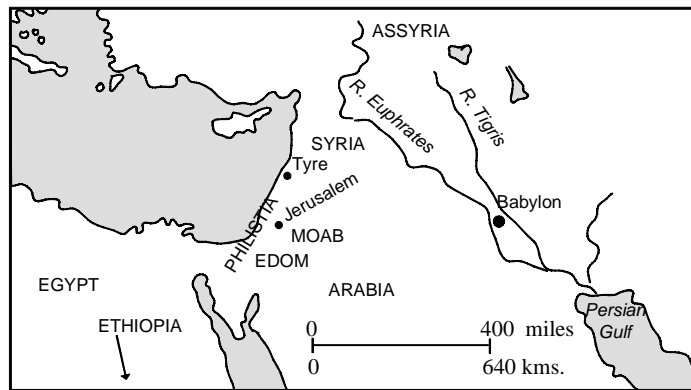


I will punish the world for its evil

There are prophecies against the nations surrounding Judah in the next twelve chapters of Isaiah. Babylon was not a threat to Judah in Isaiah’s lifetime, but within a hundred years of his death Judah was taken into Babylonian captivity. We must never forget that God is in control of the world. It is his world and he is sovereign over every nation. God used the Medes to overthrow Babylon (17) and he describes them as his ‘sanctified ones’ and his ‘mighty ones’ (3). God sanctified (separated) them to himself as an instrument of judgment on Babylon. The prophecy that Babylon would be conquered by the Medes was literally fulfilled (17–22; cp. Daniel 5:30–31).

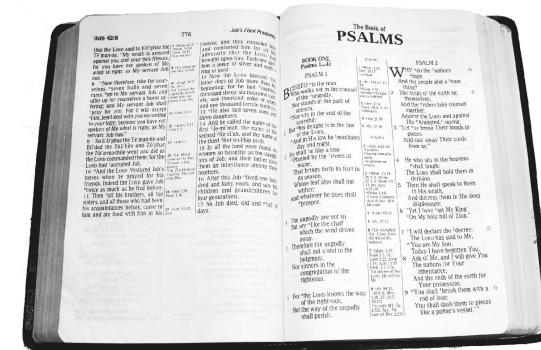
The word ‘Babylon’ (Hebrew = ‘babel,’ cp. Genesis 11:9) means ‘confusion’. We live in uncertain, lawless and confusing times when God’s word is despised and when wickedness is increasing. God has said, ‘I will punish the world for its evil’ (11). Babylon stands for everything that opposes God and is spoken of in Revelation chapters 17 to 19. Early Christians understood those chapters to refer to the Roman Empire. The Reformers understood them to be speaking of the Church of Rome. **There is confusion and opposition to God in the world but he is sovereign and he will have the last word. He will punish evil-doers. Is your heart right with God?**



Sketch-map to show nations in prophecies (chapters 13 to 23)

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God’s holy Word simply explained and applied



April 2013

Bible readings from Song of Solomon
Isaiah chapters 1 to 13

SONG OF SOLOMON

29 APRIL

Isaiah 12:1–6

Solomon composed 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32). The title ‘*The song of songs*’ (1:1) means ‘the best of songs’ (cp. ‘*vanity of vanities*’ – Ecclesiastes 1:2). This song is about the love of a man and a woman committed to one another in marriage. It has a powerful message for our permissive society where lust is often confused with love. True love is tender (2:2–4), passionate (8:6), enduring and priceless (8:7), and it is totally committed to the beloved (5:9–10).

The Song of Solomon is not easy to follow. There are two main characters, the Shulamite girl (6:13) and her shepherd-lover (identified also as the king). Solomon had a vineyard which he let out to tenants who included a mother, her sons and their little sister the Shulamite (8:11; cp. 1:6; 6:13; 8:8). The Shulamite was very beautiful but her brothers made her toil in the vineyard to such an extent that she had little time to care for her own appearance and became very sunburned (1:5–6). She was a shepherdess and also had to set traps for the foxes who spoiled the vines (1:8; 2:15). One day Solomon visited his vineyard and wooed her (1:6–11), won her and married her (3:6–7). Some believe that there are three main characters, the Shulamite, her shepherd-lover, and the king who seeks to win her affections. It is difficult, however, to see how Solomon could be shown in such an unfavourable light in a book that was written by him.

Interpretation of the Song of Solomon

Christians differ in the way that they interpret the book and there are three ways of looking at the Song of Solomon:

- The Naturalistic Interpretation which takes the book as it stands, viewing it as describing pure, marital love without any spiritual meaning. The problem with this view is that the Lord Jesus says that the Old Testament Scriptures speak of him (Luke 24:27,44–48), but the naturalistic view denies this.

Wells of salvation

These verses are a hymn of thanksgiving to the Lord which looks forward to the coming of Messiah (‘*in that day*’– 1,4; cp. 11:10,11). The word ‘*salvation*’ is found three times in verses 2 and 3. It means deliverance and for the Christian it is deliverance from the tyranny of sin and of Satan in our lives; it is deliverance from God’s judgment for our sins through the work of Christ at Calvary. The experience of salvation should cause us to sing God’s praises with great joy (2–5). *Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation* (3). Notice that the word ‘*wells*’ (or ‘well-springs’) is in the plural. What are these ‘*wells of salvation*’ which provide spiritual refreshment for the needy, thirsty soul? Among them are:

- A well of pardon. We have forgiveness of sins through the precious blood of Christ (Ephesians 1:7).
- A well of purification. We are polluted by our own sin and by the evil influences of the world around us, but the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin (2 Peter 2:20; 1 John 1:7).

