

## SLOW FOOD NOTES on ISAIAH 56-66

The final eleven chapters of Isaiah (sometimes called Third Isaiah) have no agreed date or historical context, though Motyer is convinced that 'the setting is plainly pre-exilic' (see notes on 65:1-7). The society being addressed is no longer the exiles in Babylonia as in chapters 40-55, but the Palestinian homeland and the sub-standard character of a half-believing people who have let slip their hold on the revealed truths of a holy and merciful God. The prophet is recalling his readers and hearers from a human religiosity based on a shrine (e.g. the Temple at Jerusalem) and on the outward observance of ritual (e.g. fasting), to a Divine relationship centred upon a glorious Messianic future. The 'Servant' figure of Israel has become the Redeemer for all mankind (anticipated in Isa 49:5-6). The characteristics of this new Spirit-given attitude are moral integrity and devotional intensity, marked by repentance, humility and a steady looking forward to the new Jerusalem – the new heavens and earth that God is preparing for his people. But it is always possible to lose this vision and revert to the old ways. Thus these chapters are relevant to any age in which a formerly vibrant and committed company of believers has compromised its stance and blunted its mission to the world.

These notes are designed to accompany the Slow Food studies on Isaiah 56-66. Words italicised in the notes are quoted from the NIV (2011). Commentaries to hand include: Alec Motyer (IVP 1993); Derek Kidner in the *New Bible Commentary* 4<sup>th</sup> ed (IVP 1994); Barry Webb (BST 1996); Jo Bailey Wells (BRF 2006). LXX refers to the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint.

**56:1-2** The keynote is struck in the first couple of verses: God promises that he will soon bring *salvation* to his people in mercy and grace; therefore they should maintain *justice* and holiness, and not give up hope. This hope is to be fulfilled by Christ's first and second comings. *Is close at hand* anticipates Jesus' proclamation at the start of his ministry (Mk 1:15), where the identical word is used. The *Sabbath* is singled out for special emphasis, not for the sake of mere ritual observance, but as a regular recharging point of spiritual and moral renewal (see also 58:13-14). If my religion lacks devotional and moral force, it could be that I have lost touch with a living and speaking *Lord*.

**56:3-8** Verse 7 *a house of prayer for all nations* is quoted by Jesus in his cleansing of the Temple (Mk 11:17). The emphasis in this section is on God's gracious welcome among his people to folk who would formerly have been excluded (*foreigners, eunuchs*). Their attitude is characterised by *Sabbath-keeping*, devotion to the Lord and *prayer*. Thus whatever their origins or deficiencies, they show themselves to be truly within the *covenant*, which is the special relationship of God with his people through the Spirit (Rom 2:29). God's gift of a special day set apart for him is not so much a reward for faithful work (like the Jewish Sabbath) as a foretaste of the resurrection of Christ and an opportunity to draw near to God. Are we ignoring or misusing this day which comes round so regularly?

**56:9-12** Now the prophet launches an attack on Israel's leaders and rulers, all the more devastating for being so sudden. They are compared to *watchdogs* who have forgotten to bark, and *shepherds* who are concerned only for their own comfort and pleasure. The repeated keyword is *they lack knowledge and understanding*. This damning indictment applies to the priests and prophets just as much as to the political leaders. Economic prosperity can never be the controlling aim. Wise, energetic and unselfish leadership is so vital, whether in church, school or society. Without it, the wild animals are going to have a field day.

**57:1-2** In times of apostasy and material self-indulgence, the *righteous* (those who seek to follow the revealed will of God) are disregarded and when they *perish*, their passing is not seen as significant. Yet the Lord had a purpose for their lives; they stood fast in the face of evil, and now they are at *peace*. Motyer shows how the singular and plural alternate in this little self-contained poem, emphasising the importance to God of the collective 'remnant' (a key motif in Isaiah) and also the power of the individual godly life. We may think that our lives, and our eventual *deaths*, count for little, but one day we will find out how we have been used to bless many (Rev 14:13).

**57:3-10** 'After the ideals laid out in 56:1-8, this passage comes as a shock, like the shattering of a dream' (Webb). It seems to describe abandonment to pagan fertility rites and the immoral practices associated with them. Either it is an extended metaphor for spiritual adultery, as used by prophets like Hosea and Ezekiel; or it is a literal and frankly horrifying description of wholesale abandonment to Canaanite cults of Baal (involving sexual practices to 'ensure' fertility) and *Molek* (sacrificing one's children to appease the dark gods). The application to today's scene may or may not be obvious; but in general it illustrates the tendency of human nature to throw over the holiness requirements of the One True God and to substitute the supposed satisfaction of the *idols* of sex, power, money and success. The LXX (Septuagint) replaces the steamy details of v8b with the telling question, 'Did you think that if you abandoned me, you would be getting a better bargain?' Timothy Keller (*Counterfeit Gods*, 'Epilogue') observes: 'Idolatry is always the

reason we do anything wrong.’ He says of a professing Christian who was bitter with God about losing his job, ‘His real problem was that something besides Jesus Christ (i.e. career success) was functioning as his Saviour.’

