin, so that we can survive God’s judgment.

Isaiah will unpack what that looks like in the next 60 chapters.

So there’s a short orientation to what’s happening in these opening chapters of the book. We’re going to split into our groups now and look a little more carefully at chapter 5 on its own.

SPLIT INTO GROUPS...

Study Notes

Isaiah 5

Introduction

Broadly speaking, chapters 1-5 look like this:

Chapter 1 *sin and judgment*

- 2:1-5 **hope**

* 2:6-4:1 *sin and judgment*

- 4:2-6 **hope**

Chapter 5 *darkness...*

The main themes of this introduction to the book are the sin of God's people, God's judgment upon them, and also their restoration. These chapters give us the backdrop to the whole book, as well as Isaiah's call in chapter 6.

Main Point and Purpose

God ruthlessly exposes sin and must act against it, even in his own beloved people, in accordance with his covenant. The purpose of this chapter is to justify God's anger against his people, and humble them.

Details

1-7 This is a song about unrequited love. Something has gone badly wrong. God's generous, protective provision (v.1 – 2a) has been spurned and ignored (v.2b – 4) so judgment must come (v.5 – 6). Verse 7 is the key explanatory verse. See also Jer 2:21 or Ps 80:8 – 17 for similar use of the vine metaphor as a picture of Israel.

8-10 The rest of the passage (verses 8-23) is split into six 'woes' (laments) which describe the bad fruit and the show us the reason for God's judgment, followed by two consequences (verse 24 and verses 25-30). Note the reason for, and the nature of, the judgment in each 'woe'. The first woe is on those who accumulate personal wealth by oppression. As so often, covenant stipulations (e.g. Lev 25:23-24 & 35-43) lie behind all this; Isaiah is showing them the consequences of rejecting God's Law.

11-17 The second "woe", on those who use their accumulated wealth purely to indulge and entertain themselves without regard for God. The coming judgment upon them is described as "exile" in verse 13, a humiliation for the chosen people. But note also promises of what lies beyond judgment (v.16 – 17).

18-19 Woe to those harnessed to sin, who doubt God will come to judge them.

20-23 Three more woes on those who reverse God's moral absolutes, on those who feel completely self-sufficient in knowledge (especially considering their lack of it, verse 13), and on those stupefied by self-indulgence into acting unjustly.

24-30 The core problem behind all the sins of Israel is that they have rejected God's word, his Law, his covenant. For such unrepentant people judgment must and will come by earthquake (verse 25) and invasion (verse 26). Verse 25c is repeated in 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4 - God's hand is stretched out to judge. The invader is identified as Assyria in 7:17 – 18; 8:4 – 8; 10:5.

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. It is vital to notice that God acts in accordance with his previously stated covenant, and has not simply decided to judge the people suddenly and arbitrarily. They enjoyed the blessings of the covenant (the land, protection, prosperity etc.) without keeping its stipulations. Isaiah is merely enforcing the covenant.

2. Jesus uses the image of the vine in Mark 12:1-9, although his focus is on the rejection by the people of the messengers (like Isaiah) who were sent to the vineyard by God. His point is that this behaviour leads ultimately to the rejection of the Son (i.e. Jesus himself) which brings God's judgment and the giving of the vineyard to the gentiles. The rejection of God's word in Isaiah 1-5 is typical of the rejection which leads to Jesus' crucifixion.

3. Jesus also uses the vine imagery in John 15:1-8, where the point is that *he* is the true Israel, and fruitfulness is only possible in union with him. Since it is best not to confuse studies with too many cross-references, however, it is probably best to stick to Mark 12 to show a New Testament application.

4. It is too easy to forget that the sins described in these verses are committed by God's people, not outsiders, and are in direct and flagrant contradiction to his revealed word. The application is to *us* as the church, as Christians, and not to the non-Christian world which does not know God's word to start with. The Old Testament reveals our sin (see Romans 3:20). This ought to humble us – we who, like the people of Isaiah's day, have had such privileges from God but not always been fruitful as a result - rather than lead to self-righteous finger-wagging at others.

Study Notes

Isaiah 6

Introduction

Chapter 6 does not necessarily come chronologically after chapters 1-5, as if Isaiah spoke the opening words of judgment and was only then called as a prophet. But his call by the holy God is best understood against the backdrop of the state of the nation outlined in the opening chapters. This is a very familiar passage, so we must be careful to attend to what the text actually says rather than what we might remember it said. There is often a surprise when we look again carefully at a familiar part of the Bible because (hopefully!) we have learned more since the last time we looked at it, and may therefore see more of its significance and impact than previously.

Main Point and Purpose

The gloriously holy God commissions a sinful but forgiven prophet to pronounce judgment upon and to harden his sinful people. This passage explains a major purpose of Isaiah's ministry which is reflected in the contents of the next 30 or so chapters, as well as giving us a glimpse of human interaction with the holy God.

Details

1-4 This is the first chronological note since 1:1. In a time of transition, at the end of an anti-climactic reign (see 2 Chronicles 26 for a brief record of Uzziah's reign and his brush with the holiness of God) Isaiah sees God in the Temple. He is the true glorious, majestic, exalted king (unlike Uzziah who ended life as an isolated leper). The thrice-repeated "holy" indicates exceptional, unique holiness rather than being merely a veiled intimation of the Trinitarian nature of God. Holiness means separate, sacred, set apart, hallowed, awe-some. When applied to God it has ethical connotations, referring to his purity and perfection (very different from Israel!). God's glory being revealed to the whole earth (verse 3) and not just to the small nation of Israel is a repeated theme of Isaiah (see 11:9-10; 24:16; 40:5).

5 Isaiah realises that not only is the sinful nation scuppered when exposed to the Holy God (see the "woes" of chapter 5, and reference to God's holiness in 5:16, 24), but he too is part of the problem as a sinful man (he singles out his lips perhaps because he is already someone who speaks publicly). Note the continuation of the theme from 5:15 of humility before God as the only right response to him, and the rightness of his judgment (see also Romans 3:4, 19).

6-7 Isaiah's guilt is taken away and sin atoned for by means of something from the altar in the Temple, applied specifically to the area where he felt his guilt most acutely in verse 5.

8-10 From "woe" to "go"... Isaiah volunteers and is commissioned by God to go as a prophet to God's people. But his message is one of judgment and hardening rather than of forgiveness and illumination. His ministry will not just wash over people, it will also cause them to be even more hardened or dulled (verse 10) and make them less likely to seek healing for their spiritual malaise (see 1:5-6). Isaiah 28:9-13 is seen by some as a sign that Isaiah's message was considered too simplistic and childish for sophisticated (rebellious!) Israel. The "us" of verse 8 is perhaps reminiscent of Genesis 1:26 where God deliberates within himself (sometimes seen, again, as a vague intimation of the non-unitarian nature of God).

11-13 Isaiah wonders how long he will have to continue with such a downbeat message, and whether there might be an end to it or a change of key to his message. God's answer is that such a message will be required until judgment has all but wiped out the nation. A stump it seems will remain; this image returns in 11:1 when the messiah arises from "the stump of Jesse."

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. John 12:36-43 quotes Isaiah 6:10 and concludes that Isaiah saw the glory of *Christ* (who is, therefore, in John's eyes God). John also says that the reaction of many against Jesus was a fulfilment of what Isaiah said concerning Israel's dull unbelieving hearts.

2. Jesus also quotes Isaiah 6:9-10 in the middle of the Gospel accounts of the parable of the sower (Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8) for similar reasons. In that sense what happened in Isaiah's day was typical of what happened in Jesus' day (as we also saw with the comparison of Isaiah 5 and Mark 12). It is also typical of people's reactions today when the gospel is proclaimed: they do not hear it properly, or react to it as they should.

3. God's holiness and majesty are emphasised here, and taken up throughout the book in the common title given to God in Isaiah, "the Holy One of Israel" (e.g. Isaiah 5:19, 12:6, 17:7, 30:11, 41:16 etc etc etc). This is not the first time he is called "holy" (it occurred previously in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers and turns up again often in Ezekiel and Psalms). It is in fact the word most often used in the Bible to describe God (compared to the two descriptions of him as "love" in 1 John 4:8, 16).

4. Certain other biblical themes are highlighted here. The Apostle Peter's reaction to seeing Jesus' glory displayed in his powerful command over nature (Luke 5:8) was similar to Isaiah's: he realised Christ was utterly different to him and was suddenly highly conscious of his sin. There are echoes of Isaiah 6:3 in the heavenly scene of Revelation 4:8. The necessity of divine initiative to make atonement for sinful humanity is also made clear.

ISAIAH 7-10

Orientation talk by James Linforth

Introduction

We're about to study Isaiah 9:1-7 this week and Chapters 11-12 next week, and so the idea of this talk is to set the context for that study by having a quick overview of chapters 7-10.

1. Who will the King trust?

You may remember that David drew our attention to a key verse in Chapter 7, indeed a key verse for the whole book. It's 7:9b, where Isaiah is addressing King Ahaz of Judah, the Southern Kingdom. Isaiah warns Ahaz, **"If you are not firm in faith you will not be firm at all"**.

It's the political situation which has brought the issue of trust to a head. Judah's two Northern neighbours, Syria and Ephraim (which is the Northern Kingdom of Israel), are threatening to attack, and King Ahaz and the people of Judah are terrified. Isaiah warns Ahaz not to fear these two Kings because the Lord says in v 7 that the invasion shall not come to pass, but that's coupled with the warning "if he is not firm in his faith, he will not be firm at all".

It's often the thing that we are most frightened of which exposes our unbelief, and this seems to be true in Ahaz's case. If we read on we see that the threat of invasion exposes Ahaz's lack of trust in God, because in 7v10 God graciously offers Ahaz a sign that he will keep his promise to protect them. But in verse 12 Ahaz, who was recently described by Rachel Wallis as "a disaster area", refuses to ask for the sign because he is unwilling to rely solely on God's promises of protection.

In this respect Ahaz is typical of his people. You may remember that Isaiah 1 and 2 starts the book off with a withering indictment of God's people, a sinful nation laden with iniquity, a harlot city, utterly estranged, and in Chapter 2:22, God tells his people to "stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?" It's not only Ahaz with the trust problem, it's the nation at large, and that's been the pattern right from the start. If only God's people could live under the rule of a wise and Godly king who would help them to obey so that they might receive the promised blessings. Back in 2 Samuel 7 King David was promised that one of his descendants would rule for ever, but now it seems that the House of David is about to be wiped out.

Well in verse 14 God says he is going to give Ahaz a sign even though he has refused God's offer of one, and in verse 14 we are rather cryptically introduced to a child figure who shall be called "Immanuel", or "God with us". The commentaries suggest that the best understanding of this is that it's a picture of Jerusalem, the virgin daughter of Zion, giving birth to a child which is the remnant who will survive the judgment. We haven't really got time to unpack that tonight, but that interpretation makes sense of the "God with us" meaning of Immanuel, as the remnant are those whom God is with. Although that sounds hopeful it's important to see that the birth of the child is actually a sign of judgment. In verse 16 God says before the "child" reaches maturity the King of Assyria will have overrun Syria and the Northern Kingdom, and in verse 17 Ahaz is told God's judgment in the form of the Assyrian King will move on into Judah. In fact this terrible judgment is described in the remainder of Chapter 7 where the land which was supposed to flow with milk and honey is a wasteland of briars and thorns.

Before we move on from the sign of the Immanuel child, I just want us to note that there is a "child thing" going on Chapters 7-10. In 7v3 Isaiah takes his son named Shear-jashub to deliver the warning to Ahaz, which seems a bit of random detail until we see that his name means "a remnant shall repent". So in amongst the terrible judgment which is promised in Chapter 7 God is letting it be known that there is a means by which his promises will be fulfilled, the remnant of his people. Could the perfect King spring from this remnant?

There's also another child mentioned Chapter 8 verse 3 where Isaiah has another son, *Maher-shalal-hash-baz*. Poor kid. His name is another sign to Judah of what's going to happen – the name means, "the prey hastens". It seems that Judah is getting a final public warning, but despite we see shortly

afterwards in Chapter 8 verse 5 that the people have refused to stand firm in faith. In 8 verse 5 God's way is described as the gentle waters of Shiloah in verse 5, and is contrasted with a description of the mighty Assyrian army sweeping on into Judah like a flood in verse 8.

So, who will the King trust? Ahaz will not trust God, and the result is judgment. He and those like him who will not stand firm in faith will not stand at all. But even in the midst of this terrible judgment there is hope, because in verse 8 the flood will only reach up to the neck. In other words the land, which is described as belonging to Immanuel, will not be destroyed completely.

But who will form part of the "God with us" remnant? Who is it that will survive this flood of judgment? Read on as Chapter 8 tells us.

2. Who will trust the King?

So we've looked at who will the King trust. We're now going to look at who will trust God, the real King who whistles for the King of Assyria and he comes running. Judgment or salvation will result depending on your response, or as 8v14 puts it, God will either be your sanctuary or your stumbling block.

During the rest of Chapter 8, God makes it clear what are the consequences of failing to trust him alone. If the people will trust man they will be devastated by Assyria. If they trust God they will be saved, and this is therefore the characteristic of the remnant. The two groups within the visible nation of Judah are starkly revealed in 8:11-22, which is the immediate backdrop to tonight's study. There are only two groups:

- The first group is described in verses 11 and 13, they are those like Isaiah who do not walk the way of the people; instead of fearing Israel's enemies they fear God – as v17 says, they will wait and hope in God
- The other group, described in verses 14 & 15, consists of those who fear the conspiracies of their enemies and who stumble over God because they will not put their trust in him alone. In verse 19 it describes them turning to others instead of God, and the blackest darkness is reserved for them... This is the backdrop to tonight's study and I hope you will be able to see how it fits in with the themes that we have been looking at so far.

The chapters after tonight's study are very similar to the chapters before. However one feature of this second section is an additional section in 10:v5-19, where Isaiah pronounces God's judgment on the King of Assyria. The point of this is to tell us who is really the king, because after God has used the proud and arrogant King of Assyria God will knock him of his pedestal. The agents of God's judgment will themselves be judged.

So, to conclude:

Who will the king trust? It's God or man, salvation or judgment. Everything is at stake, and the bulk of the people are heading for darkness and distress.

Who will trust the King? The remnant, God with us, will live to see hope after judgment because they trust the real King, the Lord of Hosts.

It is against this backdrop that we will look at Chapters 9:1-7, and hopefully we'll see all these ideas linking up, especially as we read it with our NT goggles on!

Study Notes

Isaiah 9:1-7

Introduction

There will be a talk on Isaiah 7-10 at Central Focus. This section introduces us to “Immanuel” – the figure through whom God will bring hope to his people in a time of darkness. Isaiah 7:9b gives us a theme verse for the book: we must stand firm in our faith, trusting God and no other because “God is with us”. The impending destruction of the Northern kingdom of Israel by Assyria is prophesied in 8:1-10 but it will not overwhelm Judah for “God is with us.”

Main Point and Purpose

God encourages his people to rejoice and trust in his plan to bring about their ultimate deliverance through a divine-human rescuer and king. The prophecy is stunningly fulfilled 700 years later in Jesus Christ, but its purpose is to bring joy and light in a time of darkness and gloom, not just to amaze us with prophetic foresight.

Details

1-2 For the people facing the gloom of God’s judgment in Isaiah 8:20-22 as a result of their lack of faith and their following of superstitious religion, God will bring light out of darkness (as he did in Genesis 1). There will be a new era of hope for the Northern parts of Israel which at present have only condemnation to look forward to. Note that the “former time” is the time of the Assyrian invasion of Israel prophesied in 8:1-10, which could actually be a *future* event at this point for Isaiah’s first hearers (although clearly in *our* past). The tribal territories of Zebulun and Naphtali will be the first to feel the force of the Assyrian invaders from the North, but Isaiah speaks of a hope for them beyond this, in a “latter time”. This perspective is interesting for later in the book, when Isaiah will prophesy an exile to *Babylon* for *Judah* and then a return from exile beyond that. Clearly he can discern several stages of divine action in the future and not just the next immediate event. “Galilee of the *Gentiles/nations*” may refer to an earlier failure to drive out the Canaanites (see Judges 1:30-33)

3-5 Verse 3 promises a renewed growth in numbers and happiness for the Northern tribes, while verses 4 and 5 (both beginning with “For...”) tell us the causes of such blessings. God will remove the oppressive rule of foreigners in a miraculous way (hence reference to the amazing divine deliverance of the people of *Midian* in the days of Gideon recorded in Judges 6-7, also mentioned in Isaiah 10:26). Verse 5 may be prophesying an end to the military might of Assyria or, better, an end to war itself, in the days of the “Prince of Peace” (see Micah 4:3 for a similar idea in a prophecy from around the same time).

6-7 Verse 6 gives the ultimate reason why God’s people will be able to rejoice and grow (verse 3): it is because of this divine-human child (remember Immanuel was first introduced as a baby in 7:14) who will reign on David’s throne. He is given four titles; three express his divinity, and one (“Prince of Peace”) expresses his role, which is then further elaborated in verse 7. Clearly although this prophecy is directly linked to the historical predicament of Israel in chapter 8, it foresees an everlasting fulfilment in the far distant future.

* He is a “wonderful counsellor”; the word “wonder” is only ever applied to God and the things he does (see e.g. Isaiah 28:29).

* He is “mighty God” a title again given to God himself, in the very next chapter 10:21. This coming king will display God’s own power as a warrior (verse 3) in his person and life, being the perfect expression of “God with us” (Immanuel).

* He is “Everlasting Father”; we should not be too worried that Jesus (who is clearly in view here) is described as Everlasting *Father*; it is not a description of intra-Trinitarian relations (Jesus is the Son not the Father!) but of God-Israel relations. God is Father to his children Israel (Isaiah 1:2, see also Exodus 4:22-23) so this title again expresses the child-deliverer’s eternal] divine nature. He is a caring Father to his people forever, and will reign forever (verse 7).