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel’s veins;
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.* (William Cowper)

- A well of peace with God (1; cp. Romans 5:1).
- A well of power. *The LORD is my strength* (2). He empowers us through the Holy Spirit (cp. John 7:37–38), giving us strength to serve him and to fight our spiritual battles (Ephesians 6:10–18).
- A well of God’s presence. He is in the *midst* of his people (6; cp. Hebrews 13:5–6). What have we to fear?

What happens when we *draw water from the wells of salvation*? We are filled with praise to God, we are encouraged to pray and to proclaim his greatness and his goodness (4–5). Be sure to draw water from these wonderful wells of salvation each day. Your life will then be a blessing to yourself and to others.

The Spirit of wisdom and understanding

Isaiah's prophecy contains many warnings of judgment, but it also has many wonderful and encouraging passages and chapter 11 is one of these great passages which prophesy:

- The coming of Christ (1–5). Christ's first coming is prophesied (1–3) and then his second coming as King and Judge of all the world (4–5). We are again reminded of his human descent from the house of Jesse (King David's father). The Spirit of the LORD was upon Christ (2; cp. 61:1–2; Luke 4:16–22). He is *the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD* (2). *Wisdom and understanding .. knowledge* – the Holy Spirit does not bypass our minds as some people would have us believe. His presence in our lives produces reverence and godly fear.
- His kingdom (6–9). I do not believe that these verses are to be taken literally. John Calvin and Matthew Henry understand them as a picture of violent opposers of the gospel being subdued and won to Christ. **When Jesus comes again, there will not only be a miraculous change in us (Romans 8:23; Philippians 3:20–21; 1 John 3:1–3) but also in creation.** This is known as *'the regeneration'* (Matthew 19:28) or *'the restoration of all things'* (Acts 3:21). We look forward to a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3:10–13; Revelation 20:11; 21:1–5). *For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea* (9; cp. Habakkuk 2:14).
- The gathering of the remnant (10–16). A remnant returned to Israel after the captivity in Babylon (cp. Ezra 1), but I believe that the ultimate fulfilment of these verses lies in the salvation of a remnant of Jews throughout the gospel age, where they are gathered into the church of Christ (cp. Romans 11:5).

- The Allegorical Interpretation which takes the book as entirely figurative. This has been the most accepted view among Jews and Christians. The former see the poem as an allegory of God's love to Israel. Many Christians interpret the book as an allegory of Christ's love for his church and of their love for him (eg. Matthew Henry, C.H. Spurgeon). The commentary of George Burrowes (reprinted by Banner of Truth Trust) also takes the allegorical interpretation of the book. Dr Peter Masters argues strongly for this view in his book *THE MUTUAL LOVE OF CHRIST AND HIS PEOPLE* (Wakeman Trust). He points out that 'Solomon would be hardly the ideal channel for lessons on love and marriage in view of his having acquired a thousand wives and concubines who turned away his heart from God. The life of the teacher must surely commend the message.' E.J. Young (*INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT*) strongly rejects the allegorical interpretation of the Song.
- The Typical Interpretation. Stuart Olyott takes this view, seeing 'the characters and events of the Song of Solomon as suggestive of spiritual truths, without there being an exact equivalence, as in an allegory'. He outlines each of the three interpretations and highlights the problems that we encounter in them (*A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING* – commentary on Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. Published by Evangelical Press).

I follow the Typical Interpretation, believing that we should read the Song both as a love poem and see in it an illustration of the love of Christ for his people. Solomon is a type of Christ and his bride a type of the church which is betrothed to him *as a chaste virgin* (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:27). The language of Psalm 45 which speaks of Christ (Psalm 45:6–7; Hebrews 1:8–9) is similar to that found in parts of the Song of Solomon.

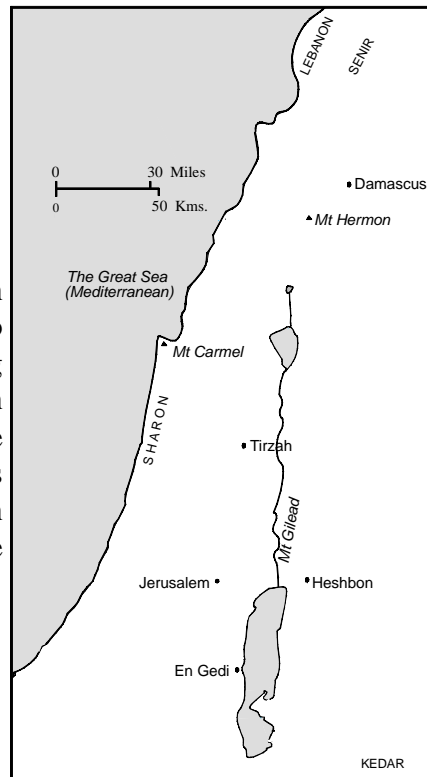
NB. The headings in your Bible indicating the identity of the speaker have been inserted by the publisher of your Bible; they are not part of inspired Scripture. I do not always follow these headings. You will find slight differences of identification if you compare commentaries on the Song of Solomon.