**57:11-13** ‘But I’m not guilty of these blatant practices,’ retorts the law-abiding believer. Isaiah takes no prisoners and exposes three common attitudes which can become the mindset of the conventionally religious person. v11a, ‘I’ve got God sorted, but I still need to make sure the world thinks I’m OK.’ Are we more concerned for the good opinion of others, rather than the ‘Well done’ of the Master? v11b, ‘God hasn’t sent a thunderbolt to show me he’s displeased, so I can go on as I am.’ We interpret God’s *silence* (apparent lack of judgment) as his approval; if I’m really sinning, why doesn’t he make things go wrong for me? v12, ‘My good deeds will save me.’ Well, they won’t, because *works-righteousness* simply doesn’t justify us before God (Rom 3:20). Our own assumed goodness can become our most potent *idol*, as with the Pharisee in the Temple (Lk 18:9-14). It is only as we run to the Lord for *refuge*, and cling to him for dear life, that we enter into our true *inheritance*, the *holy mountain* that represents the kingdom of heaven.

**57:14-21** The Lord wants us to live in intimacy with him, but the road is full of rocks and *obstacles*, and the chief one is human pride. v15 is a gospel invitation, a pre-echo of Jesus’ words in Mt 11:28-30, ‘Come to me ... for I am gentle and humble in heart.’ God is even prepared to drop his rightful accusations against our ‘unscrupulous pursuit of self-interest’ (Motyer), if only we will admit our need for healing. Otherwise we will never find peace, and like the raging sea, our lives will continue to throw up useless and ugly rubbish. The preacher of the gospel can find encouraging things here: we need to pray the ‘rocks’ out of the road for people to come to Christ (v14); repentance means giving up one’s pride, because though God is utterly greater than we are, he is still longing for us to live with him (v15); the Holy Spirit can work on people’s attitudes, opening their eyes to their need for healing (v18); and the proclamation of *peace* to those both *near* (the Jewish nation) and *far away* (Gentiles) is fulfilled in Christ’s reconciliation on the cross (v19; Eph 2:16-17).

**58:1-5** The only *fasting* (v3) required by the Law was on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29-31), but regular personal fasting was encouraged; the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable who fasts twice a week is probably an example of extreme piety (Lk 18:12). Our Lord’s quarrel with the Pharisees was not that ritual observance (eg in worship, prayer, fasting and giving) was wrong in itself, but if it was pursued in order to impress others, or so to impress God that he was bound to answer one’s prayers, or if it made no difference to the way one treated employees or neighbours, it was worse than useless. ‘If we fast in order to get something for ourselves from God, instead of to become better people for the sake of others, then we have missed the meaning of worship’ (W. Wiersbe). This passage links with Isa 1:10-20 in declaring the hollowness of public demonstrations of religiousness, and calling for repentance and seeking true delight in the Lord.

**58:6-9a** These verses are particularly applicable to the season of Lent, but they are also a corrective to pietistic feel-goodery. ‘Generosity is a spiritual discipline as much as abstinence’ (Jo Bailey Wells). Is the effect of my *fasting* or self-denial to make me more compassionate and open-handed? How true is it that I am ‘available to my own family’ (v7, *The Message*)? vv8-9a are a snapshot of the person who is ‘walking in the light’ (1 Jn 1:7) and enjoying a healthy and intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:25). Just as Isaiah himself responded ‘Here am I’ to God’s call (Isa 6:8), so the Lord offers to be instantly responsive to our prayers and pleas for *help*. This isn’t a ‘four steps to spiritual health’ formula; it’s the logic of getting to know the heart of God.

**58:9b-12** Throughout this chapter the verbs are in the singular, as if the prophet is having a personal conversation with the individual worshipper about the true impact of their life on those around. *Yoke of oppression* could mean ‘ganging up on someone’ in order to restrict their power of action. *The pointing finger* suggests destructive criticism. We all have influence and we can use it either constructively or negatively. Similarly the use of our resources (money, possessions, authority) can be a mere token contribution, or it can arise from a heartfelt commitment to solving others’ problems (v10). Motyer writes perceptively: ‘It is possible to have a very developed social conscience but to be personally burdensome and mischief-making.’ vv10b-12 are a beautiful portrait of someone who spreads goodness wherever they go. ‘Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness, your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.... You’ll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again’ (*The Message*). A similar picture of the influence a truly good person can have on their society is found in Job chapter 29.

**58:13-14** Isaiah returns to the connection between justice and the *Sabbath* touched on in 56:1ff. Sunday (for us) is ‘the weekly reminder of what matters most’ (Jo Bailey Wells). The word for *delight* is ‘exquisite pleasure’ and is repeated (vv13, 14). We enjoy the day of rest, not because it’s time off work, but because it

is designed to bring us closer to the Lord who is our supreme joy. It isn't for 'business as usual, making money, running here and there' (*The Message*), or indeed for exploiting our workers by making them slave away at their weekday tasks. If my experience of the Christian life isn't the *triumph* and *feasting* of v14, then perhaps my use of Sunday needs to be examined.

**59:1-8** This famous passage of straight talking does more than expose the twistedness of the human race as a whole – it homes in unerringly on the right-professing person who is attempting to cover up immorality, illegality and dishonesty. Words for *sin* in the Greek LXX that abound here are the same as those commonly found in the NT: *anomia* (lawbreaking), *adikia* (unrighteousness, injustice) and *hamartia/hamartēma* (going astray). Not only has the relationship with God been shattered, but *truth* itself is nowhere to be found. Metaphors of poison, *cobwebs* and crooked paths add to the ghastliness of the scene. If Isaiah seems to be overstating his case, he is only a precursor of Paul in Romans 3:9-20 who quotes v8 as well as multiple similar phrases from the Psalmist. The aim of both writers is the same: to open people's eyes to the stark truth, that sin separates us from God, spoils our dealings with others, and becomes habitual and eventually fatal. But Paul can go on to point us to the finished work of Christ on the cross, where all these evils were borne by the innocent Servant (ch 53).