* He is “Prince of Peace” which refers more to the peace he brings about than to his methods (he is no pacifist in verses 4-5!). His peace involves an ordered government of justice and righteousness which increases, spreads, and endures forever. He reigns on David’s throne, as inheritor of the promises to King David in 2 Samuel 7 and king of God’s people by God’s appointment (this is accomplished by God’s zeal, his passionate commitment to keep his promises to Israel).

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. Matthew 4:12-17 quotes Isaiah 9:1-2 as being fulfilled in Jesus’ withdrawal to Galilee and the beginning of his ministry there. He, of course, is “the light of the world” (John 9:5) who brings light (John 1:4-5, 9). So Jesus is the only one who can lift the gloom of those who live with false religion, superstition, self-indulgence, and the other sins for which people are judged in Isaiah 7-8. That hope began to arrive in Galilee, but spread to the world...

2. Just as Isaiah 9:3-5 pictures God’s deliverance in military terms, so Colossians 2:13-15 indicates that Jesus broke the power of our great enemies (sin and the devil) by dealing with and triumphing over them on the cross. Israel (the Northern kingdom) does not enjoy a political-military resurrection after its exile in 722BC, so the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy for them here must be in Jesus. This is consistent with the rest of this passage which pictures the glorious rescue as ushering in a permanent new state of peace and justice (Isaiah 9:7), which only happens in Christ.

3. Jesus is the ultimate expression of “God with us” (Immanuel). The Immanuel prophecy of 7:14 is applied to Jesus in Matthew 1:23. This prophecy in Isaiah 9:1-7 develops the identity of the Immanuel figure so that we can perceive in the light of the New Testament that it also is about Jesus, the one who is not just a divine representative but is truly a God-man, who reigns on the throne of David (Luke 1:32).

Study Notes

Isaiah 11-12

Introduction

The faithlessness of God's people will lead to a devastating judgment inflicted by the Assyrians, which will leave the Northern Kingdom destroyed and only a remnant left in Judah. Yet God will not forget his promises or give up on the House of David through which he ultimately intends to bless the whole world. In Isaiah 11 we learn more about the divine Davidic king and the salvation he will accomplish. Chapter 12 concludes the first big section of the book of Isaiah with a hymn of praise to God for what he has promised not just in chapter 11 but in 1-11 as a whole.

Main Point and Purpose

Praise God that the Spirit-anointed King will usher in a perfect new creation, and gather the nations into it. The passage tells us about the king and his kingdom, how it will grow and extend, and then ends with praise to God for doing all this. Studying this section should lead us to praise God too, both individually and collectively.

Details

1-2 Jesse was the Father of King David (see 1 Samuel 16:1) so if something springs up from Jesse it must be a king like David, or indeed another David – not just another king in the line of David, but another great king like David himself. The fact that he is described as coming from the *stump* of Jesse reminds us that Israel is in a depleted state (just as Assyria will be chopped down in the similar image of 10:33-34). A weak and faithless line of kings will be replaced by a king who like David (1 Samuel 16:13) is anointed not just with oil but with the Spirit (mentioned 4 times, see also Isaiah 61:1). It is from the Hebrew word for “anointed” that we get “Messiah”, referring to the ultimate ruler and saviour predicted in passages like Isaiah 11. He is endowed with wisdom and understanding, but most importantly with knowledge and fear of the LORD. He will, therefore, be a perfect ruler for God's people, a wonderful counsellor (Isaiah 9:6).

3-5 This king has more wisdom than Solomon, and can truly discern the needs of all his people. Even the weakest and most vulnerable members of society (“the meek” and “the poor”) will be looked after in his kingdom. He can even judge the wicked and kill them with a mere word. His whole kingship is controlled by righteousness and faithfulness, and these are the things in which he “clothes” himself in verse 5: he will do right in every circumstance and be utterly dependable. He certainly is a mighty God and everlasting Father (9:6).

6-9 The whole created order will be transformed by the rule of the Messiah as the perfection and peace of Eden is restored. Not only is creation changed but so is the inner nature of God's creatures so that predator and prey are reconciled, mortal enemies live in harmony, as humanity's proper place of rule over creation (under God) is also restored, so that even “a little child shall lead them.” All will know God, as the whole creation becomes a holy place; “my holy mountain” in 9a is equivalent to “the earth” in 9b. Again we see (as in 6:3) that Isaiah's God has a vision for the whole world, not just Judah (see Isaiah 65:17). This King is surely the “Prince of Peace.”

10-16 In the end time, the Messiah king will be the leader of the whole earth, as even the Gentile nations gather to his banner to enjoy the benefits of his victory and rule. The people of God are released from exile and dispersion (verse 11, “a second time” implying that this will be a great event like the Exodus) reconciled together amongst themselves (Ephraim and Judah in verse 13, representatives of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms) and then swoop down on the nations to make them obedient to the Messiah also (verse 14). The people will return from Assyria just as they did from Egypt at the time of the Exodus (verses 15-16, see also Jeremiah 16:14-15).

12:1-2 This first song of Isaiah 12 is individual (see the singular “you” and the first person “I”) expressing thanks to God for deliverance in the life of the believer who has been rescued from God's anger. This reminds us that God's judgment against the nation's sin is a picture in some sense of his anger at our own personal sin too. The phrase “in that day” reminds us of the day of judgment spoken of in 2:11, 3:18, 7:18 but also the day when the remnant returns (10:20) the burden is lifted (10:27) and the nations share the glorious rest of the Messiah (11:10-11). In this day, God himself will somehow avert his own anger from us, so we can trust in him and not be afraid (note the idea of trusting God surfacing again as a key theme of the book, in verse 2). Verse 2b is an echo of Moses' song after the Exodus (Exodus 15:2).

12:3-6 The second song is corporate (see the plural “you” and the collective exhortation to “Give thanks... sing praises... shout and sing”). It focuses on joy (verses 3 and 6, see also 9:3) and praise to God for what he has done, exalting him as great, glorious, and holy.

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. Jesus has Messianic discernment in John 2:24-25 and 4:16-18, knowing beyond what eyes can see or ears hear. In Acts 17:31 it says he will judge the world with righteousness. As the perfect king he fulfils Isaiah 11.
2. In Acts 2 (esp. verses 5-12) believers from all over the world are brought together to Messiah (Christ) as in Isaiah 11:10-12; in the rest of Acts they swoop down (Isaiah 11:14) to make the Gentiles obedient too (see Romans 1:5). This is not done through military means of course, but through proclamation of the gospel. Colossians 1:20 tells us that peace and reconciliation come to the world through Jesus' work on the cross. Knowledge of him and his saving work come to the whole earth through the proclamation of the gospel to the nations, just as Isaiah 11 pictures.
3. God's anger at Israel's sin was turned away after the Assyrians passed through, and “comfort” was brought to his people again (see also Isaiah 40:1 on “comfort”). God himself turned aside his own wrath from us, at the cross (Isaiah 12:1; see the language of “propitiation” in Romans 3:25, and of course Isaiah 53:4-6). This is expressed in personal confession in a verse like Galatians 2:20 where Paul says Christ “loved me and gave himself for me.”

Isaiah 13-23

Orientation talk by Lee Gatiss

Tonight we come to what are seemingly the most obscure and irrelevant chapters of Isaiah. Chapters 13-23 consist of a series of oracles against foreign nations. For the most part, these states and systems of government have all changed in the last 2700 years. Moab is no longer a threat; Edom isn't worth bothering about. Britain isn't mentioned, and neither are our NATO allies. So what's the relevance to us?

Come to think of it, what's the relevance to *them*? It is very unlikely that the rulers of Tyre and Assyria and Egypt and Arabia would have been interested in what Isaiah has to say to them. Even if they could have got hold of a copy of Isaiah's latest anthology of prophecies published by the Jerusalem Press, I doubt they would have read them or given them much credence anyway.

So what's the point of 11 chapters of oracles against the nations? Well, the real point is that although these prophecies are directed against the nations, the nations are not the intended audience. Isaiah is writing, and God is speaking, for the benefit of his own people. God intends Israel to overhear his judgments against the surrounding nations, in order to teach Israel herself something.

So what is it that God's people learn from these oracles against the nations? Well the purpose of these chapters is to reinforce and develop the message of previous chapters. This is summed up in Isaiah 7:9 – *“If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.”*

Isaiah's big concern is that we stand firm in our faith. Whatever happens around us, God exhorts us through Isaiah to continue to trust in him, to rely on him, to take him at his word, to believe and act on his promises.

The issues when Isaiah first wrote are very similar to the issues we face today. The true faith was under threat from other religions. There were influential voices calling for compromise over key doctrines, watering down the word of God in a multi-cultural society, for the sake of a peaceful life.

At the same time, the people of God were also under military and political threat from a dangerous and powerful enemy which worshipped false gods. The enemy in the 8th century BC was called Assyria, and the strategists and politicians in Israel were constantly on the lookout for ways of dealing with this evil Empire. The easiest solution, it seemed, would be to team up with other countries against Assyria. Potential allies included all the surrounding nations you can see on the back of the talk outline.

So in Isaiah 13-23, God encourages his people to trust in him alone, and not to water down the faith by allying themselves with these godless nations. Because those nations themselves are going to be judged by the God of the whole world. Look for instance at 14:24 and God's judgment on Assyria:

The LORD of hosts has sworn: "As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand, that I will break the Assyrian in my land, and on my mountains trample him underfoot; and his yoke shall depart from them, and his burden from their shoulder."

God had planned long ago what he was going to do about the evil Empire of Assyria. He would crush their persistent opposition and persecution of God's people.

And that should have been enough, in one sense, for God's people. To know that ultimately, their biggest enemy would be destroyed and would not be able to defeat them.

But inevitably, it wasn't enough. Judah still sought to find political allies from the surrounding nations, something God had told them specifically not to do. Because to make alliances with the pagan nations around them, God's people would eventually have to compromise their faith. They would also begin to rely on their coalitions, instead of trusting God.

So God shows how pointless it is to trust in worldly alliances. Let's have a flick through chapters 13–23. There are ten oracles against the nations here, in two sets of five. And each set of five begins with an oracle against Babylon. Should Judah turn to Babylon for help against Assyria? Chapter 13, a prophecy against Babylon, says there is no point. 13:19 – *“And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them.”*

So if Babylon is destined to be no help to God's people, should they look to the Philistines for an alliance? Chapter 14 says there's no point. So should they rely on Moab, another close neighbour? Chapters 15 and 16 show how futile it would be to ask Moab for help. For, 16:14 – *“In three years, like the years of a hired worker, the glory of Moab will be brought into contempt, in spite of all his great multitude, and those who remain will be very few and feeble.”*

So if Babylon was going to be no help, and Philistia and Moab were just as vulnerable to the Assyrian threat, should Israel ask the powerful people of Damascus for help? 17:1 – *“Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city and will become a heap of ruins.”*

The point is probably clear by now. There's no point trusting the surrounding nations with all their political and financial and military power. They won't be able to help you when the Assyrians come.

But just to make sure they got the message, Isaiah continues. Chapter 18 is a prophecy against Cush, or Ethiopia. Chapters 19 and 20 against Egypt. In chapter 21 we return to Babylon again, then Edom, and then Arabia.

Finally in chapter 23 we get a long prophecy about Tyre, a very rich and prosperous city, the commercial and trading capital of this part of the world. The military might of all the other nations could not help God's people. And according to chapter 23 verse 1, neither could the fabulous economic wealth of Tyre – *“Wail, O ships of Tarshish, for Tyre is laid waste, without house or harbor!”*

Some of these nations were bigger and more powerful than others, their potential usefulness to Judah found in various different things. They were proud and arrogant, confident in their prowess and stature. But God will bring them *all* crashing to the ground.

So who *can* God's people rely on to defend them in a dangerous world?

Or to apply the same truth to today – drawing the line from God’s people then to God’s people now - who will defend Christians and the gospel from the threat of Islam, or secularism? Who will defend the persecuted believers in Indonesia and Africa and the Middle-East? Who will protect our ability to preach the gospel freely? How can we ensure that our denomination doesn’t collapse?

Can we rely on political alliances with friendly powers? Not according to Isaiah. Can we rely on the military prowess of America to guard the cause of true religion and defend the gospel of Jesus Christ? Not according to Isaiah.

Others may choose to be on our side against a common enemy, but we must never link the cause of Christ and the defence of his people too closely with any one nation state or political power. There is no modern equivalent of ancient Israel, which can be said to be God’s own nation. Not America, not Britain, and certainly not modern Israel which has rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is also important for us not to think that we need the latest management techniques or business strategies to secure the success of the gospel. They may be of some use, but we must not tie ourselves to the business empire of Tyre. If our leaders are more au fait with Charles Handy or other management gurus than they are with *biblical* teaching on church growth - then we’re in trouble. We must trust God’s word, not the business world. God’s promises not human policies.

So the message of chapters 13-23 is that we can only trust in the LORD. He is our shield and our defender. He is the one, the only one, who can uphold the cause of the gospel. He is the one we are to look to in times of crisis and times of turmoil. And ultimately he is our only hope when *the* day of judgment comes too.

In the end, every other power and authority, every other kingdom and dominion will fall. But God is sovereign forever.

So that’s chapters 13-23. Isaiah encourages God’s people to trust in God alone to defend them from the might of Assyria their enemy. Every other potential ally will eventually prove to be useless, when the God of the whole earth descends in judgment.

Now we’re going to split into our groups, and study the details in just one chapter from this section of Isaiah...

Map of Isaiah's Middle-East



Notes on place names

Damascus is the capital of Syria

Nineveh is the capital of Assyria.

Jerusalem is the capital of Judah, and is also known as Zion.

Israel is also known as Samaria (its sometime capital) or Ephraim (its largest tribe).

Israel can also be the name for whatever bit of God's people is left (so it *can* refer to Judah!). The name *Jacob* (or House of Jacob) also refers to God's people generally.

Dates

740BC The year that King Uzziah died (*Isaiah 6:1*).

722BC Assyria destroys Israel. Her exile begins (*Isaiah 8:3-8; 2 Kings 17*).

701BC Assyria attacks Judah, getting as far as Jerusalem (*Isaiah 36-37*).

597BC Babylonians take Jerusalem (*2 Kings 24*).

587BC Jerusalem destroyed, more people exiled (*2 Kings 25*).

539BC Cyrus the Persian takes over Babylon (*Isaiah 44:21-45:13; Ezra 1:1-11*).

For a more complete run-down of all the history see 2 Chronicles 26-36.

Study Notes

Isaiah 19

Introduction

There will be a talk at Central Focus on Isaiah 13-23. The main point is that these chapters are for the benefit of God's people, to warn them against being allied with the godless nations around them against Assyria, the great empire of the day. Rather, they should trust God, the God of the whole world, and not be afraid (see also 10:24-25).

Main Point and Purpose

Even the great Egypt will be judged by God and therefore useless as an ally against Assyria; but one day both Egypt and Assyria will join Israel in worshipping the LORD. The purpose of the chapter is to show God's people how futile it is to trust in Egypt, which despite its famous strengths cannot stand against the God-ordained Assyrian onslaught and hence is a useless ally to rely on when trouble comes. But there is also an indication that both Egypt and Assyria will feature in God's coming eternal kingdom, which should produce in us both amazement and hope.

Details

1-4 Egypt was and is famous for its religion of sorcerers, mediums, and necromancers (verse 3), but their false gods will get them nowhere when God rides out to judge them (verse 1). Fear will overtake Egypt as civil war breaks out (verses 2-3) and God hands them over to "a fierce king" (verse 4), probably meaning the King of Assyria (see 20:4).

5-10 Egypt was and is also famous for the River Nile, the source of all its fertility, food, and finance. When God judges them, the Nile will dry up and so Egyptian prosperity will suffer greatly.

11-15 Egypt was also famous for its wisdom and philosophy, so God also says he will see to it that even this is reversed (verse 11), while the wise cannot even discern what God is doing (verse 12). Egypt will thus become unstable (verses 13-15) and not a good ally to trust. She will fall to Assyria herself, and not be able to help Israel or Judah. Note that Egypt's military strength is not discussed here; either she was not militarily useful at this point, or her reputation for sitting still and letting others do the fighting was well earned (see 30:7).

16-17 Five references to "in that day" structure this section, which focuses therefore on a future day when God's purposes will be fully realised. The first future vision sees Egypt trembling at the judgment of God upon them just described. It is not so much Judah as the *God* of Judah who will make them afraid. The Assyrians will also come at Egypt from Judah's direction.

18-25 The remaining visions of the future are about the unity of Egypt with God's people. So verse 18 pictures Egyptians speaking Hebrew and declaring allegiance to the LORD of Hosts. Verses 19-22 picture Egypt as clearly identified with the true God and taking part in true worship of him (verse 21), while he treats them like his own people (sending a saviour and defender, verse 20, to deliver them as he did for Israel in the days of the Judges). Verse 22 pictures God's fatherly discipline of them. Verse 23 is about the unity of this renewed Egypt with even their greatest enemy, Assyria, in terms of communications and trade (the highway) and religion (their joint worship). In verse 24 Israel is fulfilling its vocation to be a blessing to the nations (see Genesis 12:3) while both Egypt and Assyria are made part of God's people.

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. God brings the lofty Egyptians down to earth, confounding their religion, their stability, their economic base, and their wisdom. The theme of worldly wisdom being confounded by God also surfaces in 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5 where in 1:20 Paul possibly alludes to Isaiah 19:12, "where is the one who is wise?" The main application is do not trust in worldly strengths which are all easily nullified by God's hand of judgment. As the hymn says, we must not boast in anything, "no gifts, no power, no wisdom" (*How Deep the Father's Love for Us*), or trust in those who have these things to save us when times are tough.