Outline of the Song of Solomon (based on that supplied in Stuart Olyott's book, A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING)

1. The Courtship of Solomon and the Shulamite (1:1 to 3:5)
2. The Wedding (3:6 to 5:1).
3. The Married life of Solomon and the Shulamite (5:2 to 8:14)
 - a. The Shulamite's troubled dream – 5:2 to 6:3
 - b. Mutual love – 6:4 to 8:14

Places mentioned in the Song of Solomon

We are taken from the mountain peaks of Lebanon and Hermon to the streets of Jerusalem in the Song (4:8; 6:4; 7:4–5). Kedar, Sharon and the vineyards of En Gedi are used in the word pictures portraying the love between Solomon and the Shulamite (1:5,14; 2:1).



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27 APRIL

Isaiah 10:5–34

The LORD of hosts

These verses were written after the reign of Ahaz. Samaria had already been overrun by the Assyrians (in 722 BC) and Hezekiah was king of Judah. Isaiah's warnings about Assyria had been vindicated and in this prophecy he encourages Judah to trust in God in the face of Assyrian threats. The Assyrians were God's instruments of judgment but they failed to recognise this. They were arrogant and claimed that they owed their success to their own military might (5–14). God warned the axe that he wielded (Assyria) not to boast itself against him, for he would judge them and punish them (15–19).

The Lord encouraged Judah to depend upon him and not to be afraid of the Assyrians. He promised that a remnant would return to the land (20–27). Verses 28 to 32 describe the thrusting advance of the Assyrian army towards Jerusalem but they were to be humbled by God (33–34). God calls himself '*the LORD of hosts*' or '*the Lord GOD of hosts*' five times in this chapter (16,23,24,26,33; cp. 9:7). The NIV loses this in translating the Hebrew as '*the LORD Almighty*'. This title of God, '*the LORD of hosts*' (Jehovah-Sabaoth) is found throughout the Old Testament and is a great encouragement to us when we face opposition and pressure.

The Assyrians had a fearsome, mighty army, but Judah had '*the LORD of hosts*' (armies of angels) on their side (cp. Genesis 32:1–2; Psalm 103:21; 148:2; 2 Kings 6:15–17). It took only one angel to destroy the Assyrians (37:36). **We have no need to fear men if we fear God and trust in him.** *The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear him, and delivers them* (Psalm 34:7). How wonderful! Let us rejoice in him.

*The hosts of God encamp around
The dwellings of the just;
Deliverance he affords to all
Who on his succour trust.*

(Nahum Tate & Nicholas Brady)

What will you do in the day of punishment?

There are four sections to this passage of Isaiah, each ending with the words ‘*For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still*’ (12, 17, 21; 10:4). This prophecy is earlier than that in chapters 7 and 8. According to verse 11 Syria was then at war with Israel and not with her in alliance against Judah. Israel had failed to heed God’s warnings and was ripe for judgment (10–12); hence the repeated statement that the anger of God had not been turned away.

Israel had listened to false prophets who had preached peace and offered comfort to them instead of warning them of the consequences of their sin (15). The leaders of the people caused them to go astray and led them to destruction (16). Judah was guilty of pride (9), indifference to God (13), lack of mercy and of hypocrisy (17), rampant wickedness (18), and injustice (10:1–2). Three questions are used in chapter 10, verse 3 to challenge the people. They also come as a challenge to us:

- *What will you do in the day of punishment?* If you are not a Christian now, it will be too late to repent of your sin after you die. Will you plead ignorance? You will have no excuse for rejecting Christ and for ignoring God’s command to repent now (Acts 17:30).
- *To whom will you flee for help?* If God is against you, no one can help you! *How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?* (Hebrews 2:3). To neglect salvation, all you have to do when challenged to respond to the gospel of Christ is – nothing!
- *Where will you leave your glory?* Your glory (honour and possessions) will be useless in the day of God’s reckoning.

If you are too proud to confess that you are a sinner and if you refuse God’s offers of mercy now, what will YOU do in the day of punishment?

Your name is ointment poured forth

As the Shulamite looks back on her courtship with Solomon, she expresses her great love and longing for him (1–7). His kisses mean more than affection to her; they are a token of his pure and intense love (2). His love brings her more joy than wine which Scripture links with gladness (2,4; cp. Psalm 104:15; Ecclesiastes 10:19). Fragrant oils or ointment were applied to the skin after washing and the Shulamite likened her beloved to the most expensive and fragrant ointment. *Your name is ointment poured forth* (3). His name speaks of all that he is and she recognises his attractiveness to others as well as to herself.

The Christian loves the name of Jesus. That name which we may have once scorned or blasphemed is now precious to us. It speaks of all that the Lord Jesus means to us. Our love for him is not the same as the love between a man and a woman. We must also beware of a love that is based on sentimentality. We love him for the perfection of his Person and for all that he has done for us. He has set his love upon us and he came to earth to suffer and die to save us. He is our best and dearest Friend who will never leave us. Is it any wonder that we love him? Can you sing from your own experience John Newton’s lovely hymn, ‘How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer’s ear’?