**59:9-15a** The denunciation of private and public sin continues, but the third person (*they*) has changed to the first person (*we*). The prophet's viewpoint has become the repentant admissions of a would-be faithful remnant. It is as though those who are awake to their transgressions, even as they still admit their *blindness* (9-10) and their *treachery* (13), are taking on themselves the responsibility for the whole nation, and so interceding with God to act in deliverance and restoration. Similar 'identification with sin' prayers are found in Nehemiah 9 and Daniel 9. The tone is no longer the self-righteousness of religious hypocrites, but the agonised confession of those who can only throw themselves on the Lord for forgiveness: 'we do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy' (Dan 9:18). Motyer comments: 'Sin debilitates, and the Lord's people are pale shadows of what they would like to be. They are *blind* as to vision and clarity for guiding life, *stumbling* as to constancy and stability of life, *dead* as to vitality of get-up-and-go.'

**59:15b-19** In v11 the situation seemed hopeless: *deliverance* is *far away*. But that is to reckon without God's faithfulness to his own character. He must show his true colours, he must bring *salvation* to his people, he must overthrow evil together with those who promote it. If there is no human being capable of achieving this, he will do it himself (15b-16). This is Isaiah's answer to the age-old question, 'Where is God when evil seems to triumph?' (eg Ps 80:4, 89:46ff). The Lord's response is to act in *salvation* and *righteousness* for his people, and in *vengeance* and *zeal* (or passion) against his enemies. Paul picks up some of these terms in his description of the Christian's armour in the day of evil in Ephesians 6:10ff. The KJV translation of v19b, 'When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him' is defended by Motyer as equally valid to the NIV preference, 'He will come like a pent-up flood that the breath of the Lord drives along.' We also note the worldwide effect of God's action (v19a) as people respond in *fear* and *reverence* from west and east alike.

**59:20-21** The promise of the Lord's personal and unique activity on behalf of his people focuses on the arrival of a *Redeemer* figure in Jerusalem. This brief passage gathers up motifs of redemption, *covenant*, *the Spirit* and *repentance* scattered through earlier chapters of Isaiah (see eg 54:5, 8, 10), and recalls the person and work of the Servant which climaxed in ch 53 and will continue in 61:1-3. Thus ch 59, which began in seeming despair of the Lord's ability to save, because of the all-pervasiveness of horrendous sin, ends in triumphant assertion. Not only will sin be dealt with and the covenant established, but the Spirit will be on all God's people (cf Joel 2:28f), enabling them to pass the good news to future generations of *descendants*. These emphatic declarations (undergirded by the triple *says the Lord*) foreshadow the Divine work of Jesus Christ on Calvary and at Pentecost.

**60:1-9** The atmosphere now changes completely as Isaiah describes the *dawn* breaking over Jerusalem and a new scene unfolding. The whole chapter is an apocalyptic vision of the whole world bringing tribute to Zion in acknowledgement that her God is the one true Lord; this Zion is not the earthly geopolitical entity but the fulfilment of God's purposes in the creation of a new heaven and earth (Isa 65:17ff). As such it anticipates the final chapters of the Bible in Revelation 21-22. The Gospel writer sees v6 (*gold and incense*) fulfilled in the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus (Mt 2:11). The language is not one of triumphalism or conquest, but of surprised amazement, radiant *joy* and wholehearted *praise*. The emphasis for the Christian is on all the nations coming to know God in Jesus Christ, and on the beauty and glory of his final reign as Lord of both Jews and Gentiles. If our vision is at present clouded by the *thick darkness* of evil and unbelief covering the earth, we can *arise* and *shine* (Eph 5:14) with the thrill of new hope and certainty.

**60:10-14** The theme of this central section of the chapter is that *foreign* nations, including their *kings*, will *serve* Jerusalem and enrich God's city. 'The apparent imperialism of the passage only expresses the sober truth that to reject God's sway is suicide (v12), and that the meek will inherit the earth' (Kidner). How are we to apply this? Some would argue that to oppose the political state of Zion, or any of its policies, leads to disaster; but this is to invoke a narrow nationalist agenda. Does it then refer to the Christian church on earth, or to the redeemed in the new creation? While Rev 20:8-9 might support the former, Rev 21:24-25 would seem to favour the latter. Nothing that is good and worthy in human history and culture will be lost in the new Jerusalem. Tom Wright (*Surprised by Hope* ch 13) envisages that by the power of Christ's resurrection every God-inspired achievement will become a building-block in the new heaven and earth. The Lord's *anger* (expressed in the destruction and exile of Jerusalem) is not his last word; rather, it is his *compassion* that will win out (v10b), both in this world and in the world to come.

**60:15-18** The prophet's vision of the ultimate glory, the joy and satisfaction of God's eternal presence with his people, is addressed in the singular to the city of Zion. It contrasts strongly with her present experience of being *forsaken* and *hated*, 'out-of-the-way, unvisited, ignored' (The Message) – a situation shared by many persecuted or sidelined churches today (LXX adds 'and there was no-one to help', humanly speaking). In 'the final perfection' (Kidner) everything of partial value or temporary use will be replaced by imperishable *gold* and *silver*; there will be *peace* instead of *violence*, and *well-being* instead of *ruin*. 'You'll name your main street Salvation Way, and install Praise Park at the center of town' (The Message). The sheer exuberance and inventiveness of the new creation will erase all the tawdriness of the old. At the centre of the picture is the Lord (v16b), still the same *Saviour* and *Redeemer* we knew by faith, but now fully *known* and unmistakably possessed. Heb 12:22-24 paints a similar scenario, reminding us that our right to be there has been won by the cross of Christ.