2. Ephesians 2:11-22 is one of the clearest passages in the New Testament for seeing the fulfilment of Isaiah 19:16-25. Gentiles are made equal partners in salvation with the Jews, a mystery not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the gospel (Ephesians 3:4-6). At Pentecost, there were devout men from every nation (Acts 2:5) present to hear Peter's sermon, even some from Egypt (Acts 2:10).

3. It is important to note that this chapter (Isaiah 19) contains the main elements of biblical prophecy: judgment *and* salvation. The fulfilment of these themes and of Isaiah 13-23 comes not in the events of Middle-Eastern politics, either then or now, but in the life, death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus the Messiah. The repeated phrase "in that day" points to a final definitive day when God's purposes will be fulfilled for the world – ultimately this has to be a reference to the Second Coming of Christ rather than to any geopolitical developments this side of Redemption Day.

Study Notes

Isaiah 26

Introduction

There will be a talk at Central Focus on Isaiah 24-27. This section of Isaiah is sometimes called “Isaiah’s Apocalypse” because it is an unveiling of the glorious future of God’s plan, much like the book of Revelation. In these chapters we turn from the specific events of the 8th Century BC to a more general picture of the future from the perspective of the whole earth. These chapters contain prophecies and songs of devastating judgment, the victory of God, and much feasting.

Main Point and Purpose

Trust in God to judge the wicked and bring perfect peace for his people, even when there is a delay in the fulfilment of his promises of a glorious future. There is a longing for “that day” to arrive, but also a confidence that it will.

Details

1-6 “In that day” in verse 1 locates this song in the glorious future being promised in this section (Isaiah 24-27) as a whole. On that day there will be two cities: a strong divinely-fortified one for the righteous saved; and a destroyed, divinely-humbled one for others. “Perfect peace” is literally “peace peace” (see Isaiah 6:3 on the use of repetition for emphasis), something given to all who trust in the secure rock of God’s promises (look back to Isaiah 9:6-7 on “peace” in God’s new order). The gates to this city of peace are open (verse 2) for any who trust him.

7-15 The central section of the chapter in verses 7-19 shows that there will be some waiting involved before God’s promises are all fulfilled; note the language of waiting, desiring, and yearning in verses 8-9. Evil thrives in the waiting period. The wicked don’t understand or perceive God’s judgment at work (verses 10-11) but his people will enjoy the peace he brings despite their past service of other lords (possibly other gods, not just other kings) who will ultimately be destroyed when the nation is blessed again (verses 12-15).

16-19 The faith of God’s people while they wait for God to act is expressed in whispered prayer in the midst of distress (verse 16). They realise that they are disciplined, even as they seek God, for having not lived as they should, which leads to a crushing sense of failure and fruitlessness (verses 16-18). Evil remains even in them during the waiting period. But they remain hopeful that for God’s people (“*your dead...*”) there will be a joyful new birth - bodily resurrection even beyond death.

26:20-27:1 The word “punish” in 26:21 and 27:1 makes the link across the chapter division (which, remember, was not in Isaiah’s original). The exhortation is to hide from God’s judgment as it passes by (as on the Passover night, Exodus 12:12-13 and 12:22-23. See also Isaiah 10:25). God is coming to expose and judge sin, and to do away with evil (personified in the image of a great beast, “Leviathan”) just as he destroyed Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:26-31).

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. For the people of Isaiah’s day, this song would help them to express their hope and longing for God during the difficult times of invasion and oppression by Assyria. It does not shirk their responsibility or sinfulness (they *are* being disciplined), while still providing a divine hope beyond the immediate suffering. Even if they should die in the coming “storm”, God is to be trusted for a long-term future, and evil will not triumph forever.

2. We as Christians have the same hope of a place of perfect peace, a city for those who trust in God (see also Psalm 46). We are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22) which will one day become an earthly reality (Revelation 21:2-3).

3. Verse 19 clearly demonstrates that the people of God before Christ were longing for a living hope after death, and not just for material blessings in this life, as many often think (Article 7 “Of the Old Testament” in the Church of England’s *Thirty-nine Articles* says “they are not to be heard, which feign that the old Fathers did look only for transitory promises” i.e. don’t listen to people who say Old Testament believers only wanted material things and had no concept of life after death). Bodily resurrection beyond death was part of their hope: see Isaiah 53:10-11, Psalm 16:8-11 (quoted in Acts 2:25-28), Daniel 12:1-3, and Job 19:25-27 for instance. See also Hebrews 11:13-19.

4. This song in Isaiah 26 expresses a longing for God’s final act of judgment and salvation similar to the New Testament prayer for Jesus to come again (e.g. Revelation 22:17, 20; Luke 18:1-8). It gives voice to the frustration and yearning of struggling, imperfect people who long for God’s help and for a better world to come. It encourages us to hide in Christ when the Day of Judgment comes.

Here is an excellent song written by a member of *Central Focus* recently, based on Isaiah 26.

The day is soon when God will call us

to his place of perfect peace,
with walls and ramparts of salvation;
shouts of praise will never cease!
Let the gates be always open
for all those who trust in him:
he is our Lord, our Rock Eternal;
let the faithful ones come in!

He humbles all who dare oppose him,
lays their lofty cities low,
and yet we too were lost in evil,
bound in sin since long ago.
Other gods have had our worship,
Lord, it pains us to confess,
yet through our whispered prayers for mercy,
we received your righteousness.

And so my soul is always waiting,
yearning for you night and day.
I need your grace, your perfect wisdom
as I follow in your way.
All the good I have accomplished
only shows your power in me;
so fill my heart with righteous longing
till your majesty I see.

There on that day of your salvation
all the dead in Christ shall rise –
the chosen saints from every nation,
under new and glorious skies,
where at last, your peace established –
no more powers to destroy –
there'll be a roar, like mighty oceans,
as we sing your praise with joy!

Study Notes

Isaiah 35

Introduction

There will be an orientation talk at Central Focus on Isaiah 28-35. The structure of this section, which focuses now on the challenges facing Hezekiah (715-686BC) as the siege of Jerusalem (Isaiah 36-37) approaches, looks like this:

Six "woes" introduce two cycles of three oracles each.

<u>28:1-29</u>	Woe to the foolish leaders of Israel.
<u>29:1-14</u>	Woe to those who choose to live in spiritual ignorance.
<u>29:15-24</u>	Woe to those who think they can do without God.

The second cycle relates the principles (above) to their practices.

<u>30:1-33</u>	How their folly is seen in their actions.
<u>31:1 - 32:20</u>	How their ignorance is seen in their actions.
<u>33:1 - 35:10</u>	How their "atheism" affects their future.

The word "ah" or "woe" (same word in Hebrew) in 28:1, 29:1, 30:1, 31:1 marks off and structures this as a separate section. The theme of looking to *Egypt* for help (e.g. 31:1) locates it in Hezekiah's reign (see 36:6-9).

Main Point and Purpose

Don't worry - be happy! For God will come with transforming power to renew his world and save his people. This prophecy is clearly given as an encouragement to persevering faith in a difficult time, and reaches forward to picture God's final transformation of the world as motivation for joy and trust in the meantime. Verses 3-4 encourage steadfast perseverance (don't worry); verses 1 and 10 surround the poem with joy and gladness (be happy).

Details

1-2 God brings life to the parched desert, sparking joy and gladness. Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon were famously fertile, well-cultivated lands (in 33:9 their lack of growth is a sign of curse). But now the *desert* will be transformed to be like them. In fact, it will be given the glory and majesty of Lebanon, life to a dead place, to display the glory and majesty of God himself. "They" will see this ("they" being human onlookers, identified later in verses 9-10 as the redeemed, ransomed people of God).

3-4 This vision of a changed world should put strength back into God's fearful people, as they realise that God is coming. He's coming to transform but also to judge and save. While they wait for this, they need encouraging in terms of action (hands), stability (knees), and conviction (hearts). God is coming - therefore his people should be strong and resolute.

5-7 The same power which transformed nature in verses 1-2 will also bring miraculous renewal for *people*. The key image is water streaming out into the world to bring life and vitality to broken land and broken humanity. This opens blind eyes and deaf ears (see 6:9-10), loosens mute tongues, and brings lively movement back to the crippled. This is more than a reversal of the metaphorical bodily weakness of verse 3; it is a healing, revitalising, rejuvenating river of life which brings restoration.

8-10 There will be a safe road to God, the Holy One. And people will be permitted to walk on it, being no longer unclean (see Isaiah 6:5). Even a fool will not go wrong on this highway (it must have clear signposting!). No dangerous animals will ruin this new world (see 11:6-9) or force God's saved people from the road. The people will return from an exile of some kind (unspecified) to Zion, the capital city of God's land and the site of the Temple (on Mount Zion). No wonder this verse is quoted again in 51:11 specifically for people longing to return from the exile of Judah in Babylon. Unbroken and unbreakable happiness (see verse 1 for joy and gladness) sweeps over these people as they enjoy and revel in God's work of re-creation.

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. Jesus alludes to Isaiah 35:5-6 in Matthew 11:4-5 when he is giving John the Baptist reasons to believe that he is the Messiah come to inaugurate God's kingdom. When you see Isaiah 35:5-6 coming true, you know that God has come with transforming power... So again we see the hope of Isaiah is fulfilled in Christ's first coming. The second coming, too, will fulfil Isaiah 35 but in a more complete and universal way than even Matthew 11:4-5, since in the new creation there will literally be no deaf, blind, or lame people, and no sorrow or sighing.

2. The return to Zion/Jerusalem, or gathering of God's people together in a city, is pictured in the New Testament in terms of the New Jerusalem (e.g. Galatians 4:26, Revelation 21. See "Zion" in Hebrews 12:22 & Revelation 14:1).

3. The transformation of the world through water is not unique to Isaiah (see Ezekiel 47:1-12 and Psalm 46:4 for a similar image of a river flowing through the holy city) and is carried into the New Testament too, so that in Revelation 22:1-2 we see the River of the Water of Life flowing through the New Jerusalem. In John 4:13-14 and 7:37-38 Jesus claims that *he* is the one who can dispense such living water, which is associated with the Holy Spirit himself (John 7:39). Is he, therefore, the glorious and majestic God of Isaiah 35?

Study Notes

Isaiah 36-37

Introduction

We come now to the dramatic climax of the first half of the book. Everything from at least chapter 8 has been anticipating the momentous events of this section. Unusually, the next four chapters are primarily prose (although Hebrew writers can never go very long without a poem or a song, so it's not all narrative!). With such a long passage to study, it is probably best to read through the story a scene at a time, and discuss what is going on in the narrative as you go, to feel the tension of each development and appreciate the drama of this significant moment.

Main Point and Purpose

Hezekiah applies Isaiah's message of trust in the Lord when the going gets tough, and God delivers on his promise.

The purpose of these chapters is to show us in history the outworking of all Isaiah has been saying for the last 30 or so chapters. Awed by God's power and faithfulness, we are encouraged (as throughout Isaiah) to trust him alone.

Details

36:1-12 The Assyrian army finally arrives at the gates of Jerusalem, having captured all the fortified cities of Judah on the way. The first step is to attempt a negotiated settlement. Note the location in verse 2 is the same as in 7:3! The parallel with Ahaz is highly significant: will Hezekiah fail to trust God here too? The Rabshakeh gets straight to the point: don't trust in words to save you, or even in Egypt. You can't trust in God, since Hezekiah has been removing his "high places" of worship (in pagan eyes, a lessening of a god's power base) and he sent me anyway! Your military is weak. Ironically, the Rabshakeh speaks the truth – God says don't trust Egypt and that he is behind Assyria's advance – but Rabshakeh's *application* is faulty!

36:11-22 Diplomacy exhausted, the Rabshakeh resorts to propaganda techniques as he addresses the people, trying to terrify them with thoughts of the hardships if they don't submit. He calls on them to forsake Hezekiah and his policy of trusting in God. Like a false prophet, he offers a rosy future if they submit – wine and figs instead of dung and urine (36:16)! No other gods have helped people resist this mighty army, so why should they believe that the LORD will help them? The officials tear their clothes as a sign of humiliation, but also in response to such blatant blasphemy (see Mark 14:60-64; Acts 14:11-14).

37:1-13 News arrives at the Palace and Hezekiah, being mortified by the threat, asks Isaiah to pray for the "remnant" left in Jerusalem. Through Isaiah, the LORD again promises to save the remnant of Jerusalem (just as he did in 10:20-34). When Cush joins the war against Assyria, the king of Assyria warns Hezekiah not to take comfort from this or from any promises from the LORD. He repeats his arrogant boast: no gods or kings can resist him (with more gods mentioned than in 36:18-20!).

37:14-20 Hezekiah's response is to go straight to God (good man!). Clearly they have touched a raw nerve by directly questioning the LORD. Hezekiah's prayer shows that he has understood what Isaiah has been saying throughout chapters 6-36 – He prays to the exalted God (Isaiah 6:1-4), and puts his trust in him (Isaiah 7:9) because God is in control of all the nations (Isaiah 13-23), and will act to show his own glory and uniqueness by saving his people from Assyria (Isaiah 10:24-27).

37:21-35 Isaiah's reply from the LORD is decisive. God takes the King of Assyria's threats personally (37:23). He reminds Assyria (37:26) that he himself planned and foretold this very situation (e.g. 8:5-10; 10:24-27; 29:5-8) and will direct its outcome. A remnant of Jerusalem will survive (37:31-32) just as he promised. God will save his people, for his own sake and for the sake of "my servant David" (verse 35) which probably means Hezekiah (as the reigning king of the House of David).

37:36-38 God brings decisive, calamitous defeat to the Assyrians in one night. When the people woke up – all they saw were dead Assyrians! Sennacherib the King of Assyria is eventually assassinated in a palace coup. His god didn't help *him* much!

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. It is vitally important that we see this passage as the historical and literal fulfilment of many of Isaiah's prophecies so far. The Assyrian threat to Judah has dominated the first half of the book, and was very real considering the fact that in 722BC (only 21 years before Isaiah 36) the Northern Kingdom of Israel *had* been utterly destroyed by Assyria. All that Isaiah has said about not trusting the nations, and relying on God alone, is now proved to be right. Where Ahaz failed (7:10-13), Hezekiah has learned what it means to be a king of faith.

2. To see Isaiah's prophecies and policy of trusting in God alone vindicated so dramatically in history should encourage us to trust in the other prophecies and promises God has made through him. If God saved Judah from Sennacherib, how much more will he save us from death (Isaiah 25:8) and inaugurate his perfect kingdom (Isaiah 9:1-7) under a perfect king (Isaiah 11) – of whom Hezekiah is a picture here with his godly reliance on the LORD.

3. If nothing else, these chapters teach us never to underestimate God's power to deal with our enemies. How could we ever doubt his ability to turn even the most disastrous situations around, or trust in lesser things to save us and help us? Many applications could flow from this central point. Pick a promise (1 Cor 10:13?) – he will fulfil it!

Here is a poem by George Gordon, Lord Byron, describing these same events:

The Destruction of Sennacherib

The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still!

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow, and the rust in his mail:
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

Study Notes

Isaiah 38-39

Introduction

We begin our studies this term in the middle of the central section of Isaiah. Chronologically speaking chapters 38-39 probably happened *before* chapters 36-37 (see e.g. the future tense in 38:6; Webb, page 148 footnote 2 and Motyer, page 290). The placement of 36-37 & 38-39 in reverse order here must be significant, and has been done for theological or literary reasons rather than historical ones: chapters 38-39 are the introduction to the second half of the book, setting up the new threat after the destruction of the Assyrians in 37:36. This term, it's Babylon.

Main Point and Purpose

Hezekiah, the faithful hero of 36-37, is shown to be weak and sinful, and therefore not the Messiah king. As a representative of the people he is typical of their wavering, which will eventually lead to exile in Babylon. These chapters therefore form a bridge into 40-66 where we learn how a sinful people can trust God and serve him.

Details

38:1-8 Hezekiah is fatally ill, prays, and is promised a recovery by God. Failure to pray is not necessarily a sign of submission to God's will; Hezekiah is not apathetic in the face of God's initial declaration that he would die but, rather, he finds that God is always ready to listen to our prayers. In some way, he is a picture of the nation as a whole; just as he is granted a short reprieve, so will Judah and Jerusalem (38:6), but their day will come eventually just as Hezekiah will still die. Ironically, the miraculous sign God gives faithful Hezekiah involves the sundial of unfaithful Ahaz, who refused a sign back in 7:10-12.

38:9-21 Hezekiah's poem about this incident is recorded for us. It shows the kind of theological thinking he was doing prior to his great prayer in the crisis of 36:14-20. Unexpectedly, it emphasises Hezekiah's mortality and weakness more than it does the wonder of the deliverance God brought him. The point is: if Hezekiah is only to live 15 more years, and he is a mere human, he cannot be the promised Messiah king of previous chapters (e.g. 9 and 11) who will usher in the perfect new world. He is a great king, but not *the* great king. Sorrow and sighing will not flee away (35:10) forever under his reign.

39:1-4 Babylonian envoys come to wish Hezekiah well (it is suggested in 2 Chronicles 32:31 that they also came to find out about the sign of 38:8). Note: if the Assyrian army had just disappeared overnight then they would surely have come to talk about this too, so lack of mention of that lends credibility to the idea that 38-39 happened before 36-37. Sadly, however, Hezekiah takes this opportunity to show off his worldly power and glory to the Babylonians, probably to convince them of his worthiness as an ally against Assyria. Whatever his faith in 36-37, he was clearly trying to play worldly politics here, and rely on human strength rather than God. Isaiah senses something wrong and goes to ask about it...