The Shulamite remembered her first meeting with Solomon who had probably come to the vineyard disguised as a shepherd. She was very beautiful but her brothers (possibly half-brothers) harshly treated her. She was aware that her beauty was spoiled by the scorching of her skin under the relentless sun as she toiled in the vineyard (5–6). Thinking him to be a shepherd, she had asked him where he fed his flock and he told her to follow *in the footsteps of the flock* (7–8). They went on to express their admiration of each other (9–17). Do you long for fellowship with your Saviour or has your heart grown cold towards him? *Go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock*. W. J. Cameron observes, ‘**They who would meet frequently with Christ must seek him in the well-worn paths of faith, obedience and worship**’ (THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY, IVP. – January 1958 reprint).

My beloved is mine, and I am his

The bridegroom now compares himself and the Shulamite to flowers (1–2). He likens himself to *‘the rose of Sharon’* (this may refer to the fragrant narcissus found in the fertile plain of Sharon, on the Mediterranean coast). He then speaks of the attractiveness of his bride, who for him surpasses all other women, just as a lily is more beautiful than thorns. The couple who love each other want to be together and cannot bear to be apart. They admire each other and delight in one another (2–3,8–14). Human love is very wonderful but Satan seeks to debase it. Sex is a God-given gift to be enjoyed within marriage (Hebrews 13:4). We must resist the permissive attitude of the world around us. Those of us who are married must always have ‘eyes’ only for our spouse (14). Whether single or married, we must all abstain from sexual immorality (1 Thessalonians 4:3–8).

When we are ‘lovesick’ (5) for the Lord Jesus, we cannot ‘see’ enough of him. We seek him in prayer, listen to his voice through the Bible and give him the adoration and worship of our hearts. We admire him for his worth, his beauty and his love to us. We trust in him and we want to please him. We reflect on his love for us with awe and wonder as we ponder how he poured out his soul to death to save us from our sin. The Lord Jesus will one day call us to himself – *‘Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past’* (10–11). The winter of bodily weakness, suffering, trial and sin will then be no more. We will be made perfect (Hebrews 12:23) and we will worship him and enjoy him as never before. Presently we rejoice in him saying, *‘My beloved is mine, and I am his’* (16).

*I lift my heart to thee,
Saviour divine;
For thou art all to me
And I am thine.
Is there on earth a closer bond than this,
That my Beloved's mine and I am his?*

(Charles E. Mudie)

His name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God

Deuteronomy chapter 18 warns against spiritism and other occult practices and goes on to promise the coming of Christ (verses 9 to 18). We have the same here in Isaiah. The warning at the end of chapter 8 is followed by wonderful verses which prophesy the coming of the Lord Jesus (9:1–7). Zebulun and Naphtali suffered the ravages of Assyrian invasion in 734 BC. They were oppressed and in darkness but they were to be privileged in the future by having the Messiah, *‘the Light of the World’*, to live among them in Galilee (1–2; Matthew 4:12–16).

How foolish it is to grope in the darkness of the occult when we can walk in the glorious light of Christ (2). Why trust in spiritist mediums and fortune tellers when the Son of God has the government of the world upon his shoulder (6)? Why seek the counsel of occult practitioners when you can know the Lord Jesus who is called *‘Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace’* (6)? Some translations do not have the comma after *‘Wonderful’* so that the title is *‘Wonderful Counsellor’*; this is perhaps the best way of rendering the verse.

Verses 6 and 7 clearly show that the promised Messiah is God. He is the *‘Wonderful Counsellor’*. He is wonderful in his Person and in his work of creation and redemption. He is the source of all wisdom and knowledge and he needs no counsel (25:1; cp. Proverbs 8:14; Romans 11:33–34). He wisely guides his people (28:29). Jesus is *‘The Mighty God’* sitting on the throne of David (7; cp. Psalm 89:19–37). His reign is eternal (*‘Everlasting Father’* = ‘Father of Eternity’). Lasting peace only comes through the *‘The Prince of Peace’* who gives us peace with God *through the blood of his cross* (Ephesians 2:14; Colossians 1:20).

Have you discovered the loveliness and preciousness of the Lord Jesus in your own life? To reject Christ will bring everlasting darkness into your soul. To embrace him as your Lord and Saviour will bring inexpressible joy, light and wonderful peace.

Should not a people seek their God?

The names of Isaiah's two sons, Shear-Jashub (7:3) and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (8:3) were signs to faithless Ahaz and his people (18). God hid his face from them because they had rejected his word, but there was a remnant of faithful disciples with Isaiah (16). There is a strong warning here against seeking to contact the dead through mediums. *And when they say to you, 'Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter,' should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living?* (19). Many who are bereaved or who are passing through perplexing or troubled times do not turn to the Lord, but to spiritist mediums and other occult practitioners. They mistakenly believe that they are getting in contact with loved ones who have died and are 'on the other side'. They do not realise that at its best spiritism and fortune-telling is trickery; at worst it is dabbling with demonic forces when evil spirits may pose as those who have died.