**60:19-22** The promises are still in the terms of the covenant made with the repentant in Zion (59:20-21); they are valid collectively and individually, even to the *least* and *smallest* (60:22). The old changeable sources of *light* (understanding and inspiration) will be replaced by the Lord himself; perishable earthly *glory* will cease to matter, *sorrow* and disappointment will be forgotten; the solid goodness of every citizen will be derived from their King. 'In the new Zion all will be what the Messiah is' (Motyer). The steady permanence of this glorious state of affairs, so utterly enjoyable, is emphasised by the repeated *everlasting ... for ever*. Its certainty is undersigned by the personal affirmation, *I am the Lord*. Are we really allowed to know all this in advance? 'The eternal glories gleam afar / To nerve my faint endeavour; / So now to watch, to work, to war, / And then to rest for ever' (James Grindley Small 'I've found a Friend').

**61:1-3** The Lord Jesus deliberately quoted the opening lines of this passage at the outset of his ministry (Lk 4:17-19), famously stopping before *the day of vengeance*. It has been called 'the fifth Servant Song' as it combines themes of Spirit, anointing (Messiah) and servanthood (LXX adds 'he has sent me'). A wide range of human conditions is addressed, so that the *good news* is not *proclaimed* in word only, but applied in *releasing* and *comforting* the afflicted. Through the Spirit the word of the Servant becomes an effective instrument for transformation – this is the key both to Christ's ministry on earth and to his continuing work through the church. A *spirit of despair* refers to the listlessness (LXX *acēdia* from which we get the word 'accidie') or hopelessness that may grip even a firm believer in times when sin and unbelief are dominant. *Oaks* translates Hebrew *elim*, 'trees, mighty ones', prompting us to pray with Paul for our fellow-believers 'that out of his glorious riches God may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith' (Eph 3:16-17).

**61:4-7** The vision of the new Jerusalem continues to flow from the Spirit-inspired Messiah's declaration of his mission (v1). *The year of the Lord's favour* will include: Reconstruction (v4) – when a land has been *devastated*, the buildings are ruined, nobody is there, the soil is uncultivated; but where Christ reigns, all these go into reverse. Incorporation (v5) – instead of *foreigners* being objects of conquest and enslavement, they become willing and responsible members of the community work-force. Dedication (v6) – instead of special classes of *priests* and Levites being set apart for Divine service, these terms will apply to all the Lord's people (Exod 19:6, 1 Pet 2:9, Rev 1:6) involving closely belonging to him. Exhilaration – previously they had known a *double* portion of *shame* and deprivation, now they can enjoy a doubly rich *inheritance*, and their *joy* will extend from this present life into eternity. Applied to the NT church, this vision implies a Christ-centred community, including some highly unlikely people, working for everyone's good and glorifying God's name (cf Eph 4:1-16).

**61:8-11** Chapter 61 ends in a triumphant reprise of the *righteousness* motif that is so prevalent in Isaiah. Just as the lack of justice and right have appalled the Lord (59:14) and motivated his personal intervention (59:16), so will its full restoration ('all your people will be righteous' 60:21) bring joy to the whole earth.

The source of this righteousness is in the Lord's own character, his *hatred* of evil and his *faithfulness* to his *covenant*. Its expression and outworking is threefold: in personal salvation, in transformed human nature, and in universal celebration. The *robe of righteousness* is the full acceptance of the repentant outcast (Lk 15:22) and the gift by grace (Rom 3:22-24) of the *garments of salvation*. The rebellion so characteristic of fallen humanity is transformed into *delight* and *joy* in God, pictured in the beauty and willingness of the *bride* in response to the *bridegroom*. Finally *all nations* will witness and celebrate the paradise of *righteousness* that will bring praise to the Lord, to whom everything is due (*Sovereign Lord* is represented in LXX as *Kyrios Kyrios*, as in Moses' vision of God in Exod 34:6, 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin').

**62:1-7** NIV *vindication* (also RSV, NRSV) is a puzzling departure from the normal rendering of 'righteousness' (KJV, ESV) as it implies that Jerusalem has been in the right all along, whereas the prophet's insistence is that she hasn't; only as the Lord confers his righteousness (61:10) does she truly belong to him. The change in Jerusalem's status from being *deserted* and *desolate* to being beautified and honoured is by God's grace alone, and is reflected in her change of *name* to *Hephzibah* ('My delight is in her') and *Beulah* ('Married'). The passion and urgency of the Lord for his will to be fulfilled in the sight of *the nations of the earth* is further underlined in his instructions to the *watchmen* on Jerusalem's *walls*, who represent the prayers and intercessions of God's people: they are not to 'let God off the hook' (J B Wells)! 'We do not conclude that otherwise he would forget, but that our prayers are, by his will, in some way a vital ingredient in the implementing of his promises' (Motyer). The transformation of God's people is not just a matter of new names or status, but of a new nature and character which will hit the world's headlines.