39:5-8 Hezekiah showed the Babylonians everything – this was repeated both positively and negatively (he showed them everything, there was nothing he didn't show them) in verses 2 and 4. That completeness will also characterise the Babylonian destruction of Judah that is coming, says verse 6. But Hezekiah, rather than being worried by this, is relieved that it will not happen in his day. Needless to say, this is not a godly reaction! That being said, it is not Hezekiah's behaviour in this chapter which directly causes the Babylonian exile (for which the whole nation's persistent sin is to blame, see 2 Kings 21:14-15). His sin is not causal but typical, the sort of pride and trusting in human glory rather than God which will inexorably lead to disaster. By not trusting God completely, the king dooms his dynasty to the darkness of exile and the service of another king.

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. "Hezekiah, like Jerusalem, is all too easily diverted from his trust when the pressure is removed. All too easily God's people are seduced by this world's values and put their trust in human glory – wealth, arms, luxuries – when all along we live and prosper by God's good pleasure alone. Hezekiah demonstrates that trust must be a way of life and not merely a one-time affair." (John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* page 673). Faith is "not merely a magic talisman to be rubbed at critical moments" (page 693) or "used only in crises" (page 696).

2. After the great deliverance of 36-37, it might be wondered why and how the Babylonians were later able to defeat Judah and Jerusalem. Hezekiah's behaviour here helps to explain this. Hezekiah's faithfulness in 36-37 is contrasted to his weakness and sinfulness in 38-39. God's people cannot depend on a mere man to "do the right thing and all will be well" because humans are sinful. God granted Hezekiah repentance from his worldly policies and gave him not only Isaiah to encourage faithfulness but a heart that would turn to God. Despite the sending of more prophets and further warnings, this would not always be the case. Kings are unreliable, so exile is inevitable.

3. Ahaz trusted in Assyria rather than God, and Assyria bit back hard. Hezekiah, though he trusted in God in 36-37, had also trusted in Babylon. We see here that the things we trust in other than God will one day turn and destroy us. Jesus says if anyone sins he is a slave to sin (John 8:34). We think that by sinning we are taking control of our lives, our destiny, but in reality we are giving control to the devil and he will not treat us well.

Isaiah 1-39

1-5

Overture

6

Isaiah's call (Uzziah dies 740BC)

7-12

King Ahaz (732-715BC) fails to trust God

“If you are not firm in faith you will not be firm at all” (7:9b)

The future perfect king and kingdom (9 & 11)

→ *Israel exiled to Assyria*
722BC

13-23

Don't trust the nations!

24-27

Widescreen view of the future

28-35

Don't trust the nations (esp. Egypt)!
Plus widescreen view of the future (35)
King Hezekiah's reign (715-686BC)

36-37

Assyria surrounds Jerusalem (701BC)
Hezekiah trusts God where Ahaz failed



38-39

Babylon introduced to Hezekiah as the next great threat

→ *Judah exiled to Babylon*
597-587BC

Things to notice about the big picture

It all happens in the space of about **40 years**: Uzziah died in 740BC and the siege of Jerusalem was in 701BC. Note especially that there are only 21 years between Israel being utterly defeated and exiled by the Assyrians (722) to the siege of Jerusalem in 701BC. This is roughly the same gap as between the First and Second World Wars, and as in 1939 the threat from a previous enemy would have seemed very potent and real, as the recent disaster was in the living memory of many of the participants.

Note also on dates that Judah's exile to Babylon is not going to happen in the lifetime of any of those around during Isaiah 1-39 (701BC – 597BC is 104 years). Isaiah himself is probably gone by 686 (see 1:1).

↪ The events of 38-39 happen *before* the events of 36-37, and yet Isaiah puts them the “wrong” way around. Clearly he has theological or literary motives for doing so, rather than a chronological agenda. ↪

<i>Uzziah</i>	<i>Jotham</i>	<i>Ahaz</i>	<i>Hezekiah</i>	<i>Hezekiah dies</i>				
740		722	701	686				597
Isaiah's call	→	Israel exiled	→	Siege of Jerusalem	→	→	→	Judah exiled to Babylon

The big parallel drawn in the first half of the book is between Ahaz, who fails to trust God, and Hezekiah who succeeds. The theme verse (Isaiah 7:9b) holds it all together.

The big message of “trust God” is reinforced with its negative: you can't trust the nations (13-23), repeated to Hezekiah more specifically as “don't trust Egypt” (28-35).

A widescreen view of the future is seen at the end of the “don't trust the nations” sections, in 24-27 and 35. There are, of course, also big pictures of the future with the Messianic promises of 9:1-7 and 11.

The Great Isaiah Quiz



Mark these places on the map:

- | | |
|---------|---------|
| Syria | Babylon |
| Egypt | Tyre |
| Israel | Judah |
| Assyria | Moab |
| Persia | Edom |
| Cush | Arabia |

The capital of Syria is.....

The capital of Assyria is.....

The capital of Judah is.....

Israel (the Northern kingdom) is also known in Isaiah as.....

Dates:

The year that King Uzziah died (*Isaiah 6:1*) was.....

Israel was destroyed and exiled by Assyria in.....

Assyria attacked Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem (*Isaiah 36-37*) in.....

Babylon conquered Judah and Jerusalem (see *Isaiah 39:5-7*) in.....

Marks out of 20

1-5 Assyrian scum! **6-10** Babylonian birdbrain! **11-15** Hezekiah's helper! **16-20** Prophetic Genius!

Match the text to the chapter of Isaiah it comes from:

<i>“He will swallow up death forever... and wipe away tears from all faces”</i>			
		Isaiah 36	
<i>“Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots...”</i>			
			Isaiah 6
<i>“Unto us a son is given... wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father, the Prince of Peace”</i>			
	Isaiah 19		
<i>“The ransomed of the Lord shall return to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads, they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”</i>		Isaiah 26	
<i>An oracle against Egypt... but one day they will worship the LORD!</i>			
		Isaiah 11	
<i>“I saw the Lord... ‘Holy holy holy!’”</i>			
			Isaiah 25
<i>“You keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you because he trusts in you.”</i>			
	Isaiah 9		
<i>“If you are not firm in faith you will not be firm at all”</i>			
			Isaiah 31
<i>The perfect king from “the stump of Jesse”... “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb...”</i>			
		Isaiah 35	
<i>The people are doomed to eat dung and drink urine</i>			
			Isaiah 7

What mark did you get out of 30?

- 1-10** *Assyrian scum!*
- 11-15** *Babylonian birdbrain!*
- 16-20** *Hezekiah’s helper!*
- 21-25** *Prophetic Genius!*
- 26-30** *SLOB Leader!*

Study Notes

Isaiah 40

Introduction

Isaiah looks ahead now in chapters 40-55 to a situation where the people of Judah are exiled in Babylon. He has foreseen this already in the book (e.g. 3:1-8; 11:10-16; 13-14; 39:6). Chapters 1-39 preach the message of “trust God” in the face of the Assyrian threat, and God decisively showed himself to be trustworthy then. But now the question is can God still be trusted even when he has not saved his people from defeat? Is he able to restore them? Does he *want* to restore them?

The fundamental issues here are who is God, and what does he plan to do, in the face of the exile (still future to Isaiah himself). The fact that these chapters, which repeatedly boast of God’s ability to see the future (e.g. 41:22-23; 44:7-8) were written decades prior to the actual exile is part of their message of reassurance to a later generation: don’t worry, trust God – none of this has taken him by surprise, and he has a plan.

Main Point and Purpose

Trust God in your weakness, because he is still the great God over all the nations, and remains true to his commitment to his people. It is a message of comfort, to reassure and strengthen the faith of the exiles, and should strengthen our faith in whatever situation we find ourselves. No circumstances are so bad that God – who alone rules the whole world - cannot rescue us; even if our own sin is to blame, he will not abandon his people. The response called for here is awe, certainly, at the coming of God to save, but also patient faith as we wait.

Details

1-5 In chapter 6, God said Isaiah’s message should be one of judgment on Israel. But now, in a new situation, he can change his tune to restoration and “comfort” (a theme not totally absent before, see 12:1). They have received double for their sins: the Hebrew can mean not “twice as much as they deserve” but more likely “an exact match” as when one side of paper *doubled over* matches the other side (the punishment fits the crime). This restoration will be accomplished publicly, through the intervention of God himself (verses 3-5) coming along the highway (on which, remember chapters 11, 19, 33, and 35).

6-11 No human force can stand against God’s word of promise (verses 6-8). Divine might is coupled with divine compassion: God is not only able to save his people but willing too (verses 9-11), willing to care for them like a shepherd. This is indeed good news (or “gospel”, verse 9) to cheer and strengthen an exiled people: judgment is over, God has come to save.

12-26 Who, who, who is like God? He is incomparable and so much greater than any merely human forces ranged against his people (12-17). Idol gods worshipped by the nations (especially Babylon) are nothing but trinkets compared to him (18-20). God is creator of the whole universe, and therefore far superior to the creations of his creatures. Then in verses 21-26, Isaiah takes up the thought of God’s superiority and majors not on his creation but his rule *over* creation, his providential direction of history and kings (verse 23), which are as small as playthings in the eyes of God, who created the stars (verses 25-26).

27-31 Yet dwelling on his majesty and pre-eminence should not make Israel think that God has forgotten them, or that they are too small for him to worry about (verse 27). He has not forgotten or run out of steam (28); indeed, he gives power to the faint – to anyone who waits for / trusts in him (verses 29-31). God can renew the strength of a broken people, even in exile.

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. Note that throughout this section, speech is very important. God speaks (1, 25), Isaiah is to speak (2, 6), Jerusalem is to speak (9). Not hearing or knowing (21, 28) leads to lack of trust and strength – this message of good news must be proclaimed (a theme we will return to in 52:7-9). Good news is for wide publication and trumpeting!

2. Isaiah 40:3 is cited in the New Testament as a prophecy of John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus (see Luke 3:2-6 for the longest quotation). Hence the New Testament understands Jesus to be God, the sovereign creator God of Isaiah 40 who brings good news to downtrodden people. Indeed, 1 Peter 1:24-25 cites Isaiah 40:6-8 and concludes that the word of the Lord which stands forever is in fact, “the good news that was preached to you.”

3. Verse 31 would be a great verse to just memorise and meditate on during the week. What a great promise of spiritual energy and vigour for those who wait for God to act, who trust him and depend on his shepherd-like care for his people (verse 11). People could pick a verse and pray it through during prayer time at the end, and take it away to reflect on during the week (without forgetting the wider context of the passage, of course).

Isaiah 41-44

Orientation Talk by Lee Gatiss

Tonight we are looking at the next section of Isaiah. We'll have a brief talk first to survey the whole sweep of chapters 41-44, and then settle down into our groups for a study just on chapter 42. So before we start, let's pray... PRAY.

As we dig into Isaiah 40 onwards, we find there has been a change of tone from the first half of the book. As we discovered last week in chapter 40, Isaiah is now called to preach a message of comfort to the people. In the first half of the book, much of what he said seemed to be about judgment. Isaiah was called in chapter 6 to be a doom and gloom prophet.

But now that the situation in view is the exile of the people in Babylon, the message changes with the circumstances. Isaiah can now preach a comforting message of grace for an afflicted and exiled people.

There's quite some disagreement on how to structure and arrange the material here. Isaiah often repeats the same words and themes in different relations to one another. That causes some commentators to see intricate patterns and arrangements throughout the section. Others just see a complex interweaving of themes and ideas without any obvious structural markers.

But whatever the structure of these chapters is, the basic thrust is pretty clear. The basic content of chapters 41-48 can be stated fairly easily. It's this: God will demonstrate his absolute superiority over the idols by doing something new, something unheard-of to that point: causing a people, his people, to return from exile.

He will do this by destroying proud Babylon through Cyrus, a previously unknown ruler from Persia. The people will then be clear to return home to Jerusalem and start rebuilding the city and the nation. Not because they deserve it – they don't – but because God will forgive them.

That much is clear from reading these chapters. God will show how great he is compared to useless dumb idols. He will bring his forgiven people home to Jerusalem, destroy Babylon the power that enslaved them, and do it through a pagan ruler he predicts in advance will be called Cyrus.

Let's look for a moment at the thought that God is superior to idols. **God's superiority over idols.** God declares that he is far greater than all the false gods and idols of Babylon. So, for instance, we see 41:23 where God says to the idols:

Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified. Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing; an abomination is he who chooses you.

Often this is in the context of a trial or disputation, as if God was in the dock defending his reputation and honour. So look on to 44:6...

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to

come, and what will happen. Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.

The rest of chapter 44 makes a mockery of idolatry, and idol worshippers. So Isaiah sarcastically describes a pagan who cuts down a tree and uses half of the wood to heat his food and the other half to make himself a god. He says, 44:19...

No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?" He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?"

The real, true, and living God is far superior to these idols, which are nothing, and less than nothing. They can't even predict the future and say what is going to happen, like God can. Notice how he boasts about his prophetic powers in those passages I've just read out. Come on idols – tell us what is to come! Let them declare what will happen, so we know they are gods!

They can't, because they're not. The idea throughout the section is that only God is worth trusting in. It's a bit like in the first half of the book when Isaiah encouraged the people not to trust in the surrounding nations and their political-military alliances. Now, in the context of false religion, he encourages them to trust only in the living God.

They might be afraid to do that because they were, after all, in exile because of their rebellion and persistent sin against God. So as part of his reassuring message of comfort, Isaiah brings them a message of God's forgiveness. That's the second thing we need to notice in these chapters: **God's forgiveness of his sinful people.**

Look at chapter 43, verse 22. God says to his people:

*Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel! **Then onto verse 24...** You have not bought me sweet cane with money, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. **And yet, verse 25...**"I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.*

God is a gracious and compassionate God, who will forgive his wayward people. We see this again over the page in 44:21...

Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me. I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you.

Verse 21 uses that phrase "my servant" to describe Israel, the nation. But there seem to be several servants of God in these chapters. And that's the final point on the handout. **God's servants.**

If we just go back a bit we see that same title given to Israel again in 44:2, “*Fear not O Jacob, my servant*” and in 43:10 on the other side of the page: “*You are my witnesses declares the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen.*”

Flick back to 41:8 and we see it again, “*But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend.*”

Sinful Israel is described as God’s servant. They exist to serve his purposes in the world. And there’s someone else doing God’s bidding in these chapters too. So look at 41:2...

Who stirred up one from the east whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot; he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow.

The answer of course is that GOD has stirred up this mighty conqueror of nations. Who is he? We find out at the end of chapter 44. Look at 44:28. God says...

says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'

Cyrus is a Persian King, as yet unborn when Isaiah writes this. That’s how good God is at predicting and controlling the future! And this pagan king will be God’s instrument for bringing his forgiven people home to Jerusalem again.

So Israel is God’s servant, Cyrus serves God too. And yet it seems there is also another figure called the Servant of the Lord too. And that’s what we’re going to be looking at tonight in our studies. So let’s finish our little introduction / overview there, and get down to studying Isaiah 42.

Study Notes

Isaiah 42

Introduction

There will be a talk at Central Focus on chapters 41-44 as a whole. Chapter 42 contains the first of four so-called “servant songs” in Isaiah 40-55 (42:1-9, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12). Clearly in these passages an exalted figure of special importance is described under the title “the LORD’s Servant,” yet the nation of Israel itself is also described using this title in other places (e.g. 41:8). Who is this figure? There is scholarly debate, but the New Testament clearly identifies him as an individual: Jesus Christ. In the context of Isaiah, the special or “Super Servant” will be and do for weak and failing Israel what Israel was meant to be and do for the world. He will cleanse, renew, and save the nation so that they in turn can function as God’s servants and witnesses to the world. Another way to put it is that the Ministering Servant will serve the Fearful Servant(s) so that he/they can properly serve the world.

Main Point and Purpose

Praise God for the work of his special servant, rescuing and enlightening his captive blind servant Israel. Studying all of chapter 42 will help us see and contrast both Israel’s failure and the Servant’s mission.

Details

1-4 The Special Servant is introduced and we are invited to look at him (“Behold”), as one chosen by God and equipped by his Spirit to establish a new world order. This consists of “justice” for the nations (see three mentions of “justice”) established through his law (verse 4) or (literally) “instruction” (*torah* see Isaiah 2:3-4). This will be done almost secretly at first (verse 2), gently (verse 3), but persistently (verse 4 – “he will not be discouraged” perhaps a sign of opposition to this ministry). He may look weak, being so tender, but his new order will spread across the whole earth, even as far as the outlying “coastlands.”

5-9 God addresses the Super Servant and describes his ministry. Verses 1-4 describe this as the establishing of justice, but this “justice” is not just correct judgments by courts (as in our “Royal Courts of Justice”) but describes a new life-giving order for the whole earth. Here we see that this means (verses 6-7) the light of liberty coming into a dark prison, and the establishment of a “covenant for the people”, including the nations. This is clearly a different servant to the one described in 41:8-10, who although chosen and upheld by God is fearful, dismayed, and feeble. It is worth comparing the language here with that used to describe the Messiah figure of Isaiah 9 and 11 (and also 16:5). All this is guaranteed by the God who created and sustains the world, and who predicts this new and startling turn of events well in advance.

10-17 Isaiah breaks into praise after the exciting vision of what God will accomplish through his Ministering Servant. The song extends throughout the world (verses 10-12). The Servant’s gentle persistence is a sign of God’s strength to accomplish his purposes against the idols (verse 13 – an allusion to similar language in Exodus 15:1-3 after God’s victory at the Red Sea). God rejoices in his victory and (almost) gloats – it is futile to trust in idols instead of him (verse 17).