Spiritists protest that they worship the same God as we do and that they sing hymns to the Lord. They do not worship the same God as Christians and they reject the teaching of the Bible which contains many warnings against dabbling in spiritism, fortune-telling, sorcery and witchcraft (eg. Deuteronomy 18:9–12; 1 Timothy 4:1; Revelation 22:15). Those who refuse to pay attention to God's word ('*the law and the testimony*') do so because *there is no light in them* (20). Occult practices lead to *trouble and darkness, gloom of anguish* (22).

When people turn away from God, the vacuum is often filled by the occult. Over one million people in Britain are involved in some form of occult practice. High Street bookshops have lavish displays of occult books and New Age bookshops have sprung up throughout the country. Many famous people are turning to dark powers for help and comfort when they should be seeking God. **How we need to seek God in prayer for those who have been deceived into dabbling with the occult, and work to make known the glorious gospel of Christ.**

Have you seen the one I love?

Many Bible commentators believe that these verses describe a time when the Shulamite dreams that she cannot find Solomon. She reports, '*I sought him, but I did not find him*' (1–2). She rises up to search the streets and squares of the city and seeing the watchmen, she urgently enquires, '*Have you seen the one I love?*' (3). She finds him immediately afterwards and embraces him. She holds him and will not let him go until she has brought him to the house of her mother (4). There are times in every believer's experience when we may sense a loss of fellowship with Christ. This may be through our own sin and the grieving of the Holy Spirit, or because the Lord leads us through some dark valley experience. **If we are not enjoying fellowship with Christ and are not concerned, could it be that we are too pre-occupied with the cares of this world?**

Spurgeon said in one of his sermons, 'Labour after a conscious enjoyment of Christ, till you can say with the spouse, "I found him whom my soul loveth."' It is good to learn the practical precepts of the gospel, it is good to be in the society of the saints; but if you put any of these in the place of communion with your Lord himself, you do ill. Never be content till you can say, "I found him." Dear souls, did you ever find him? Have you yet found him? If you have not, keep on seeking, keep on praying, till at last you can say, "Eureka! I have found him whom my soul loveth. Jesus is indeed mine." ' (Sermon delivered on 7 October 1877).

The Shulamite repeats her charge to the daughters of Jerusalem that they do not disturb or awaken her beloved (5; cp. 2:7; 8:4). George Burrowes comments with reference to the gazelles and the does of the field, 'As these animals were proverbially timorous, the greatest care must be taken not to disturb them; and the believer enjoying the manifestations of heavenly love, will be as cautious in avoiding sin, as in watching the gazelle, which bounds away at the rustling of a leaf ... Never have we such intense anxiety in guarding against sin as when filled with intense love.'

Go forth ... and see King Solomon

We now come to a new section of the Song of Solomon which describes the wedding procession of the beloved and his spouse. The bridegroom is twice named 'King Solomon' (9,11) and the Shulamite is six times referred to as the 'spouse' (4:8–12; 5:1). These titles are not found elsewhere in the book. Those seeing the great procession approach Jerusalem ask, 'Who is this coming out of the wilderness?' (the open countryside; 6). They see Solomon's couch being carried along with the smoke of burning incense and costly perfumes rising at the head of the procession. The king is escorted by sixty of Israel's finest soldiers (7–8). Solomon's splendid chariot (or palanquin) is made of high quality wood from Lebanon (cedar and cypress) which is overlaid with gold; its purple (or dark red) canopy is supported by silver posts. The luxurious interior had been lovingly fitted out by the daughters of Jerusalem (9–10). The bride is not mentioned as all attention is focused upon the king.

The women of Jerusalem are called to go out to greet the royal procession and see King Solomon with the crown which his mother had placed upon his head. *Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and see King Solomon with the crown* (11). The Lord Jesus is far greater than Solomon (Luke 11:31). When he returns in all his splendour there will be many crowns upon his head and he will be admired by those who believe (Revelation 19:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:10). All who belong to his church, the bride of Christ, will be transformed (Ephesians 5:27). *We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is* (1 John 3:2). **Are you looking forward to the second coming of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ?**

*Yea, Amen! let all adore thee,
High on thine eternal throne!
Saviour, take the power and glory;
Claim the kingdom for thine own:
O, come quickly!
Hallelujah! come, Lord, come!*

(John Cennick & John Wesley)

For God is with us

The Lord continued to warn Ahaz and the people of Judah not to place their confidence in Assyria for deliverance from the armies of Syria and the northern kingdom (here called 'Samaria', 4). God told Isaiah to take a large scroll and to write upon it the words, 'Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz' (which means 'Quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil'). Two faithful witnesses were called to confirm what he had written (1–2). Isaiah's wife, the prophetess, then conceived and bore a son who was called 'Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz'. The significance of the name was that before the boy was able to speak, Damascus and Samaria, the capitals of Syria and the northern kingdom, would be plundered by the Assyrians. Syria was indeed overthrown within a year of the boy's birth (732 BC) and Samaria completely destroyed a decade later.