**62:8-12** There is mounting excitement as we move towards the promise of the *Saviour's* coming (v11). The Lord *swears* by his own *right hand* because there is no one greater to swear by (Heb 6:13). A new phase of Zion's history is beginning in which she will no longer be plundered and devastated, but her produce will satisfy all her citizens and every meal will be holy. Those citizens will include not only *the people*, the native inhabitants of the city, but also *the nations*, from the ends of the earth (cf 49:6 and Acts 1:8). The *banner* raised over the city will no longer be an invitation to the enemy to invade (5:26) but will be associated with 'the root of Jesse' (11:10) and will signal the completion of a *highway* leading to the city. 'The future city of God will be a far cry from the desolate, ruined Jerusalem of the sixth century BC. It will be full of holy, redeemed people, the joy of the whole earth' (Webb). The task of the mission-centred church, then, is to *remove the stones* and *proclaim* the *Saviour*. Laurence Singlehurst *Sowing Reaping Keeping* ch 10 insists that evangelism is ineffective unless there is a determined prayer strategy to remove the rocks from the soil where the seed is to be sown.

**63:1-6** This highly descriptive (and, to some readers, unattractive) passage is full of words we might consider to be opposites: *vengeance* and *redemption*, *wrath* and *salvation*. Some have seen references here to the cross of Calvary; but most commentaries interpret it as God's final Day of Judgment. The figure coming from *Edom* (Israel's traditional and persistent enemy) is a *great* and mighty conqueror, the *blood* that stains his *clothing* is not his but the opposition's, he expected help from others but has had to *tread the winepress alone*, and his determination to carry the work through to victory is fuelled by his utter *anger*. This scene is picked up at Rev 19:11-16 and is referred unmistakably to Christ, out of whose mouth comes a sharp sword and whose name is 'King of kings and Lord of Lords.' The concept of Christ both saving and judging is presented very clearly in Jn 5:19-30, where the granting of eternal life and the carrying out of judgment are the responsibility of both Father and Son. Two applications may be noted: sin and opposition to God are going to be decisively dealt with, and the work is God's alone and not a human one. We may never feel we have got our heads round a passage like this; similarly, we need humility and awe as we approach both Christ's work on the cross and his role as supreme Judge of mankind.

**63:7-10** Motyer sees the final portion of Isaiah as beginning here: God's salvation is apparently complete, yet there is still a call for the praying church (chs 63:7-64) to claim the promises of God (chs 65-66). The prophet casts himself in the role of remembrancer and watchman (as in 62:6-7). The tension between the proactive love and mercy of God in the Exodus and the rebellious nature of his people is portrayed graphically. It was God's *compassion* and *kindness* that brought Israel out of Egypt. Words like *Saviour* and *redemption* emphasise the Lord's rescuing role. The *angel of his presence* is not just an angelic messenger but the *Holy Spirit* of the Father God himself, who feels intimately the *distress* of his children. So the people's perversity and disobedience is like a painful jab to him (the LXX word for *grieved* is used of Paul's reaction to the idol-worship in the city of Athens, Acts 17:16). This aspect of our relationship to the Spirit has not changed (Eph 4:30). The tension and paradox reach a climax as the God who fought and subdued their enemies now turns to fight against his own people. In the same way, Jesus exposes the perversity of

the Jewish leaders while longing for Jerusalem to be gathered under his wings (Matthew 23). 'The days of old were days of immense grace on the Lord's part, and immense ingratitude on the part of his people' (Webb).

**63:11-14** Isaiah is as we have seen acting as intercessor for the people of his time, and reminding God of his actions on behalf of his people in time past. Whether this section focuses on the crossing of the Red Sea, the crossing of the Jordan or the subsequent history of the tribes of Israel (commentaries are divided, but the sense of the exodus is foremost in *the sea* and the *dividing of the waters*), it is a reminder of the closeness of God to his people and his sure *guidance* of them through his *shepherd Moses*. God's *Holy Spirit* is mentioned twice more, stressing the personal and intimate friendship and power of the very presence of the Lord. *Flock, horse* and *cattle* are pastoral images conveying the complete security and trust of God's people in their Lord. God's *everlasting renown* and *glorious name* are plain to see in those events – but *where* (twice in v11) is that same God now? Such questions have been asked agonisingly by the Jewish people in regard to the Holocaust; but they can arise for Christians too in any generation or in any region of the world, particularly in times of persecution or apostasy. Is God closed for business? Do we simply give up?

**63:15-19** This direct appeal to the Lord is remarkable for several reasons. It doesn't attempt to domesticate God, the glory of whose *throne* recalls Isaiah's vision in ch 6. Yet it calls upon him as *Father* (cf 64:8, but rare in the OT, Ps 89:26, Jer 31:9) and *Redeemer* to whom they originally belonged, even though *Abraham* and even the wayward *Israel* (Jacob) might not recognise them. It then almost seems to blame God for their *wandering* and *hardness of heart*! It actually pleads with the Lord to reverse his self-distancing from them on the grounds that they are his *inheritance* and his *sanctuary* has been desecrated by the *enemy* (Assyria and Babylon). It echoes the Lord's own declaration of Isa 54:7, 'For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back.' In a word, it tells God that his judgmental stance needs rethinking. 'The fundamental problem is within the divine nature, and until the Lord changes nothing can change' (Motyer). 'Such prayer seems outrageous' (J B Wells); yet it recalls Abraham's in Gen 18 when he prays for the cities of the plain, and the great intercessory prayers of Moses (Exod 32), Solomon (1 Ki 8), Nehemiah (Neh 9), Daniel (Dan 9) and Jezreel (Hos 2). It reaches deep into the Father-heart of the Almighty where we find a genuine reluctance to terminate his project of salvation (1 Tim 2:4, 2 Pet 3:9). Its ultimate expression is found at Gethsemane and Calvary where the Son offers himself in order to bring back his Father's rebellious world.