18-25 The Super Servant will bring light and sight to blind captives. The servant of 42:1-9 cannot be the same servant as 41:8-10, i.e. the nation of Israel, because those blind captives are themselves none other than fearful, feeble Israel, the chosen nation. They cannot bring light and sight to the earth, because they themselves are blind and deaf (verses 18-20) and in need of rescue, having been plundered and imprisoned (verse 22) because of their sin against God (verse 24-25). Verse 18 tells them again to look and listen, just as verse 1 told them to look at the Ministering Servant. So we see that the nation servant needs the special individual servant to come and act before they themselves can be freed and restored to their own servant task.

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. Just as God delights in the Servant and gives him his Spirit, so we also hear the voice of the Father at the baptism of Jesus saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” as the Spirit rests upon him (Matthew 3:13-17). He quietly and lovingly heals the broken, in fulfilment of this prophecy (see Matthew 12:15-21).

2. Isaiah 43:10 talks about Israel as God’s “witnesses”. Chapter 42, however, shows that before they can truly be witnesses for God, the Servant must save them. This idea is taken up by the New Testament as the Apostles go out to the ends of the earth as witnesses to Jesus in Acts 1:8, *after* his death and resurrection.

3. The intended effect of the passage on Israel is to make them sing for joy to God, and put their trust in his power while they wait for his servant to come. Clearly if the servant is Jesus, this can be applied to Christians too: we can sing knowing that Jesus *has* come as the Servant to demonstrate God’s power. We are also encouraged again, of course, to put our trust in him (see 7:9b) as opposed to any other gods or idols, who have neither power nor the ability to predict the future like this (see 41:21-23).

Isaiah 45-48

Orientation talk by Lee Gatiss

Tonight we're looking at Isaiah chapters 45-48. You may remember from a couple of weeks ago I said that the basic content of chapters 41-48 can be stated fairly easily. It's this: God will demonstrate his absolute superiority over the idols by doing something new, something unheard-of to that point: causing a people, his people, to return from exile.

He will do this by destroying proud Babylon through Cyrus, a previously unknown ruler from Persia. The people will then be clear to return home to Jerusalem and start rebuilding the city and the nation. Not because they deserve it – they don't – but because God will forgive them.

That much I think is clear from reading these chapters. God will show how great he is compared to useless dumb idols. He will bring his forgiven people home to Jerusalem, destroy Babylon the power that enslaved them, and do it through a pagan ruler he predicts in advance will be called Cyrus.

Chapters 45-48 continue this theme as it began in 41-44. At the end of chapter 44 we were introduced to Cyrus, this previously unknown, unnamed ruler from Persia who will be God's agent in rescuing Israel. In chapter 45, we hear more about him. So 45:1

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed:

God has taken hold of Cyrus and will open all the doors of power and conquest to him. And God particularly stresses that he has named Cyrus in advance. So in verse 3 and 4 God says "I name you... I call you by name."

Why is that so amazing? Well, because this was written many many years in advance of Cyrus even being born. And yet God has had a plan all along. Before the exile to Babylon even happened, God had a plan to rescue his people from it.

The problem is, he's going to use this *pagan* King Cyrus to do it. You may have spotted that in verses 4 and 5 where God says to Cyrus, "I name you – though you do not know me... I equip you – though you do not know me." The rest of chapter 45 tries to anticipate some of the people's reactions to God using a foreigner to help them. Basically – don't argue with me – I'm God and can rescue you any way I want!

Chapter 46 continues the theme of God's superiority over the idols. Bel and Nebo mentioned in verse 1 there are the names of Babylonian gods. And Isaiah mocks them:

Bel bows down; Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts and livestock; these things you carry are borne as burdens on weary beasts. 2 They stoop; they bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity.

These things are just wood and stone statues carried around by donkeys. The gods they represent are so powerless that they can't even stop their images falling over when the donkey trips on a stone.

God is far different. He is not carried about. He has carried Israel, verse 3:

"Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; 4 even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.

He will be with them, and carry them through. And so chapter 46 ends: *"my salvation will not delay; I will put my salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory."* Salvation is coming.

Chapter 47 is a lament over Babylon. When God acts to save his people, Babylon will fall. Look at verses 10-11 for instance:

You felt secure in your wickedness, you said, "No one sees me"; your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, "I am, and there is no one besides me." But evil shall come upon you, which you will not know how to charm away; disaster shall fall upon you, for which you will not be able to atone; and ruin shall come upon you suddenly, of which you know nothing.

That theme of Babylon falling and not being able to charm destruction away is continued in the rest of the chapter as God through Isaiah mocks their "enchantments" and "sorceries." They trusted in their magical religions to save them from disaster. But their idols could not help them see this dreadful future that awaits them. And God will just brush these things aside.

So, the transcendent God, who is far superior to the idols, always had a plan and a purpose. He has promised to save his people. He can be trusted to bring about this promised salvation in whatever way he chooses. He can even use a pagan king like Cyrus if he wants to, and he can destroy Babylon, the proud empire which symbolises everything that is opposed to God and his purposes.

But what should Israel do in response to this? When God has acted through Cyrus to defeat Babylon and set them free, what should they do?

Well, that's what chapter 48 is all about. So let's leave the introduction there and dig in to chapter 48 in our groups...

Study Notes

Isaiah 48

Introduction

There will be a talk at Central Focus on chapters 45-48 as a whole. God's superiority over idols is demonstrated by his prediction and implementation of proud Babylon's destruction through Cyrus. Chapter 48 focuses on those who, as a result of this, can now return to Jerusalem. The issue, as always, is trusting God.

Main Point and Purpose

Listen! God has saved his sinful people for his own glory, just as he predicted; so get away from the doomed city. "Listen" is repeated several times, especially at the head of the two major sections (v 1 & 12); sinful failure to listen before led to catastrophe (v 4 & 8, 18-19); God's prediction of the future is re-iterated in verses 3-5; God's glory as his motivation is emphasised in v 5, 9-11. The call is to leave Babylon (v 20) and go back to Jerusalem (v 2).

Details

1-5 Using several of their historic titles and descriptions, God addresses his people. Note that it is what they *call* themselves that he focuses on – they claim to be God's people but are not that in actual thought and behaviour. He foresaw and spoke of former events in Israel's history long before they happened (e.g. the Assyrian advance on Jerusalem and their eventual destruction in Isaiah 1-39) so that they could never say some other god was behind it.

6-11 God can also do new things, to show his creativity (as opposed to idols who are predictable objects of human creativity). The end of exile and return to Jerusalem was a new thing never seen before, which God announces in advance so that, again, the people could see his superiority. The exile did have a purpose, however, to refine the people. Since they are described throughout this section as sinful (verses 4 & 8) it is no surprise that God acts not because they deserve it, but because of his own name and glory. It glorifies him to be proved right and to save his people even though they are utterly sinful.

12-16 This is the creator's purpose. An enigmatic figure appears in verse 16. "God has sent me", he says, "and his Spirit." This is reminiscent of 42:1 (the special servant chosen by God and anointed with the Spirit). It is picked up in 49:1-6 (the next "servant song"). How interesting to see, if this is the "super servant", the trinity all together (enigmatically) in one verse.

17-22 Listen now! Failure to listen in the past meant disaster, and it meant that they missed out on the fulfilment of the great promises of blessing given to Abraham in Genesis 12. So now, if they wish those promises and blessings to come to them, they must flee the City of Babylon and the surrounding area of Chaldea, proclaiming the salvation God has achieved for them, and returning home to where they say they belong (the holy City, verse 2). There will be provision for them if they do (verse 21) but no peace for them if they fail to listen again (verse 22). The temptation is to stay in Babylon which is more comfortable than returning to a land and a city which need much rebuilding. But Babylon is the symbol of all that is opposed to God and his plan. Therefore the call to "pack your bags" and leave it is a call to go God's way, and trust him for provision.

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. The big call is to get out of Babylon. In the New Testament, this is applied to our fleeing from sin and pursuing holiness. So in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 Paul uses Isaiah's call to flee Babylon (similar to 48:20 but actually from a later chapter, Isaiah 52:11). He applies it to Christians in the sense that we too should cleanse ourselves from sin and have nothing to do with the ungodliness of those who don't worship Christ. Nothing should hold us back from following him. Revelation 18 pictures things similarly, calling for a radical break from Babylon's sins (18:4). This is also taken up in Peter's reminder that we are aliens and strangers in this world (1 Peter 2:11), and Paul's insistence that we live as citizens of another place (Phil. 3:20). We might live in Babylon, but it is not our home.

2. It is well worth pausing to reflect on Isaiah's clear message here that salvation is by grace alone. That is, it has to be based solely on God's gracious, undeserved action on behalf of his people, because even they are sinful ("rebels from before birth" Isaiah 48:8). He acts to bring glory to his own name, not because we are so great. Ultimately this means that even when they have returned from exile, their biggest problem remains to be dealt with. Isaiah foresees a solution for sin later in Isaiah 53. In the New Testament, Ephesians 1:3-14 has a similar chorus of salvation being "to the praise of his glory," and a similar focus on grace to the undeserving (Ephesians 2:1-10).

3. God insists that his reliable prediction of former events should encourage his people to listen to him alone and not other gods. It should also encourage them to pay heed to this new prediction of rescue from Babylon, because they know he is reliable. The call therefore is to wait patiently until he acts, and then be ready to go when he does. Are there, perhaps, similar lessons for Christians who have more of God's fulfilled prophecies to look back on and a more glorious predicted future to look forward to?

Isaiah 49-52

Orientation talk by Lee Gatiss

As we get older in the Christian life, we hopefully get better and better at understanding the Bible. But more than that, we should also get better and better at using the Bible too. I get a little nervous talking about “using” the Bible – it’s God word after all, and he uses us, not we him. But he did give us the Bible for a purpose. We’re meant to use it.

And as we get more experienced at using the Bible, we start to get a sense for what would be a good passage to read or refer to in any given situation. Well, I don’t know how useful you’ve found Isaiah 40-48 so far. But this central section of the book of Isaiah – from 40 to 55 - has to be one of the best possible prescriptions for spiritual dryness in the whole Bible.

So, one of the best things we can do with Isaiah 40-55 is not to atomise it into tiny passages of 3 or 4 verses, but read it all in one go. Drink it in, let it soak in a bit. We’re not going to do it now, but if we read it all through in one sitting, say, it only takes an hour or so. Don’t pause too long to grasp all the details; just catch a sense of the development and drama of the unfolding story here.

And hear God address his people with words of comfort and encouragement – I have not forgotten you, I love you, I will redeem you from that sun-scorched land, and bring you home to a new Garden of Eden, where there will be joy and singing. Sorrow and sighing will flee away, and God will deal with all that causes you to suffer.

Try it! It’s one of the most spiritually uplifting things you can do with an afternoon or evening – just read 16 chapters of Isaiah in one go. Why not try it in your family this weekend, or with a group of friends - out loud, a chapter each, from 40-55?

That being said, tonight we’re looking at just a few chapters together. We’re looking particularly at Isaiah chapters 49-52. And after the rousing call at the end of chapter 48 for Israel to pack their bags and get out of Babylon as fast as they can, a new section of the book begins in chapter 49. The language of captivity and deliverance continues, but Cyrus and Babylon are not mentioned again.

The “servant” theme, which we’ve spotted throughout chapters 40-48 so far, continues in this section. But now it is not the passive servant, the nation of Israel, which dominates. Rather, it is the Super Servant, the Special Servant. We had a glimpse of him back in chapter 42, but then he disappeared for a while and the dominant theme was the blindness and deafness and sinfulness of God’s servant, the people of Israel.

But in subtle yet clear ways the focus now shifts from the physical captivity of Israel to the moral and spiritual captivity of the whole world. How will God deal with that? He has urged his people, once Babylon is defeated, that they must leave it behind and put all that is opposed to God and his purposes away. But will he just ignore their sin and lack of faith? How can the blind, rebellious servant Israel be any different just because King Cyrus has sent them home to Jerusalem?

The answer of course is that they can’t. Not on their own anyway. They need someone to help them, or their sin, which is what caused the exile in the first place, will be their undoing once

again. And God's plan to bless the world through these descendants of Abraham will be thwarted and come to nothing.

The solution to this vicious circle of sin is the Super Servant. He will be for Israel what Israel was meant to be for the world. He will bring light and truth and joy, and the knowledge of God. And ultimately, he will deal with his people's sin.

So this section of the book, chapters 49-52, is full of expectant hope. The possibility of a restored relationship between God and the people is raised and the people are challenged to trust God. He will do it. What they could not do for themselves, because their sin had sapped their spiritual strength, God himself will do, baring his mighty arm and rolling up his sleeves to do what's necessary.

And so these chapters end with the announcement of the gospel – good news! Look at 52:7...

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." ⁸ The voice of your watchmen - they lift up their voice; together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion. ⁹ Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem. ¹⁰ The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

The good news – it's more than just the return of a few exiles to Jerusalem. As we know from the rest of the Old Testament, that wasn't exactly a spectacular event, but a bit of an anti-climax. It hardly seems to fit Isaiah's elevated language here.

No, the good news is more than the return from exile. The good news is that "our God reigns." Our God reigns. And he not only reigns and rules the world, he also intervenes to save and deliver his people.

He will do it! He will do it – that's the message of these chapters. We don't find out the details of *how* he will do it until chapter 53 of course. But the drums have started to beat as we get closer and closer to that crucial chapter.

Trust in him! God will win!

He will win through his agent, the Super Servant. In chapters 49 and 50 we get two more songs about him, to go with that first introductory passage we had back in chapter 42. And the picture is slowly developing, of what God is planning to do.

So that's the big picture of chapters 49-52. Rather than study how this section develops bit by bit, tonight we're going to look at those two sketches of the Super Servant in chapters 49 and 50, to see if we can build up a picture of what he is like and what God is planning to do through him.

If you want to know more about the big picture, why not try that suggestion of reading through the whole of Isaiah 40-55 this week in one go? But for now, let's get to our groups and have a good look at this Servant.

Study Notes

Isaiah 49:1-7 & 50:4-11

Introduction

There will be a talk at Central Focus on chapters 49-52 as a whole. This study is not on one passage but two separate passages within 49-50, commonly identified as “servant songs” (along with 42:1-9 and 52:13-53:12). This study will focus therefore on the portrait of the servant that Isaiah is building in these two “sketches”, more than how the text as a whole develops from 49:1-50:11.

Main Point and Purpose

Vindicated by God, the Super Servant will save the world through suffering, so obey him. That slightly silly sentence sums up the central thrust of these two sections, which is that the Servant of the Lord will save not only Israel but also the nations (esp. 49:6), and he will do this despite being despised and rejected by people (esp. 50:6). His rejection is not, however, the final word (50:7-9). The call to trust and obey (see 7:9b) comes in 50:10-11.

Details

49:1-4 The Super Servant himself calls for attention. The central two servant songs are spoken by the servant himself (whereas 42:1-9 is God introducing him and 52:13-53:12 is a mixture of God and Israel speaking). He calls the nations of the world (significant, given the main point in verse 6) to listen to his credentials – called and named before birth, he has been hidden away until the opportune moment (2b). His purpose is to bring glory to God, and though that seems to be fruitless for some reason (see 50:6 for more on his suffering) he trusts in God to vindicate him.

49:5-7 The Servant recounts God’s commissioning of him – not only is it the LORD’s plan to use him to bring Jacob/Israel back to God (an honourable task in itself) but he will also be the light of the world, so that God’s salvation may reach the nations (see 42:6 for an earlier mention of this worldwide role). Verse 7 is then God’s final word to and about his servant – though he will be despised by some, he will bring even Kings and princes into subjection to him. This outcome is assured, guaranteed by the faithful, holy God who has chosen this servant.

49:8-50:3 ...will be covered in the orientation talk, but not the study, which will focus just on the depiction of the Servant.

50:4-6 Again the Super Servant himself speaks. He boasts of his instruction by the Lord (contrast with chapter 48’s constant call to “listen!” and what God said to Isaiah in 6:9-10) – he listens humbly, each day, and uses what he hears to sustain others. This however, did not lead to popular acclaim in verse 6; divine instruction prepares him for human rejection, which he is ready for and accepts as part of his mission, voluntarily giving himself to suffer (“I gave my back... I hid not my face...”).

50:7-9 Despite his great suffering, the Servant continues to trust in God to help him, knowing that although he is rejected by men he will be vindicated by God. No-one who contends or stands against the Servant will last very long (verse 9) so he challenges them to do their worst which, considering God’s help for the Servant, will not be good enough to defeat him. Their guilty verdict cannot stand in the face of a greater justice at work. Note the great sense of confidence he has about this.

50:10-11 These final verses give us two ways to live in a nutshell. There is the option of fearing God and obeying his servant (note the close identification of the two; indeed it could almost be read as fearing God *by* obeying his servant). This means trusting and relying on God. The result is walking not in darkness but in light (see 49:6 for the Servant as “light”). The alternative in verse 11 is walking by the **light** of our own fire (note the emphasis on providing one’s own light instead of walking in God’s: *you* kindle a fire... equip *yourselves* with torches... walk by the light of *your* fire... torches *you* have kindled”). This will lead ultimately to judgment from God’s own hand, because it is a rejection of his specific provision.

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. In Acts 13:44-48, Paul and Barnabus quote Isaiah 49:6 to justify their mission to the gentiles. If the Super Servant was intended by God to be a light to the nations, then it was their responsibility as his disciples to take the light of the gospel to the gentiles. Since they were “in Christ” they identified Christ’s mission as the servant with their own missionary efforts. In that sense, we too share in the mission of the Servant to be a light to the nations (and if we are gentile Christians, then we are the result of it too – praise God!). See also, of course, John 8:12, 12:46.

2. If we share in the mission of the Servant, then we also share in his suffering and rejection by people. Paul takes up the same sort of language from Isaiah 50:7-9 in Romans 8:33-34, “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect?... Who is to condemn?” Paul’s answer is that God will vindicate his people in the face of suffering, even if it means death. Even that cannot separate us from the love of God if we trust in him as the Servant did.