Judah's water supply from the gently flowing waters of Shiloah, though precarious, was preferable to the bountiful supply of water found in Syria and Israel. Because she was trusting men rather than God, the waters of the River Euphrates would spill over into Judah (6–8). This was a prophetic warning that the Assyrian army would invade Judah which was fulfilled during the reign of king Hezekiah. How foolish of Ahaz to trust in the treacherous Assyrians when God would have been with him had he obeyed and trusted in him.

Those who seek to destroy God's people will themselves be destroyed. All their plans will come to nothing *for God is with us* (9–10). The Hebrew is 'Immanuel' – 'God is with us'. The Lord Jesus Christ is our Immanuel. He came into the world so that we could enjoy God's forgiveness and peace through his death and resurrection (Matthew 1:21–23). **When God is with us, men's counsel against us comes to nothing. We have no need to fear the threats of the ungodly (10–12) but should place our hope and confidence in God (17).** God is with us and for us; who can be against us? What have we to fear (Romans 8:31; Hebrews 13:5–6)?

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son

The northern kingdom of Israel formed an alliance with Syria (or ‘Aram’ NIV) in approximately 734 BC to fight against Judah. Jerusalem itself was in danger and king Ahaz of Judah sought the help of the Assyrians to drive out the invaders (2 Kings 16:1–9).

The Lord sent Isaiah and his son to meet the king who was inspecting the city’s water supply. He had a message of encouragement for Ahaz telling him to keep calm and not be afraid nor lose heart because of these two smouldering stubs of firewood. God would thwart their plans and the northern kingdom would soon be no more (5–9). The Lord encouraged the king to trust in him and graciously offered him a sign but the wicked king refused this offer. He appeared to be very spiritual in his reply that he would not test the Lord but he was refusing the challenge to trust in God (10–12). He may have thought it a small thing to weary men (God’s servants), but would he also weary God (13)?

The Lord did give the king a sign, however: *Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call his name, Immanuel* (14). While the child was still very young, the two kings whom Ahaz so dreaded would be destroyed. Ahaz did not realise that his greatest enemy was not Israel or Syria, but Assyria (16–25). There may have been a reference to a son to be born to the king but this was not the main thrust of the prophet’s message.

The New Testament shows us that the prophet was looking ahead to the birth of Christ (14; cp. Matthew 1:23). Just as Ahaz did not want this sign, we have a glorious King who is still unwanted and rejected by most people. **If you want Immanuel (God with you), you must embrace Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord.** If you reject Christ, you are no better than Ahaz, however spiritual you may appear to be when you attend church, sing hymns or say your prayers.

You are all fair, my love, and there is no spot in you

Verses 1 to 15 of this chapter contain a song (some say two songs) in which Solomon lavishes his praise upon his bride. He gazes at her and is enraptured with her beauty. The language of these verses should not embarrass us; we are reading the Word of God. The Lord created the human body and attraction between male and female is quite normal; it is not sinful, except when it gives place to lust and unholy desire. It is understandable that a husband should have ‘eyes’ for his wife and that he should admire her beauty. Stuart Olyott comments on verse 5, ‘In the West a public love poem would not normally include any reference to a woman’s breasts. But the Bible does not see anything questionable here, and at this point Eastern culture is still nearer to the Word of God’ (A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING – commentary on Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon).

Solomon said to his bride, ‘*You are all fair, my love, and there is no spot in you*’ (7). The apostle Paul may have had this verse in mind when he wrote, ‘*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish*’ (Ephesians 5:25–27).

The Lord Jesus Christ takes sinners and makes them into saints. What wonderful grace and condescension. The sanctifying process begins at conversion and though we will not be perfect until we reach heaven, we must seek to *grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (2 Peter 3:18). **Does it not fill you with love and wonder, that the almighty, holy Lord Jesus, should seek the love and fellowship of our poor hearts, that he should delight in us?** Let us be determined to walk worthy of God who calls us into his own kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:12).

A garden enclosed

Solomon wanted more than anything for his bride to be at his side (8). The *'lions' dens* and *the mountains of the leopards'* suggest danger, but he would protect her. The tenderness of his love for the Shulamite is shown in the way he addresses her as his *'sister'* as well as his *'spouse'* (9,10,11,12; 5:1). She had earlier told him that his love was better than wine and he now says the same about her love (10; cp. 1:2).

Solomon describes his bride as *'a garden enclosed ... a spring shut up, a fountain sealed'* (12,15). The word *'enclosed'* is taken from a Hebrew word meaning 'locked and bolted'. An enclosed garden was only accessible to its owner and the Shulamite belonged exclusively to Solomon. The same point is made when she is described as *'a spring shut up, a fountain sealed'* so that only one person can enjoy its water (cp. Proverbs 5:15–21). The church is also *'a garden enclosed'* and a sealed fountain. **Christian, the Lord Jesus Christ has supreme claim over your life and your affections.** *Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's* (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

Spurgeon said in a sermon on verse 12, '“All for Jesus” is to be our motto ... We must be truly, thoroughly, really living for Jesus: we must be a garden enclosed, reserved, shut up for him. O brother, your life is to be a stream that flows for the refreshment of him who poured out his life for you! ... You are a spring shut up, a fountain sealed for Jesus, for Jesus only, and that altogether. Should self come forward, or personal advantage, you are to bid them be gone. They must have no admission here. This garden is strictly private. Trespassers, beware! Should the world, the flesh, or the devil leap over the wall, and stoop down to drink of the crystal fountain of your being, you are to chase them away, lest their leprous lips should defile this spring, and prevent the King from drinking thereat again. Our whole being is to be a fountain sealed for Jesus Christ alone.'