**64:1-7** If Isaiah's insistence that the Lord should act on behalf of his people seems overbold, it is speedily replaced by an admission of personal and collective sin that offers no excuses whatsoever. If God really chose to *come down* (repeated again and again in vv1-3), the worldwide impact would be unmistakable. If we really saw the uniqueness of the one true God, and experienced what he is prepared to do for *those who wait for him* ('for his mercy' LXX) both in this life and the next (as Paul reminds us, quoting this passage in 1 Cor 2:9), we would behave entirely differently. *But* (5b is a sudden douche of cold water, marked in the LXX by *idou*, 'Get hold of this!'), we have no claim whatsoever on his saving power or his mercy, but can only expect his utter displeasure – because of our persistent *sin*. Vv 5b-7 are as comprehensive an indictment of human sin as found anywhere in the Bible (cf Isa 59, Rom 3:10-20). Sin pollutes our souls and infects even our best actions with spiritual pride (v6a); it sucks the life of God out of us like fallen autumn *leaves*: 'sin-dried, we're blown off by the wind' (*The Message*) (v6b); it renders us apathetic and uncaring in our quest for God (v7a); it separates us from any possibility of friendship with God as we become its total slaves (v7b). If God is to come down, then, it must be to do what in the person of his Son he actually 'descended' (Eph 4:9) to achieve: the release of sin's captives through the cross and resurrection (Lk 4:18).

**64:8-12** 'Isaiah has become so identified with those for who he prays that, as far as his language is concerned, there is no difference between him and them' (Webb). As in Jeremiah's visit to the *potter's* house (Jer 18:1-6), the Lord's sovereignty over Israel and their dependence on him are total; but here the context is the repeated invocation of God as *Father* (63:16). The prodigal children plead for their father not to let them feel the full weight of his anger (*beyond measure*, vv9, 12); he has the right to do so, but they are his family, his *people*, and their salvation depends on his response to their *prayer*. The references to Israel's home country having become a *wasteland*, *Jerusalem a desolation*, and the *temple* being *burnt* down, seem to locate this section of the book in an exilic context; but Motyer argues that the perfect tense of the verbs indicate the certainty of these future events, as conceived in the prophet's imagination. The force of this whole intercessory prayer, then, is to turn the Lord's planned judgment into a merciful deliverance based on their helplessness and his Fatherhood. The final chapters (65-66) will constitute God's response to their desperate request.

**65:1-7** Chapters 65-66 constitute the Lord's answer to the prophet's agonised pleading. Paul in Rom 10:20 makes it clear that v1 refers to God's revelation to the Gentiles. The paradox is that whereas other nations were not *seeking* God yet *found* him (for instance the Ninevites, Jonah ch 3), he was readily available to his own people who rejected him. Motyer argues convincingly that the detailed charges in vv3-4 fit a pre-exilic rather than a post-exilic Israel. They are the practices of a religious people who have gone off the rails. V5 applies to spiritual elitists who have set up standards of *holiness* that find no support in the Bible – it applied to the Pharisees of Jesus' time, and may still be a warning to would-be 'insiders' in the church of any age who insist on special experiences or practices as a marker of true devotion (see Col 2:16-23). But the general indictment is of the idolatry that persisted in pre-exilic Jerusalem and expressed persistent *defiance* of the one true God. For all the prophet's intercession, nothing is going to deflect the Lord from his intention: 'I'm not putting up with this any longer – I'll pay them the wages they have coming for their sins' (v6, *The Message*). 'The solemn message of the opening section of ch 65 is that to call on him to rend the heavens and come down is to invite his judgment as well as his salvation,; to bring on the final separation between the saved and the lost among his own people as well as in the world at large' (Webb).

**65:8-12** If the Lord will not go back on his word, there will nevertheless be a faithful remnant left in the land (a major theme throughout Isaiah, 1:9, 35:8-10 etc and see notes on 57:1, 59:7), described here as *my servants* (8), *descendants* (9), *my chosen* (9), *my people who seek me* (10). The *cluster of grapes* recalls the Lord's vineyard of ch 5. *Sharon* was a beautiful area in the west of Palestine which had fallen on hard times (33:9); *Achor* in the east was the valley of 'trouble' where Achan was stoned to death (Josh 7:24-26). Their restoration and fertility would be marks of the Messianic age. The permanence and satisfaction to be *inherited* by God's faithful people are strongly stressed against the background of judgment. Vv10-12 however show the logical end of those who fall for the worship of alien gods like Fortune and Destiny. 'Hell, in the end, is God simply given us what we have chosen' (Webb). Motyer notes that these people are religious, in their own way; but 'religion is no substitute for personal relationship'.