3. Are we walking by the light of the Servant (which means obeying him and trusting God, whatever happens) or lighting our own torches to see the way in life?

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

Meditation led by Lee Gatiss

This evening we're going to spend some time thinking about this amazing passage in Isaiah 53. It's a beautifully structured poem in the original, and consists of five stanzas or sections. And as is the case so often with Hebrew poetry, the first and last stanza have certain parallels, as do the 2nd and fourth.

It is neatly represented by a cross as you can see on the handout, with the top and bottom panels corresponding to each other and the left and right panels also having certain features in common. All of which draws our attention very firmly to the central verse, the central section of Isaiah's prophecy, which is in the middle of the cross on your handout.

But I've not just put the text into a cross shape in order to highlight the distinctive structural features of ancient Hebrew poetry. Interesting though that is, the real reason I've done it this way is that this beautiful song by Isaiah is all about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Many of the books and commentaries that have been written about this passage leave us to ponder the identity of the "Suffering Servant" until the end. But I want to say up front, right at the start, that Isaiah's Suffering Servant is in fact Jesus Christ.

Why do I say that? Well, because Jesus himself said it. Just before his death, in Luke 22:37, he quotes Isaiah 53 and says he is going to fulfil it.

And it's not only Jesus himself who thinks this. Philip, one of the early evangelists in the New Testament also said that this passage was all about Jesus. Acts 8 tells us that he met an Ethiopian on the road out of Jerusalem one day, who was reading this part of Isaiah to himself. He was puzzled about who Isaiah was talking about, so he asked Philip. And Acts tells us that Philip leapt on the opportunity, and starting from that very passage of Scripture he explained the gospel to him. Philip was in no doubt that the suffering servant was Jesus.

And he was not alone, because the Apostle Peter also thought this. In 1 Peter 2 for instance when he is talking about how to endure suffering in a godly way, he can't help referring to Jesus' example. And the language he uses to describe Christ's attitude on the way to the cross is straight out of Isaiah 53. He says:

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Peter uses Isaiah 53 to describe the Lord Jesus. And he's not alone of course. The Apostle Paul does it (Romans 15:21). Matthew does it (Matthew 8:17). John does it (John 12:38). There was no doubt at all in the minds of the early Christians that Isaiah 53 was all about Jesus.

The Suffering Servant

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

Behold, my servant shall act wisely;
he shall be high and lifted up, and
shall be exalted.

As many were astonished at you-- his
appearance was so marred, beyond
human semblance, and his form
beyond that of the children of
mankind-- so shall he sprinkle many
nations; kings shall shut their mouths
because of him;

for that which has not been told them
they see, and that which they have
not heard they understand.

Who has believed what they heard
from us? And to whom has the arm
of the LORD been revealed?

For he grew up before him like a
young plant, and like a root out of dry
ground; he had no form or majesty
that we should look at him, and no
beauty that we should desire him.

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

Surely he has borne our griefs and
carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed
him stricken, smitten by God, and
afflicted.

**But he was wounded for our
transgressions; he was crushed for
our iniquities; upon him was the
chastisement that brought us
peace, and with his stripes we are
healed.**

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own
way; and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was
afflicted, yet he opened not his
mouth; like a lamb that is led to the
slaughter, and like a sheep that before
its shearers is silent, so he opened not
his mouth.

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

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

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

Out of the anguish of his soul he
shall see and be satisfied; by his
knowledge shall the righteous one,
my servant, make many to be
accounted righteous, and he shall
bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will divide him a portion
with the many, and he shall divide
the spoil with the strong, because he
poured out his soul to death and was
numbered with the transgressors; yet
he bore the sin of many, and makes
intercession for the transgressors.

But what an astonishing claim to make! Because Isaiah wrote this song 700 years before Jesus died on the cross. For seven centuries it lay there in Scripture as a witness to the work of the coming Messiah. For almost a millennium it was read and studied, until it was finally fulfilled in the most wonderful and astonishing way.

We're going to meditate on this passage in the light of its fulfilment in Christ. We'll look at it a section at a time, and then pause to reflect, to think, and to pray. Meditation in the biblical sense is not to empty our minds. To meditate in the biblical sense means to *fill* our minds with the word of God, to chew on Scripture like a cow chews the cud, savouring it, pondering it, contemplating it from different angles, singing it, praying it.

So that's what we're going to do. And we start with the first stanza of Isaiah's servant song, at the top of the cross.

Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.

Here we see, then, that the servant of the LORD will act wisely, and be successful. He will accomplish the task for which he has been sent by God. And what does that mean? It means, this first verse tells us, that we are talking about someone who will be risen, ascended, and highly exalted.

Is this not Jesus, who died on the cross for our sins but who was raised from the dead on the third day?

And not only that: after he was raised he was also lifted up, he ascended into heaven, there to be exalted to the right hand of the Father.

So the song begins by telling us about this glorious, triumphant figure. But, enigmatically, before his exaltation many were astonished at him. He was disfigured and marred. It's a description of someone savagely beaten or with an ugly, debilitating disease like leprosy, which would make this servant unclean in the eyes of the people.

And yet his role was to sprinkle many nations, verse 15. We might not pick up immediately on the imagery being used here. When the Old Testament talks about sprinkling, it is not talking about watering the garden or putting hundreds and thousands on the top of a cake! Sprinkling was done with blood. It was part of the sacrificial rituals performed by priests to make atonement and to bring about ritual cleansing.

So if someone had an infectious disease, for instance, they were considered unclean while it lasted. When they were no longer infectious, they would go through this cleansing ritual (it's all in Leviticus 14 if you're interested!) which involved being sprinkled with blood.

How ironic then, for Isaiah's servant! He was considered unclean by many, Isaiah tells us, and yet he would be the one to sprinkle them with blood and bring cleansing. An astonishing turnaround. For one who was considered the friend of tax collectors and "sinners," to shed his own blood to purify us from all unrighteousness.

This would certainly silence kings, the wise and powerful, as their ideas of power and wisdom are overturned by this stunning reversal. Ridiculed but then raised. Laughed at, and yet lifted up. Hated by men, but highly exalted by God.

Let's spend a few minutes now, meditating on this first section, and praying for more understanding of what Jesus has done for us. So let's pray in our groups now...

We move on now to look more closely at part two of Isaiah's song about the suffering servant, the left-hand panel of the cross.

And rather than being a God's-eye view of Jesus' work on the cross and what it achieved, we now hear the report of those who have grasped the message of the cross. But they complain – “Who has believed our message?”

Who indeed? For it's not at first a very believable message, is it? A man who died on a cross 2000 years ago – how can he be *God*? How can it have anything to do with me today? How can this death be a demonstration of God's power?

And yet it is. It is the power and wisdom of God, a revelation of the arm of the Lord, Isaiah calls it. Why his “arm?” Well, that's where strength is, in arm-wrestlers for instance, or weight-lifters. And here the picture is of God “rolling up his sleeves” as it were, baring his arm, to come down and help his people. And how does God roll up his sleeves and get involved? By taking frail flesh and being born as a man.

He grew up like a tender shoot. The start of his life looked promising – angels filling the sky, shepherds flocking to see him, the visit of the wise men from the East. But he was a fragile shoot – attacked by King Herod who sought to kill the newborn king.

But he was a root out of dry ground, a speck of goodness and hope from less than promising soil – “can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

This is not describing the Jesus we know from paintings and stained glass windows. He is not the Jesus with blue eyes and long flowing hair, the beautiful and majestic figure of icons and pictures. No, the picture of Jesus given to us in Scripture is very different:

he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. In fact, he was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief...

That is the true picture of Jesus. A man with no worldly attractiveness, no charismatic appeal. It was his words and his actions that drew people to him. That's the true picture.

Anything else is idolatry, and misleading, as our 2 dimensional and 3 dimensional images of him are bound to be. God has given us just one dimension – the text of Scripture, his very own word, to define and clarify and show what he is like. And that true picture is more powerful than any mute idol or painting.

A picture is worth a thousand words, it has been said. But here in Isaiah's description of the man of sorrows, we see more in a few words than a picture could ever hope to convey. We see Jesus, despised by the crowds that once shouted "Hosanna to the Son of David!" but now shout "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

We see Jesus, betrayed by Judas and rejected by the religious regime – "He is not our King! We have no king but Caesar!"

And we see Peter, who denied three times that he even knew his Lord. Luke's Gospel tells us that when the cock crowed Jesus looked straight at Peter. But, "*as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*"

We esteemed him not. Not just "them", the crowds, the authorities, the world. But "us" – the very people he came to save. It was a bitter pill for him to swallow no doubt, but this suffering servant of God was well acquainted with suffering. As we heard back in Isaiah 50:6, he said, "*I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.*"

Let's spend a few moments now, looking back over this part of Isaiah's description of Jesus' life. Let's ponder what it meant for Jesus to be a man of sorrows. And as we do that, let's pray together in our groups. So let's pray together around the tables for a few minutes.

And now we come to the central stanza in Isaiah's poem about Jesus. Everything leads us here – the structure makes us focus on the center of the piece, just as our eyes are drawn to the centre of this cross. And the content above all draws us to this section too, because the big question here is "why?"

Why did the servant do it? Why did he endure such suffering? Why did God allow it? Why did this happen to someone who according to the very first verse of the whole piece, acted wisely? Unjust suffering doesn't seem to be very wise does it? Rejection and betrayal and pain don't sound like the rewards of a virtuous life. And yet...

The first part of this section takes up the last words of the previous bit. He was a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering, we were told. But now we realize that he also bore *our* sufferings, *our* griefs, and *our* sorrows. He was doing something *for us*.

And yet we considered him to be stricken by God. That word stricken is the word used time after time in Leviticus to describe the person who has been afflicted with a skin disease, like leprosy. It describes someone who is unclean because they have been struck down with disease.

We thought the servant was like that. Stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. And indeed he was. Just look at all the words that Isaiah piles up to describe what was happening to Jesus on the cross. Stricken, smitten, afflicted, wounded, crushed, chastised.

How dreadful it must have been! No wonder Jesus cried out "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" As he hung there he was literally God-forsaken, abandoned and cut off.

But here we learn the answer to that question, "Why?" He *was* pierced, but for *our* transgressions. He was crushed, but for *our* iniquities. He was chastised, punished, so that *we* could have peace with God, and by *his* wounds, *we* are healed.

Because the simple truth is, and we all know it to be true in our hearts, the simple truth is it should have been us. We are the ones who deserve to be stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. We are the

ones who have turned away from the source of all light and life and love. We are the ones who, like sheep going astray, have turned to our own way, saying “no thanks” to God and his ways.

And we would like to be able to pay for our mistakes. We would like to make it up to God for our rebellion and rejection of him. Yet we could never do enough.

If I had to atone for all my iniquity, if the Lord laid it on my head and set me to work to make up for what I’ve thought and what I’ve said and what I’ve done – I would be working without respite for all eternity.

And we’ve seen this problem throughout Isaiah 40-53. In chapter 42 we heard how the people are blind, deaf, and dull to the things of God. And in chapter 48 they don’t listen to him, but are obstinate, stiff-necked people who deal treacherously and rebel.

Now, rebellion against God, even the smallest and seemingly most insignificant sin, renders me guilty of treason. Treason against Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain and Northern Ireland used to carry the death penalty. How much more though, do I deserve to die, having committed treason against the Sovereign Lord of the Whole Universe?

And yet...Isaiah’s words sound too good to be true... the Lord has laid on *him*, on the suffering servant, the iniquity of us all.

Let’s just take a few minutes now, then, to fill our minds with these staggering verses. Why not take these words and make them your own. Read them to yourself, “He was wounded for *my* transgressions. He was crushed for *my* iniquities.” Insert your own sins, “He was crushed because I... dot dot dot...” And when you’ve done that, and let it sink in how much Jesus has done for you, just say thank-you.

So let’s pray, but silently this time. Let’s just be quiet for a few minutes.

I went to a performance of Handel’s *Messiah* at Christmas, in the Royal Albert Hall. During the interval someone said to me that they didn’t think Handel could be a Christian. “Why not?” I asked. “Because of that bit, ‘All we like sheep have gone astray’. He treats sin so flippantly, like it was fun. He can’t have understood it, or what the cross was about.”

Well, I don’t claim to be a classical music expert. But I love Handel’s *Messiah* so I jumped to Handel’s defence. We’re about to listen to that part of the *Messiah* where he deals with Isaiah 53:6. And what we get is a lot of silly sheep, going astray. Sin is seen from our perspective as, yes, maybe slightly jolly. You can almost picture the sheep zig-zagging around, heading off in a million different directions, away from God. We have turned – decisively turn-ED – every one to his own way.

But then Handel brilliantly – in my humble opinion – brilliantly and beautifully turns it around. So when he gets to “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” we see things differently. Because it is only in the light of the cross, where the punishment for our sins is meted out, that we see sin in its proper light. And Handel portrays this soberly, seriously, movingly as we hear successive waves of iniquity and guilt being laid, layer upon layer, onto Christ’s shoulders.

I think after he listened to it again in the light of what I said, my friend agreed that that was what Handel was doing. But see what you think as we listen to his interpretation of Isaiah 53:6 for a few minutes...

Now, having spoken in part two on that left-hand arm of the cross about the *life* of the servant, Isaiah now comes to narrate his *death*. His life was one of rejection and sorrow. And yet his response to such treatment was exemplary.

He was oppressed and afflicted, the word implies some kind of injustice, or unfair treatment. And the trial of Jesus was indeed a mockery of the legal process. The Jewish courts met illegally at night to pass summary judgment upon their own Messiah. The Roman Governor Pilate pronounced his verdict of “innocent”, and yet he sent Jesus to be flogged and crucified anyway, on the whim of the crowds. He freed a murderer, and condemned the Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace!

Yet Jesus did not open his mouth to complain. He did not resist. In fact, Matthew’s Gospel records the following incident as Jesus was being arrested. Matthew writes (Matthew 26:51-54):

*one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? **But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?"***

Led like a lamb to the slaughter, like a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth, and nor did he call upon the Lord of Hosts to send his angelic legions. Because this passage from Isaiah was in his mind. It must be fulfilled, as it was written.

He was assigned a grave with the wicked, verse 9 – the Hebrew here is plural, i.e. it means he died alongside wicked men, crucified between two thieves, numbered with the transgressors. But he was with the rich in his death – the Hebrew there is singular, i.e. it means he was with a rich *man* when he died.

Whether Isaiah understood what he was writing, I can’t say. How could this suffering servant be with the wicked and also with the rich when he died? We have seen how he was with wicked men, but how was he with a rich man too? Again, we read in Matthew how what was written was fulfilled (Matthew 27:57-60):

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock.

Assigned a grave with two wicked men, he was actually buried by a rich man.

Let’s pause again to ponder the wonderful ways in which the Lord Jesus fulfilled all that was written about him in the Old Testament. And let’s ponder how we can emulate his patient endurance of suffering as seen in Isaiah 53. On our tables, let’s pray out loud in groups to thank God for what Jesus did. So let’s pray together in our groups, perhaps breaking up into smaller groups of 3 or 4.

Finally, we come to the last part of Isaiah’s picture of the suffering servant, at the bottom of the cross. Here we discover the ultimate reason behind his suffering. *It was the will of the LORD to crush him*. Literally it says, “the LORD delighted to crush him.” In Isaiah 42 God presented his servant to us as one with whom he was very pleased. But now he is delighted to crush him.

Not the delight of a sadistic monster who loves to see pain inflicted on others. No, God is no sadist. He was not pleased that this was necessary, or happy that his beloved Son should have to suffer. But he was delighted with the outcome.

Because the cross was not a tragic mistake or an unforeseen accident. It was the plan of God from all eternity to save us through his voluntary, sacrificial death.

He gave his life as an, "*an offering for sin*" it says. Back in the first part of this song, we heard how the servant would be like a priest, sprinkling many nations with blood to make them ritually clean. But here at the end we discover that he was not only priest but sacrifice too, giving his *own* blood, like the animals sacrificed in the Temple day by day. "*Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*"

He took upon himself all our sin, all our guilt, and dealt with its consequences as his life ebbed away. And yet, unlike the animal sacrifices which made atonement for sin in the Temple, Jesus would return to see the result of his work. "*He shall see his offspring,*" Isaiah says, "*[and] he shall prolong his days.*"

That can only mean that after death there would be resurrection. This man of sorrows has been rejected, stricken, smitten, crushed, pierced, and assigned a grave. Like the sheep given as a guilt offering on the altar, he has given up his life on the cross. There is no doubt at all, he is dead.

Yet after the suffering of his soul, he shall see and be satisfied! He will rise again, not avoiding death but by passing through it to the other side.

He will see the light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak, and look back with satisfaction at what he has achieved.

What has he achieved? Here, God gives us his assessment. Just as we started this poem with a God's eye view, so it ends from that perspective too. "*the righteous one, my servant,*" God says, "*[will] make many to be accounted righteous.*"

In other words, he will bring righteousness to many, he will bring acquittal from all charges and a new standing with God. Whereas once we were accounted guilty in God's sight because of all that we have done, now because of the servant, we will be reckoned innocent. In a great exchange, an amazing swap, *he* the perfect, spotless lamb of God is reckoned as guilty --- and *we* sinners, straying sheep, are reckoned righteous, right with God.

And the servant will be rewarded too, verse 12. Because he was obedient unto death, even death on a cross, God gives him a great reward, the spoils of a victorious war against sin and death and hell. And if we are Christ's, we share in that victory.

So for one last time, let's sit in quiet for a few moments and ponder this last section of Isaiah 53. Let's praise God for his eternal plan to send Jesus to save us. Let's praise him for the resurrection, and thank Jesus for bearing our sin. Let's read this passage through to ourselves again, with gratitude and wonder. And after a few minutes quiet, we'll sing a last hymn together...