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne

King Uzziah intruded into the priestly ministry by burning incense to God who struck him with leprosy on account of his presumption; a long reign of 52 years ended in disgrace (2 Chronicles 26:16–23). In the year that Uzziah died, Isaiah had a vision of God in the temple that transformed his life. He writes, *'I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up'* (1). Judah was in spiritual decline and there was apprehension among the people as Assyria become increasingly powerful and belligerent but the prophet was reminded that God is absolutely sovereign. He cannot be toppled from his throne.

Isaiah saw the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is God (John 12:41; cp. Hebrews 1:3,8). He was overwhelmed by the majesty and dazzling splendour of the exalted God. He was gripped by the truth of God's holiness, for he repeatedly used the title *'the Holy One of Israel'* when speaking of the Lord (eg. 1:4; 5:19,24; 10:17,20). The seraphim (winged angelic beings) are sinless, yet they covered their faces in the presence of God (2). Isaiah keenly felt his own sinfulness in the presence of the Lord (5). **An appreciation of God's holiness brings a sense of our own sin and unworthiness.** Though we are God's children, the only acceptable way to serve God is *with reverence and godly fear* (Hebrews 12:28). God had a work for Isaiah who needed not only to confess his sin, but also to be cleansed from it (7). If we are to serve God acceptably, we must know the cleansing work of the blood of Christ in our lives (1 John 1:7) and be holy (1 Peter 1:15–16). We must witness with clean lips (7).

Isaiah's commission from God was tough. He would not see great success, but rather experience the heartache of ministering to a people who were dull, lethargic and indifferent to his message (9–11). In the difficult days that were to follow, he would remember that he was serving the eternal King of glory and he would be encouraged to persevere. **Christian, are you discouraged? Remember that you serve the King of all creation. He is in control of all things, and his purposes cannot fail nor be frustrated.**

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil

Isaiah now describes the wild grapes found in God's vineyard (Judah) with six 'woes' and pronounces judgment against the unbelievers of that day. *Woe to:*

- Greedy grabbers of land and property squeezed from the poor. God will judge them with dreadful harvests and vintages (8–10).
- Drunken revellers who lived for their drink and who failed to acknowledge the works of the Lord. They will be brought into captivity, hunger and thirst (11–17).
- Defiant sinners who challenged God (18–19). The sense of verse 19 is, 'If there is a God, let him prove himself. Let him do something that we may be convinced of his existence.' They wilfully refused to see the work of God (cp. verse 12).
- Those with warped values *who call evil good and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!* (20). So called 'progressive thinkers' despise the teaching of the Bible and the things that are true, good and pure. They are progressing headlong to hell.
- Conceited men who are wise in their own eyes (21).
- Unjust judges (22–23).

God is angry with the wicked every day (Psalm 7:11) and he punished Judah's wickedness by sending an earthquake (25) and by bringing the terrifying armies of Assyria and Babylon against his sinning people (26–30). *The LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment and God who is holy shall be hallowed in righteousness* (16). God is just and he will punish sinners. **How do you think your life appears in the sight of the Lord?**

I sought him, but I could not find him

We begin a new section of the Song (5:2 to 6:3) in which the Shulamite tells of a dream that she had soon after her marriage. In the dream she hears the voice of her beloved as he knocks at her door to seek admission. He speaks to her in the most endearing terms but she appears reluctant to stir herself in order to admit him. He puts his hand through an aperture in the door, trying without success to let himself in (1–5). The Shulamite then yearns for him but to her dismay he is not there when she opens the door. She recalls, '*I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer*' (6). She becomes so desperate to find him that she goes in the depth of the night to search the streets of the city for him. The suspicious watchmen roughly treat her and humiliate her by tearing away her veil in order to identify her (7). She then calls on the daughters of Jerusalem to tell her beloved of the depths of her yearning for him (8).

On a human level it is possible even in Christian marriage to allow our love for our partner to grow cold. We do not delight in each other as once we did and we will hardly stir ourselves to be considerate or help the other. We must never allow our feelings to undermine our mutual commitment. Feelings come and go and we will not always feel that we are in love. We promised in our marriage vows not to feel love, but rather to be faithful. If things are not right between you and your spouse, repent of your sins of omission and seek his/her forgiveness. Be always determined, with God's help, to build up and to maintain your marriage.

In our relationship to the Lord it is all too common for us to allow feelings to control us. We will only pray or read the Bible when we feel like doing so. We will only attend the prayer meeting if we are in the right mood. **Have you grown so cold in heart that if you sought the Lord, you would hardly know where to find him?** The Lord Jesus says to Christians who have left their first love and grown cold in heart towards him, '*Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works*' (Revelation 2:5).

He is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend

The daughters of Jerusalem respond to the lovesick Shulamite by asking her in what way her beloved was different from any other man (8–9). Their question brings forth a torrent of admiring words which conveys to them that she adores him, that he means everything to her. She eloquently describes his beauty and excellence and closes by exclaiming, *‘His mouth is most sweet, yes, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem’* (16).