**65:13-16** 'Isaiah is not a universalist – he does not believe that all will be saved' (Webb). This short section is a transition to the vision of the new state of things in 65:17ff. It is a side-by-side description of those who will ultimately be *put to death* and those who will be accepted as true *servants* of God. It is no different from Moses' warnings (Dt 28:45) and Daniel's predictions (Dan 12:1-2). It is in line with the earliest doctrine of the church (2 Thess 1:8-10) and is presented as the Lord's teaching in the Gospels (Matt 13:47-50; Jn 3:36, 5:29). It is applied individually (Hebrew changes to a singular *you* in the second half of v15) and is ratified by *the God of truth*, literally 'the God of the Amen', a unique formulation picked up by Paul in 2 Cor 1:18-20. God means what he says and acts accordingly (Num 23:19). The blessing to Abraham, involving a blessing, a *name* and a worldwide people (Gen 12:2-3) is still God's fundamental plan, converging finally on Jesus Christ who is God's final 'Yes!'. The message is what it has always been: 'Now choose life' (Dt 30:19), 'Now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor 6:2). Because one day soon, everything will be made new and *the past troubles will be forgotten* both by the Lord's *servants* and by the Lord himself.

**65:17-20** The opening of this double poem encapsulates the whole Bible story from Gen 1:1 to Rev 21:1. '*Heavens* and *earth* represent the totality of things' (Motyer). *Jerusalem* is not the earthly city but the eternal dwelling-place of God's people, God's 'holy mountain' (66:20), 'the Jerusalem that is above' (Gal 4:26), 'the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem' (Heb 13:22), 'the new Jerusalem' (Rev 21:2). Four different phrases for *joy* emphasise the absence of anything in the old order that would cause *weeping* or *crying*. V20 does not mean that there will still be such things as aging or death; it is a rhetorical flourish indicating their total removal (Isa 25:8, Rev 21:4). For the last part of v20 NIV has an alternative 'the sinner who reaches a hundred years' (also LXX, ESV), but that too is rhetorical: sin will be absent because the *curse* upon it will have eradicated every trace. Paul centres this vision upon our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who not only bore the curse for us (Gal 3:13) but will take our lowly earthly bodies and transform them, so that we can already say 'our citizenship is in heaven' (Phil 3:20-21). Hebrews pictures the people living by faith as 'longing for a better country – a heavenly one' (11:16), 'a kingdom that cannot be shaken' (12:28). What is in view here 'is not the unmaking of creation, nor simply its steady development, but the drastic and dramatic birth of new creation from the womb of the old' (Tom Wright *Surprised by Hope* 115). This is the vision of Isaiah.

**65:21-25** The second little poem at the end of ch 65 further explores the life to come on the Lord's *holy mountain* and links it with the Messiah's reign. The theme is fulfilment and harmony. On this earth constructive activities like *housebuilding*, the *planting* of crops and *childbearing* are liable to be tragically unproductive owing to *enemy* action or *misfortune*; agonised prayer seems to go unanswered; nature's creatures prey upon each other. But (v25 is a reprise of 11:6-9 with identical phrasing as well as some variations) under Christ's peaceful rule there will be no trace of *harm* or *destruction*. God's people will be

so close to him that their wishes are granted before they need to express them (v24). 'The only point in the whole of the new creation where there is no change is in the curse pronounced on sin, which still stands' (Motyer, referring to the judgment on the *serpent* in Gen 3:14). The Lord's response to the prophet's intercession is therefore categorical: his dispensation is as originally intended – the rewards of faith and obedience are unimaginably great, the judgment on unbelief and disobedience still stands, so where's the sense in complaining that he won't change his mind?

**66:1-4** Isaiah's final chapter brings a twofold message of condemnation and encouragement. The opening verses are a critique of temple- and ritual-based religion to be set alongside 1 Samuel 15:22-23, Amos 5:21-24, Micah 6:6-7 and Isaiah's own trumpet-blast in 1:10-15. V1 echoes the words of Solomon at the dedication of the first Temple (1 Ki 8:27) and also Isaiah's own vision in the Temple in ch 6: the Lord is far greater than any *house* that could be built for him or that is to be considered his *resting-place* (*The Message* captures the irony with 'holiday-spot'). Paul used similar words when standing on Mars Hill over against the Parthenon (Acts 17:24). Furthermore, the human response that interests God is not *sacrifice* but humility and obedient respect for his *word* (cf Isa 57:15). 'Ritual conformity without moral obedience only extends sin into another area of life. It is possible to be religiously meticulous and at worst incur guilt, at best achieve nothing. The word of God is the key to everything' (Motyer). This applies as much today as it did in pre-exilic or post-exilic times. It is not a question of drifting into sub-Christian attitudes to God – it is an active *choice* of what God can only describe as *abominations* and *what displeases me*. It could apply to ecclesiasticism, 'the spirit that would build human walls around God' (Kidner), 'that ugly distortion of true religion which inevitably reasserts itself where there is no recognition of the greatness of God or heartfelt contrition before him' (Webb). Ezekiel ch 8 exposes the 'utterly detestable things' that either literally or metaphorically were being practised instead of the worship of 'the glory of the God of Israel.'