Orientation talk by Nick Margesson on Isaiah 54 (missing)...

Study Notes

Isaiah 55

Introduction

There will be a talk at Central Focus on chapter 54. Chapters 54 and 55 are a double celebration of the work of the Super Servant in 52:13-53:12. They bring to an end the central section of the book (chapters 40-55).

Main Point and Purpose

Come to God for satisfying food, certain forgiveness, and a singing future. The chapter calls very strongly for a response to all that God has done and promised (verses 1-2, 6-7). What is offered in return is abundant satisfaction (verse 2) and inclusion in a new worldwide covenant under the Messiah (verses 3-5) with abundant forgiveness of sins (verse 7) guaranteed (verses 8-10) and a bright future promised (verses 12-13).

Details

55:1-3 There are two parallel “panels” in the chapter (1-5 and 6-13). Both begin with a strong exhortation to the people (1-3, 6-7). In 44:20 the idolater “feeds on ashes”; but here God offers water, wine, milk, bread, and rich food (see the banquet of 25:6). Idols exact a heavy price from their worshippers and do not satisfy or bring life to the soul with peace or pardon, but God offers all this even to those without money. Here is a free offer, available to all who diligently listen to God.

55:3b-5 Those who listen are cut into an everlasting covenant, where the blessings promised to David – namely, an exalted throne and enduring offspring - are fulfilled for our benefit (see especially Psalm 89 verses 1-4, 19-29, and 38-39, 49 probably written in the exile). This (new?) covenant is needed because the old one was broken by the people’s sin (punished in the exile itself). Linking it to David shows that the solution to the problem of sin lies with Messiah (David’s line) not Moses (and the Mosaic covenant). Glorified by God, he (the David-Servant figure) “calls” the nations, to rule over them as commander, leading them to God (see 2:3, 11:10-16, 19:24-25, 42:6, 49:6, 66:18).

55:6-7 Again, as in verses 1-3, God calls to his people to respond: seek and call for God, forsake your sin and return to God for forgiveness. The last part of verse 7 is actually a promise – return to him “for he will abundantly pardon.” But in keeping with the opening invitation, this is urgent – God must be sought “while he is near”, the implication being that he may not always be.

55:8-11 Three causal links are established by the word “For” at the start of verses 8, 9, and 10, giving us three more reasons why we should return to God (the first reason was in verse 7: return, for he will pardon). The first reason to return is that though we may not understand this offer and how it can “work”, our understanding is not a measure of what God can do. So we are to leave our own ways and thoughts for God’s ways and thoughts. Second, we should seek him and forsake our own ways because his ways and thoughts are *higher* than ours. That is, we may not freely forgive people, but he does; we may not have compassion on rebels, but he does. Or, our words of promise may not mean very much but his certainly do. Third, we can return because his word of promise is absolutely dependable and will certainly accomplish what God purposed. This takes us back to the promise in 40:1-8, which ends with a similar reassurance that God’s word – his promise of comfort and pardon – is utterly trustworthy and solid.

55:12-13 The final reason to seek the Lord and return to him is “For...” he promises great results and a bright future if we do! These verses express great joy and happiness (see 35:10; 51:11) for those who return to God as a result of what the Servant has done. Even the inanimate creation joins the chorus (see also 44:23 and 49:13) praising God for his redemption. In new creation language (like that in 11:6-9) Isaiah describes a renewed world where beautiful greenery replaces the thorns and briars – the everlasting “sign” of an everlasting new order, to God’s fame and glory.

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. John Oswalt sums it up well: “Because of what he [the Servant] has done, God’s face toward his people is not stormy but sunny. The ‘arm of the Lord’ has been revealed against what has separated them from God: their unatoned-for sin. The only thing that they must do is to accept the sin offering that the Servant has made... and receive the mercy of God... If they do that, they are indeed able to be the servants of God in the world.”

2. Cross references have been made from Isaiah 55 to John 4:10-14 and John 6:35 and 7:37-38 where Jesus claims that he is the one who can give satisfying, living water to any who ask for it. In Isaiah 55 itself, however, the water on offer (along with other drinks, and food) in verse 1 is parallel to the “abundant” forgiveness on offer in verses 6-7, so if a cross-reference to John’s Gospel is made, it would probably be less confusing to stick with the John 4 one, which emphasises the satisfying and long-lasting character of the “water” Jesus offers.

3. It would be appropriate to ask ourselves at this stage whether we have come to this feast, turned from our sin, and returned to God for his forgiveness. It would also be appropriate for us to ask whether we are continuing to find satisfaction and delight in Christ alone, or whether we are tempted to “spend our money on that which is not bread” (verse 2) spiritually speaking. Do we delight in sport or friends or work or TV more than we delight in Christ?

Isaiah 56-62

Orientation talk by Richard Andrews

After the tremendous promises of chapter fifty-five and God's call to everyone, this final section of Isaiah opens with a bang... Fifty-six starts with a picture of God's worldwide people including the foreigner (verse 3), the eunuch (verse 4) and "the outcasts of Israel" (verse 8).

If Isaiah finished there we'd be left on a high... but he doesn't. There are eleven more exciting, challenging chapters.

And it is a good thing that Isaiah keeps going because this world is a mixed up place. Compared to the great picture in chapter 55 there is a danger we become dispirited as we struggle in the here and now. The reality is Isaiah's first readers lived under the cloud of exile and we know from our daily struggles that we live in a broken, wicked world.

Tonight's section splits in two. The first three and a half chapters describe the problem... the topsy turvy world we live in. A reality check...

The following chapters thrill us with God's response... the certainty of His rescue, the magnificence of his future for us.

I've put some more detailed notes on the handouts on the tables. But now let's look in a bit more detail at the reality check in chapters fifty-seven to fifty-nine...

It's a real mess... God condemns blind leaders; tells us of the plight of righteous men and then condemns the idolatry of the nation, look down with me to chapter fifty-seven verse three to get a flavour...

"But you draw near sons of the sorceress, offspring of the adulterer and the loose woman... Are you not children of transgression, the offspring of deceit you who burn with lust among the oaks, under every green tree who slaughter your children in the valleys under the clefts of the rocks?"

Isaiah picks up the stone and reveals Israel's idolatry and condemns it. Next he tells us that God promises to heal the contrite and that God hates false religion... before this section concludes with a confession over the page in chapter fifty-nine and a summary of the mess that the world is in, in verses fourteen and fifteen...

"Justice is turned back and righteousness stands afar off; for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey"

And at this point... if we've been reading Isaiah, if we are trusting his great promises, we should be crying out that after the high of chapter fifty-five everything looks wrong in these chapters... but if we're honest... Isaiah is spot on in his description of the world around us... so if it is so bad, what was the point of the suffering servant? Was the paradise we looked at last week a hoax? After fifty-nine chapters are we right back to the problem laid out in chapter one where we learn that God hates Israel's festivals and that Israel's hands are full of blood.

Well no! Isaiah has deliberately structured his material to ask these questions. Isaiah deliberately echoes God's condemnation of false religion from chapter one in chapter fifty-eight. So that right at the point of our despair, here at the finale of the book we are uplifted as God rides into the picture ... as God steps centre stage... and as God addresses the problem...

He gives His verdict as we continue reading verse fifteen

“the Lord saw it and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man and wondered that there was no one to intercede;”

The problem is HUGE and if we pretend that it isn't, then we're kidding ourselves... So God tells us what He is going to do about it..

“then his own arm brought him salvation and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head he put on garments of vengeance for clothing and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak...” God Himself is coming to the rescue... “And a Redeemer” verse twenty “will come to Zion to those in Jacob who turn from transgression”

With this glorious picture of God coming as Rescuer and Redeemer, Isaiah breaks into four songs about how this Rescue will come about – about the victorious ruler through whom the Rescue will happen, and about the glory of God's Kingdom.

Just like the servant figure of chapters forty to fifty-five, this last major section has a main character – the victorious ruler. And just like the servant, we have two songs addressed to the ruler and two songs sung by the ruler – I've outlined the structure on the handout.

The figure is impressive and there is much that we could say about him. But if we just pick out the themes of God's rescue of righteousness, salvation and vengeance, we see how they underlie his work

He is to bring righteousness...

So we read in chapter 59 verse 21 that there will be an everlasting covenant with Israel so that God's words that “I have put in your mouth... shall not depart out of your mouth...”

Or in chapter 62 verse two “the nations shall see your righteousness”

He is to bring salvation, so we are told at the end of chapter 62...

“Say to the daughter of Zion, “Behold your salvation comes, behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. And they shall be called the Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord and you shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken”

And He is to bring judgement, vengeance... so in chapter 63 the ruler tramples the nations enacting God's vengeance and wrath.

And as we study the song in chapter sixty-one tonight I hope that we'll see Isaiah bring out these themes. Moreover, that we'll see the parallels Isaiah has drawn between this ruler and the Messiah of chapters nine and eleven and the servant of chapters forty to fifty-five...

We've only had time in this brief orientation talk to touch the surface and haven't had time to delve into the wonderful promises for God's Kingdom. I hope that you'll have time to look at some of these promises tonight and next week when we'll see this idea come to the fore. But if you can find time this coming week, I recommend that you read chapter sixty each day and rejoice in HOW great God's promises are... HOW wide ranging and HOW wondrous ...

But now it is time to study chapter sixty-one and the song of victorious ruler and the restored nation...

Study Notes

Isaiah 61

Introduction

There will be a talk at Central Focus on Isaiah 56-62. The last part of Isaiah (56-66) draws together many of the themes we have seen already in the book, skilfully weaving together themes from part 1 (1-37) and part 2 (38-55).

Main Point and Purpose

Rejoice in the transforming, restoring gospel proclaimed by the Anointed Preacher. The transformation is in verse 1-4. The restoration of Israel to a place of honour is seen in verses 5-9. The rejoicing element comes in verse 10.

Details

1-4 The speaker is anointed with the Spirit of God, just like the Davidic Messiah of Isaiah 11:2 and the Servant of 42:1. His task is not to rule a new creation or bring justice to the nations as such, but to be a gospel preacher. "Good news" (gospel) echoes Isaiah 40:9 (see also 41:27, 52:7, 60:6). This gospel proclaims the end of poverty/affliction, broken-heartedness, captivity (see also 42:7), debt (the year of the LORD's favour perhaps refers to Leviticus 25's "year of jubilee" when debts were forgiven and lands returned), mourning, bad dress sense (wearing ashes in verse 3; this is also a sign of mourning of course!) and discouragement. Verses 3 and 4 picture the rebuilding of what was devastated, much like 54:3 or 58:12 (a poignant picture for those who will witness the destruction of Jerusalem in 597-587BC). This gospel message is powerful: comforting, binding up, bringing transformation and joy, all for God's glory ("that he may be glorified", end of verse 3). The Preacher does not just proclaim these things, but also gives them (e.g. "to grant...", beginning of verse 3), because he *is* the good news.

5-7 When this Anointed Preacher comes, God's people will again have a privileged place in God's plan, as priests (see "a kingdom of priests" in Exodus 19:6). This is part of the movement in Isaiah where Israel are restored to their role by the work of the Servant, who is for Israel what Israel was meant to be for the world (see, e.g., "a light for the nations" in 42:6 and 49:6). This is a reversal of how things will seem during the Babylonian exile. It means idols will be discredited and through Israel the world will come to know God. This is part of the "worldwide" theme in Isaiah (e.g. 2:3, 6:3, 11:10-16, 19:24-25, 42:6, 49:6)

8-9 Israel will be blessed by God again ("recompense" here not having the sense of punishment but of reward). Note the mention of the everlasting covenant, which reappears from 55:3, and how (like the Abrahamic covenant, Genesis 17:7) it extends to the offspring and descendants of the people included in it (see also 59:21; Ezekiel 37:24-28; Acts 2:39). There is a question about whether it's the Preacher still speaking here (as he is from verse 1); if so, then in verse 1, the Spirit of the LORD is upon him, because the LORD has anointed him, and yet in verse 8 he *is* the LORD. It is not clear yet (until the fuller New Testament revelation) but this *could* be an intimation of the divinity of the Anointed Preacher, and even perhaps of the trinity.

10-11 There is debate about whether the Preacher speaks again here or whether it is the beneficiaries of his work (Zion/Israel) who rejoice in God. The speaker in these verses has been given righteousness and salvation (verse 10), so it seems likely that he is a recipient of the Preacher's work (see verse 3) rather than the Preacher himself. God has caused righteousness and praise to sprout up (NB there are no Brussels Sprouts in the Bible) and beautifully adorn his people in the eyes of the world.

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. In Luke 4:16-21, Jesus carefully chooses Isaiah 61 as the reading for one of his first synagogue sermons. He declares boldly that Isaiah 61 is fulfilled right there and then, which must mean that he is the anointed one who has come to declare the good news (that is, he's the Christ who proclaims the gospel). The gospel Jesus brought was one of freedom from sin and all its consequences (*captivity* to the devil, the *mourning* of death, the *poverty* of a life without God). Much is sometimes made of the fact that Luke's quotation (or Jesus' reading?) stops before Isaiah 61:2b, "the day of vengeance." This *may* be significant, in that the day of final judgment awaits Jesus' *second* coming whereas his first is primarily about salvation (see Hebrews 9:26-28); if this is the case it is another instance of the Old Testament viewing the two comings of Christ as if they were one (see application point 2 in the notes on Malachi 2:17-3:5 for further comments on this, at www.centralfocus.org.uk).

2. We have now seen Jesus proclaimed as the Messiah of Isaiah from every major section of the book. It is worth pausing to reflect on this, as a way of summarising what we've seen in the book as a whole. He is **Immanuel** (Isaiah 7:14=Matt 1:23), **Wonderful Counsellor** bringing light to Galilee (Isaiah 9:1-7=Matt 4:15-16), **Root of Jesse** (Isaiah 11:1-16 = Romans 15:12) and **Gentle Servant** (Isaiah 42:1-9 = Matthew 12:15-21), **Servant/Light of the World** (Isaiah 49:1-7 = Acts 13:47), **Suffering Servant** (Isaiah 53 = Matt 8:14-17; Luke 22:30; John 12:38; Acts 8:32-35; Rom 15:21; 1 Peter 2:22-25). Now he is also the **Anointed Preacher** of Isaiah 61.

3. The gospel is not for strong people who are comfortable and in control. It is for the broken, for those who are so bound in various addictions that release seems impossible, for those who think they will never experience the favour of God, for those whose lives are full of ashes, sackcloth, and despair. For them, Jesus has good news. Do we?

Isaiah 63-66

Orientation talk by Mike Walton

Well, tonight we get to eat and digest our last slice of Isaiah. Or as David Jackman likes to call it, our last slice of the elephant. I am sure that you would agree, that Isaiah has been an immensely rich feast. A book of anointed kings, super servants, rubbish servants, awful historical judgements, even worse future judgements, astonishing historical rescues and seemingly impossible and unbelievable future rescues.

Because it has been so rich, I thought it might be useful to briefly revisit where we have got so far. A whistle stop survey before we look at our last few chapters.

Last week Richard took us back to chapter one and reminded us of the mess that Judah was in. Judah and the LORD were not exactly getting along very well. In fact by Chapter two, Judah, along with the whole world are clearly seen to be under Gods judgement.

But chapter two also presented us with an apparent paradox. Could you briefly turn to chapter two?

Chapter two, verses one to five describe how Zion will be glorified again. (Verse two) People from all nations shall flood to it, (verse four) there will be no need for weapons of war, (verse five) people shall walk in the light of the Lord.

How do people who are obviously wicked to the core, under Gods judgement, end up streaming to a glorious, shining, peaceful Zion? Alright we know the answer is Jesus, but Isaiah's first readers would have been going "Good question, how is this going to work?"

And this paradox in the first half of Isaiah, all the way up to chapter thirty nine just gets stronger. The judgements get worse and the descriptions of Zion and her Immanuel king figure just get better. But after thirty nine chapters with a message predominantly of judgement we are convinced judgement is what everyone faces.

Then mercifully chapters forty to fifty five brings the fantastic news of a super servant. A servant who would not fail, unlike Israel the nation and her previous kings. A super servant whose sacrificial death means a remnant can be redeemed. Redeemed from the very judgement we've so clearly seen in the first half of the book. And clearly redeemed to the same glorified Zion as chapter two.

And then last week, we started the final section of Isaiah. A section clearly grounded in the waiting period. The promise of the redeeming servant is certain but Gods people, the remnant, are clearly not experiencing life in glorious Zion. Salvation is

now available to people from every nation, but the world is still a very mixed up place. The old problems of idolatry and false religion are clearly visible to everyone.

But Gods' response is... yes that is what it is like now, but last week we saw God restate his commitment to righteousness, salvation and vengeance. God will act.

And now onto chapter sixty three onwards.

Point 1: Reality check, waiting is hard. Another reality check is needed in this final section, because waiting is hard.

Isaiah, along with the remnant, cries out for God to merciful and powerfully act. Please look with me at chapter sixty four and verses one and two, page seven hundred and fifty four.

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence - as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil - to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence.

These people already know redemption is available through the super servant. But they are longing for God to finally act, so every single person in the world will tremble at Gods presence.

But why are they so desperate for this to happen? Admittedly it would be pretty exciting to watch all this take place, even Central Focus might be missed for such a spectacle.

But their motives are firmly based in the hard reality of life. Bottom line: I don't think they felt like God's chosen people. Chapter sixty three describes how God has demonstrated his love throughout history, but by the time we get to verse nineteen, the people are saying:

We have become like those over whom you have never ruled, like those who are not called by your name.