**66:5-11** These verses are a message for those *who tremble at the word of the Lord* (v5, picked up from v2). Their own brethren may *hate* and *exclude* them, but they will find comfort and nourishment from the true Jerusalem. Jesus himself warned his disciples that they would be 'put out of the synagogue' (Jn 16:2) or worse. It's hard when faithfulness to God's word causes estrangement from deeply loved fellow-Christians or places of worship. The judgment implied in v6 was, as we now know, carried out when the Roman general Titus destroyed the Temple in AD 70. The curious passage about instant labour-free *birth* is the Lord's reply to the cynics who mock the expectations of the 'word-tremblers' in v5b: his fulfilment may appear to be slow in coming (cf the taunt in 5:19), but he is capable of swift and seemingly miraculous action if need be, and the birth of the church of Christ out of the womb of Judaism is going to be one example of this. 'Painless birth (cf Gen 3:16) is a symbol of Eden restored and the curse removed' (Motyer). Meanwhile there is comfort for the word-tremblers who seek nourishment from *Jerusalem*: they can find their home in the church on earth below, imperfect though it may be. 'We are to live in the benefit of divine mercy, enjoy the richness of divine fellowship and fashion our lives in obedience to the divine word' (Motyer). Webb reminds us that 'the church continues to draw nourishment from its Jewish heritage – the OT is three-quarters of the Christian Bible.' 'Direct fellowship with God, and full involvement in his church, are held together here' (Kidner).

**66:12-16** The contrasting themes of ch 66 are judgment and glory, fury and favour. There is nothing impersonal about the justice and holiness of Israel's Lord; *I will* indicates the intense feeling and commitment of a long-term relationship. *Peace* (Heb *shalom*), a consistent motif of the whole book, will come flowing into Jerusalem *like a river* conveying the glory of the *nations* with it (cf Rev 21:24). The *motherhood* of God is the dominant metaphor of 12-13, bringing nurture, joy and *comfort* to his faithful *servants*. But by the same token the Lord's *foes* will experience utter rejection and destruction, as by *fire* and *whirlwind* ('wildfire ... tornado' *The Message*). "'Fire" is defined as a motif of the unapproachable, deadly holiness of God' (Motyer). The word for *rebuke* (v15) is a very rare one; in the LXX it recalls a slang phrase in common use indicating total contempt and dismissal: 'to the crows with you!' To ignore or to attempt to water down the warning of universal *judgment* in v16 is to distort the plain teaching of the entire prophetic literature of the Bible, however unpalatable it may be to our ears. *The Message* brings out the force of this wake-up call: 'For it's by fire that God brings judgment, a death sentence on the human race. Many, oh so many, are under God's sentence of death.'

**66:17-21** 'This last, tremendous paragraph (18-24) contains God's entire programme for the evangelisation of the world' (Webb). V17 sticks out like a sore thumb just before it: God is so disgusted with the appalling practices of his people that he will have to *come* himself and act in grace. This seems to refer prophetically to the whole span of time between the first and second comings of Christ. The missionaries are going to be the *survivors* of the wreckage of God's people. The purpose is that the whole world should *see my glory*, should see God for who he really is and how wonderful he is. This formulation may help us reinterpret our

conception of 'mission'. The *sign* is most likely the cross of Christ (Jn 12:32, Mt 12:38-40). The *nations* of v19 are the farthest extremities of Isaiah's own world, but *distant islands* will surely include today's Western lands. The apparently irrelevant detail of *famous as archers* possibly indicates that 'the task of the missionaries is to go into real situations, to face independent, organized peoples and actual dangers' (Motyer). The theme of the Gentiles becoming fully part of God's people is promised in Isa 49:6 and 56:8, relates to the coming of Christ at Lk 2:31-32 and is at the heart of the good Shepherd's mission at Jn 10:16. The vision of the nations being brought in all kinds of transport to *Jerusalem* may seem centripetal, but it is spiritual not geographical and they are being gathered as an *offering to the Lord* with the emphasis on total holiness. Paul reflects this language at Rom 15:16. Again, the selection of *some of them as priests and Levites* insists not on a continuation of the old forms of ministry but on the participation of the Gentiles in the new ministry of the gospel (1 Pet 2:9).

**66:22-24** We might have expected Isaiah's book, the longest and most magisterial of the OT prophets, to end in a triumphant C major key, like Beethoven's Fifth; instead, it ends on a very different note, such that Hebrew synagogues habitually repeated v23 after v24 to soften the final blow. The *new heavens* and *new earth* (repeated from 65:17) are 'the climax towards which all is moving' (Motyer). To those who might still be afraid that their *name and descendants* could eventually fade, God's unalterable decree promises a permanence equal to that of the new creation itself. The rhythm of *New Moon* and *Sabbath*, so essential to human stability in the old creation, symbolises the holding of eternal festival in the new. *All mankind* will pay homage to Christ (Jn 5:23, Phil 2:9-11). 'Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him' (Jn 12:41, in another context). The solemnity and awfulness of the fate of *those who rebelled* against the Lord cannot be papered over with glib references to the hyper-judgmental character of the OT, since our Lord himself reinforces his teaching on the kingdom of God and the reality of hell by quoting this very passage (Mk 9:48). But if 'the former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind' (65:17), we might ask why the inhabitants of the new Jerusalem are pictured as taking a special trip outside the city, if not to gloat on the fate of the Lord's adversaries, at any rate to remind themselves of the terrible end from which they themselves have been delivered. Motyer's final sentences are worth quoting in full: 'There is a grandeur about Isaiah not found elsewhere even in the most majestic of the rest of Scripture, a majesty full of glory and of solemnity, plain alike in the revelation vouchsafed to him and in the language in which he was inspired to express it. But with the grandeur went a stern resoluteness, that if the glory does not win us to the life of obedience, if visions of the coming King, the sin-bearing Servant and the liberating Anointed Conqueror will not suffice, then maybe the unmistakably horrible rewards of disobedience will drive our wayward hearts to tremble at the word of the Lord.'

*Mark Greenstock, Sherborne, May 2020*