It is nearly as if, God's redeemed remnant feel as if they are gentile, totally cut off from God and his promises. Chapter sixty four verse seven, God has seemingly hidden his face from his people. By the time we get to the end of chapter sixty four, the people seem to be living afflicted lives.

Our earlier reality check back in chapters fifty six to fifty-nine showed how mixed up the world still was. These chapters here show the painful reality for the remnant, as

they live in such a world. A reality where God seems so distant and his promises seem forgotten.

Waiting for God to fulfil his promises was genuinely hard. They longed for God to have mercy on them and to act right now, because life was really tough.

And the situation gets worse as we go into chapter sixty five.

Sixty five verse three:

A people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and making offerings on bricks.

Unauthorised religious practices are still to be seen.

How about verse four@

who sit in tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat pig's flesh and broth of tainted meat is in their vessels.

Perhaps an alternative spiritual system as they meet in secret places, definitely flagrant disobedience as they eat unclean meat from unclean dishes.

And finally verse five:

who say, "Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you."

Outright religious snobbery. A holier than thou attitude is being displayed for everyone to see.

No wonder the remnant that is hanging on is finding life really tough. God seems distant from them, the rest of the world around them is acting as if God does not exist or at the very least is unable to act.

And now much more briefly onto my second point, starting at chapter sixty five verse eight.

Point 2: Gods people will be called out from judgement

God's people will be called out from judgement. God's judgement will have a dividing effect. The redeemed remnant will be spared while the disobedient are destined to the sword. Look with me at Isaiah 65 verse 13

¹³Therefore thus says the Lord GOD:

"Behold, my servants shall eat,

but you shall be hungry;

behold, my servants shall drink,

but you shall be thirsty;

behold, my servants shall rejoice,

but you shall be put to shame;

¹⁴behold, my servants shall sing for gladness of heart,

but you shall cry out for pain of heart

and shall wail for breaking of spirit.

In the midst of judgement, this separation will take place.

Gods remnant, they need to look forward to God's final judgement. It is at that point where life will really change. It is at that point where the reality for God enemies will be visibly different to the experience of Gods people.

It makes perfect sense therefore, for Gods people to look forward to Gods judgement. They will not actually suffer in it because of Isaiah fifty three.

As the great separation takes place you get verse sixteen. Former troubles are forgotten, never to be seen again.

And most excitingly of all, this judgement means a wonderful new creation will be brought in. A new creation to be enjoyed by Gods people forever.

Life is going to be hard for the remnant of Gods people as they wait in this world. But God reminds them of the certain judgement that is to come. And through that judgement the new creation that will be able to enjoy. What is there response to be?

Well it's a common response we've seen throughout Isaiah: trust. Trust in God's redeeming servant, trust in God's promises to bring his people through his judgement and onto far better things.

Lets look at those better things in our groups now.

Study Notes

Isaiah 65:17-66:24

Introduction

There will be a talk at Central Focus on Isaiah 63-66. As in chapters 1-5, judgment and hope are placed alongside each other, although this section begins and ends with hope rather than judgment. God can now declare that although judgment remains a possibility, it is not the last word for those who hear God's call (6), relinquish their trust in the nations (7-39), believe God's promise of unmerited grace (40-48), accept the sin offering of the Servant on their behalf (49-55) and allow God to transform and produce righteousness in them before the nations (56-66).

Main Point and Purpose

God is making a new and perfect creation centred on Jerusalem, so rejoice and listen to him – or face exclusion and judgement. The new creation theme is clearly key (see the “bookends” in 65:17 and 66:22 which both speak of the new heavens and new earth). Jerusalem is mentioned in 65:18, 66:10, and 66:20. Rejoicing features in e.g. 65:18, 66:10, 14. Listening is the response prized in 66:1-6. Exclusion and judgement appear in 66:4-6, 15-17, and 24.

Details

65:17-25 The final picture in the book is of a renewed, re-created creation, which is so beautiful as to cause all thoughts of the former world to vanish (see 65:16) and be replaced by everlasting joy. Jerusalem is an essential part of this vision of a new creation, for in it are God's people, minus the weeping and distress of former years. The harlot city of Isaiah 1:21 has been transformed. None of the things that spoil *this* world (such as untimely death or frustrating work) will be there (verses 20-23). Verse 20 is not meant as a literal picture of old age followed by *death* in the new creation, since we know from the New Testament (e.g. 1 Cor 15:54) and from Isaiah 25:8 that death itself will be swallowed up forever. Verse 24 pictures a perfect relationship with God. Verse 25 is a condensation of Isaiah 11:6-9, and therefore links the perfected kingdom of the Davidic Messiah with this new creation. (*An alternative reading from a premillennialist perspective (e.g. Wayne Grudem and others) would see this as a description of the millennial kingdom which precedes the eternal state, where Christ physically rules on earth but sin and suffering and death have not finally been removed yet. Evangelicals will differ on knotty issues of eschatology like this, but don't let that be too distracting. If none of this stuff in italics makes any sense to you, don't worry!*).

66:1-6 Here God contrasts the humility and contrition (repentance) of the one who listens to his word (verses 2 and 5) and those who worship him falsely, offering sacrifices but without integrity of heart and soul (verse 3). God does not need their temple sacrifices, nor even a temple (verses 1-2), and would have preferred them to listen to him instead (verse 4). Those who put their own “religion” above listening to God will face judgment, emanating (ironically) from the temple itself (v 6).

66:7-14 The main point here is: rejoice in what God will do for Jerusalem (verse 10) in bringing her peace (verse 12) and comfort (verse 13). This will reinvigorate God's servants (note the plural applied to them here, in contrast to the singular for The Servant in Isaiah 42, 49, and 52-53). They (Zion) will know his blessing, while his enemies will know his righteous anger.

66:15-24 Judgement and hope again come together in this final section. Verses 15-17 are a fiery picture of judgement. Yet verses 18-21 picture the nations coming to Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD and to see his glory, as brothers (verse 20) to Israel (note they are not scattered Israelites, since they are specifically contrasted with Israelites at the end of verse 20). Verses 22-23 stay with the good news of an enduring family of believers who last as long as the new creation itself (verse 22), and who worship the one true God together (verse 23). Yet verse 24 ends the book on a note of judgment: there will be no peace for the wicked (see 48:22 and 57:21). Alongside eternal bliss, there is eternal punishment for those who rebel against God. We may find it hard to reconcile, but in Scripture the existence of hell does not spoil the joy of heaven (see also Malachi 4:1-3).

Application in the light of Scripture as a whole

1. Isaiah has of course discussed issues relating to the future before. It is well worth casting our minds back to Isaiah 2:1-5, Isaiah 11:6-9, Isaiah 19:19-25, Isaiah 24-27, Isaiah 35, Isaiah 55:12-13 to remember some of this joyful, transformed world, Jerusalem-centred, death-defeating, gentile-including imagery.

2. The ultimate fulfilment of the new creation theme is in Revelation 21:1-4. Not only do we see there the new creation, but a city – Jerusalem - is again a key factor. Death and mourning and “the former things” (compare Isaiah 65:16-17) have all passed away. Revelation is clearly echoing Isaiah here (as well as other parts of Scripture) and you may well spot other allusions and quotations from Isaiah throughout the book. We also see in Revelation 21:8 that in the midst of the joy there is judgement still for those who did not repent of evil and listen to the good news.

3. The last section of Isaiah faces us with a choice: inclusion or exclusion, joy or sorrow, trembling at God's word or rebelling against him. As we look back over the book as a whole we are reminded again that if we do not stand firm in our faith we will not stand at all (Isaiah 7:9b). We must therefore examine ourselves to see if we still trust in the God of Isaiah to save us through the work and gospel of his Servant, whatever our circumstances might be.

Questions relating to Isaiah as a whole

Read all of Isaiah through at least once (it's only 66 chapters!).

1. What is the general thrust of the whole book?
 2. Which bits make you go "hmmmm?"
 3. Which bits make you go "What on earth is that about?"
 4. Write down recurring words, phrases, and themes.
 5. Why not plan to read again a chapter of Isaiah every day for the rest of term? You can just about fit it all in before Christmas!
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Questions relating to Isaiah 5

1. What has God done for his people in 5:1-7? But what is the problem?
2. Is there a structure to verses 8-30, any repeated words, phrases or ideas which give this section a shape?
3. What is the essence of Israel's sin against God?
4. What is God going to do about their sin?
5. Read Mark 12:1-12. How is Jesus' use of the vineyard image different / similar to Isaiah?
6. If you get time and would like to think deeper, read Psalm 80 and John 15:1-8 and consider what Jesus is saying about himself by using the image of the vine.

Questions relating to Isaiah 6

1. Why does chapter 6 and the commission of Isaiah as a prophet not come *before* chapters 1-5?
2. What do we learn about God from Isaiah's vision?
3. What do we learn about humanity in relation to God from Isaiah's vision?
4. What is the purpose of Isaiah's ministry (verses 8-13)?
5. Read Matthew 13:1-23 (especially verses 14-15). Why does Jesus quote Isaiah 6?
6. If you have more time and would like to think deeper, read 2 Chronicles 26, which records the reign of Uzziah (mentioned in Isaiah 6:1). How does this historical background help to put Isaiah 6 into context?

Questions relating to Isaiah 9:1-7

1. What is the connection between the end of chapter 8 and the start of chapter 9? i.e. into what context does this happy prophecy come?
2. What is the good news in verses 2-3 (in your own words)?
3. What *reasons* for joy are given in verses 4 and 5?
4. What similarities are there between the person described in verses 6-7 and “Immanuel” from chapters 7-8?
5. Read Matthew 1:18-25 and 4:12-17. Who does Matthew think Isaiah 7-9 is talking about?
6. If you want to ponder the details in this passage, you could look up *Midian* from verse 4 in Judges 7 (see also Isaiah 10:26); *wonderful counsellor* from verse 6 in Isaiah 28:29; *mighty God* in Isaiah 10:21. Does *Everlasting Father* in Isaiah 9:6 mean that the person in view here is God the Father (and if not, why not?).

Questions relating to Isaiah 11-12

1. What is the structure of chapter 11? Give each section a title (a section is a handful of verses or so).
2. What similarities are there between the figure described here and the one described in 9:1-7?
3. What *new* elements are there here in chapter 11 compared with the portrait of the Messiah in chapter 9?
4. What is happening in verses 10-16? When is this fulfilled? (Hint: if you get stuck then Acts 2:1-12, 41 might be an interesting place to look).
5. What is the fulfilment of the “swooping” in verse 14? (Hint: if you get stuck then Romans 1:5 might be an interesting place to look).
6. What is the main point of chapter 12? Can you split it into sections?
7. If you have time, compare Isaiah 11:11, 11:16, Jeremiah 16:14-15, Jeremiah 23:7-8 and Luke 9:30. What is the significance of the Exodus from Egypt in these verses?

Questions relating to Isaiah 19

1. What do you think is the point of all the oracles against the nations in chapters 13-23?
2. What things will happen to Egypt in Isaiah 19:1-15 as part of God's judgment?
3. Is there a structure (repeated words or phrases, obvious marks of an underlying structure) to 19:16-25?
4. What is the essence of the transformation described in 19:18-25? What is so amazing about this?
5. If you have time, do read through all of Isaiah 13-23 and see if there are common themes to all these judgment prophecies. You could also compare this section of Isaiah with Jeremiah 46-51 and Ezekiel 25-32. Why did the prophets prophesy against other nations like this?

Questions relating to Isaiah 26

1. Is there a structure to this chapter? i.e. can you split the song into verses with distinct subjects or themes?
2. What is promised for God's people?
3. What is promised for the wicked?
4. What is the situation of God's people as pictured in this chapter? That is, do they currently enjoy all the blessings promised, or not?
5. If you have time, compare Isaiah 26:19 with the following verses: Isaiah 53:10-11, Psalm 16:8-11, Daniel 12:1-3, and Job 19:25-27. What is the hope of an Old Testament believer?

Questions relating to Isaiah 35

1. In what ways are things reversed and the world transformed in this passage?
2. What responses from God's people does this poem call for and encourage?
3. What is the motivation given to produce such a response?
4. How does this passage fit with the rest of Isaiah? That is, what is "Isaiah" about this prophecy, and why is it particularly appropriate here?
5. If you get time, look up Ezekiel 47:1-12, Psalm 46, and Matthew 11:4-5, and explore the links and common themes between these different texts.

Questions relating to Isaiah 36-37

1. Summarise the story in the following sections:

36:1-12

36:11-22

37:1-13

37:14-20

37:21-35

37:36-38

2. How is this (true!) story a fulfilment of all that Isaiah has said so far in the book? (If you get stuck here, look up 10:20-27).

3. What is the big message to take away from these chapters?

4. If you get time, summarise these sections of Isaiah which we have studied this term (this would be a good thing to do over the Christmas holiday, before we move on to the second half of the book!):

Isaiah 1-5

Isaiah 6

Isaiah 7-10

Isaiah 11-12

Isaiah 13-23

Isaiah 24-27

Isaiah 28-35

Isaiah 36-37

Questions relating to Isaiah 38-39

1. Contrast Hezekiah in 38:1-8 with Ahaz in 7:10-17. What are the differences are similarities between these two kings?
2. After such a great deliverance, what would you expect Hezekiah's song in 38:9-20 to say? What *is* its main theme?
3. What is stressed in chapter 39 verses 2b, 4b, and 6? What is wrong with Hezekiah's policy here?
4. What is prophesied in 39:6-7? When was this fulfilled?
5. If you get time and would like to think deeper... 38:6 seems to be a prophecy of the deliverance of Jerusalem in 36-37, and the Babylonian messengers of 39 do not mention any destruction of the Assyrians, so many conclude that chapters 38-39 actually happened *before* the events of chapters 38-39. If that is so, can you think why Isaiah has ignored the correct chronological order?

Questions relating to Isaiah 40

1. What is the main message of 40:1-5? To whom is it addressed, and when?
2. What is the main message of verses 6-8? Why did the people need reminding of this (especially verse 8)?
3. What phrases and themes are repeated throughout 40:9-31?
4. What would cause people to doubt the things taught in verses 9-31?
5. If you get time and would like to think deeper, read 2 Kings 21-25 (or at least chapters 24-25) to find out what happened between Hezekiah and the Babylonian exile.

Questions relating to Isaiah 42

1. How is the servant of the LORD described in verses 1-4?
He is: -
 - verse 1
 - verse 2
 - verse 3
 - verse 4
2. What will he **do**, in verses 1-7?
3. Is the servant of verses 1-9 the same as the servant in verses 18-25? If not, why not?
4. Why does Israel need the servant?
5. Read Matthew 3:13-17 and Matthew 12:15-21. How is Isaiah 42 fulfilled in the New Testament?

Questions relating to Isaiah 48

1. In verses 1-2, how are the people describing themselves? That is, how do they define their identity?
2. What does God say in verses 3-8
 - a) about himself?
 - b) about Israel?
3. Why did God rescue Israel from the exile? (v 9-11)
4. Who is verse 16 about?
5. What is the big application for the original hearers in this chapter (especially verse 20)?
6. Research: How is the theme of “get out of Babylon” developed in the New Testament?

Questions relating to Isaiah 49:1-7 and 50:4-11

1. What is the main point of the “servant song” in 49:6?
2. Is there any hint in 49:1-7 that the Servant’s mission include opposition and difficulty?
3. What makes the Servant different from Israel in 50:4-5?
4. What does this lead to in 50:6?
5. What is the Servant’s attitude towards this in 50:7-9?
6. If you get time, read Acts 13:44-48. How do Paul and Barnabus use Isaiah 49?

Questions relating to Isaiah 52:13-53:12

1. How would you structure / divide up this last great “servant song”?
2. Assuming it has not just fallen from heaven into the middle of Isaiah, how is it related to what comes before?
3. Look up Matthew 8:14-17, Luke 22:35-38, John 12:37-38, Acts 8:26-35, Romans 15:20-21, and 1 Peter 2:24-25. What does the New Testament say about the identity of the Servant in Isaiah 53?
4. Can you see other fulfilments of Isaiah 53 in the New Testament? If so, where...?

Questions relating to Isaiah 55

1. What would you say are the main themes of this chapter?
2. Why do you think it comes where it does in Isaiah?
3. In verses 1-5, what is the feast, and how is entrance gained to it?
4. What are the similarities between verses 6-13 and verses 1-5? What are the differences?
5. What does/will God's word achieve, in this chapter?
6. If you get time, look up John 4:10-14 and John 6:35 and 7:37-38. Did Jesus have Isaiah 55 at the back of his mind when he said these things, do you think?

Questions relating to Isaiah 61

1. Looking particularly at verses 1-4, what does this person have in common with the Messiah as portrayed in Isaiah so far? (Hint: Look especially at chapter 11 & chapter 42)
2. What is the main job of this person in chapter 61? (e.g. Suffering? Ruling?)
3. What do verses 8 & 9 have in common with elsewhere in Isaiah (especially 55:1-5 and 59:21)?
4. How would you sum up what is happening in verses 5-7?
5. If you get time, look up Luke 4:16-21. Who does Jesus think Isaiah 61 is about, and what is interesting about his quotation of Isaiah 61?

Questions relating to Isaiah 65:17-66:24

1. What is it that links 65:17-24 with chapter 66? (i.e. why include the last bit of chapter 65 in our final study?).
2. What is Isaiah alluding to in 65:25 (i.e. does it sound familiar...)? Why does he do this when talking about the new creation?
3. What is the main thrust of 66:1-6, and 66:7-14? Note any familiar words and concepts from elsewhere in Isaiah which turn up here.
4. What is happening in 66:18-21? Where have we seen similar ideas in Isaiah before now?
5. Why does Isaiah end with 66:24, and not with something more cheery?
6. If you get time, look up Revelation 21:1-8. What ideas has Revelation taken up from Isaiah?