They now asked the Shulamite to tell them where he had gone, though earlier she had asked them to pass on a message to him if they found him first (5:8; 6:1). In her dream she is now able to say that she knows where he is and that he has gone to his garden. She rejoices that she belongs to him and that he belongs to her (6:2–3).

The Lord Jesus is precious to the Christian (1 Peter 2:7). There was a time in our lives when we saw in him no beauty that we should desire him (Isaiah 53:2). Things are so different since God graciously worked in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We now see that the Lord Jesus is the eternal Son of God, who came to earth to become man and who lived a life of perfect obedience to the will of God the Father. He humbled himself and willingly laid down his life to save us and to cleanse us from our sins. Our hearts melt with adoring gratitude when we ponder his matchless love. Our almighty Saviour conquered death and will come again as King of kings and as Judge. We will then gaze on him and admire him in all his splendour. We have found him to be a Friend who never fails us and who is always gracious and kind. He is the *Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6). *He is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend.*

Do you know the Lord Jesus? Do you love him?

*Immortal honours rest on Jesus' head;
My God, my portion and my living bread;
In him I live, upon him cast my care;
He saves from death, destruction and despair.*

(William Gadsby)

Wild grapes

These verses record a very moving song of the prophet to his *‘Well-beloved’* (the LORD of hosts; 1,7). It is possible that Isaiah visited the people as they were gathering in clusters of grapes at the time of harvest and his song would have had a great impact on his hearers. Israel is likened to a vineyard belonging to God and planted on well-prepared, fertile ground. A watchtower was built so that intruders could be seen and driven out (cp. Song of Solomon 2:15). A winepress was constructed in anticipation of a bumper vintage. God *expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes* (1–2).

The song asks, ‘What more could God have done to his vineyard? Why did it fail to yield good grapes as expected? What should God do with such a useless vineyard?’ He would take away its protecting wall and hedge. The vineyard would be left to be overgrown with briars and thorns (4–6).

The prophet drives home his message in verse 7 with a clever play on the Hebrew words – *For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel ... He looked for justice* (‘mishpat’), *but behold oppression* (‘mispach’); *for righteousness* (‘tsedaqah’), *but behold weeping*, (‘tseaqah’). **Great privileges bring great responsibilities and, like Israel, we will not be let off lightly if we despise God’s word (Luke 12:47–48).**

Wild grapes are worthless grapes! Let us close with a comment from Matthew Henry: ‘Wild grapes are hypocritical performances in religion, that look like grapes, but are sour or bitter ... Counterfeit graces are wild grapes ... It is very sad with a soul, when, instead of the grapes of humility, meekness, patience, love, and contempt of the world, which God looks for, there are the wild grapes of pride, passion, discontent, malice, and contempt of God; instead of the grapes of praying and praising, the wild grapes of cursing and swearing, which are a great offence to God.’

The Branch of the LORD

The Lord Jesus Christ is described here and elsewhere in the Old Testament as *'The Branch of the LORD'* (2; 11:1–5; Jeremiah 23:5–6; 33:15; Zechariah 3:8; 6:12–13). We read here that he is *beautiful and glorious*. There was a time when we saw no beauty in the Lord Jesus that we should desire him (53:2) but the One whom we once despised and rejected is now most precious to us (1 Peter 2:7). The work of the Holy Spirit in our lives has changed our perception of our Saviour whom we now love and adore, whom we praise for saving our souls. *The Branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious.*

There is also a description of God's people here. They are:

- Known to God – *recorded among the living* (3; cp. Psalm 69:28). If you are a Christian, you should rejoice that your name is written in heaven (Luke 10:20; cp. Revelation 20:15).
- *Holy* (3) – God has chosen us to be holy, separated to himself in order to glorify him in our lives (Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:15–16; 2:9). We have been delivered from the corruption of the world to lead godly lives (cp. 2 Peter 1:3–4).
- Directed – verse 5 recalls the cloud which led Israel by day and the fire at night when they journeyed from Egypt to Canaan. How wonderful to know that God who made all things guides us!
- Protected (6) – the Lord shelters us in the heat of our pilgrimage to heaven and protects us in the blasts and storms of trial and suffering.

Let us think about the wonderful privileges that we enjoy in Christ and praise him for all that he means to us. He is precious!

*O that my soul could love and praise him more,
His beauties trace, his majesty adore,
Live near his heart, upon his bosom lean,
Obey his voice and all his will esteem.*

(William Gadsby)

Awesome as an army with banners

In the remainder of the Song Solomon and his bride revel in their love for each other. Here he praises the Shulamite for her beauty and begins by saying, *'O my love, you are as beautiful as Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as an army with banners'* (4). Tirzah, a city to the north-west of Samaria, was famous for its beauty. It became the first capital of the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 14:17; 15:33). Jerusalem was also renowned for its beauty (Psalm 50:2). Solomon is overwhelmed by the beauty of his bride and the language of these verses is similar to that found in chapter 4. The expression *'awesome as an army with banners'* is repeated in verse 10.

Christ loves his church (Ephesians 5:25) and his beauty should be seen in his people (Psalm 90:17; 149:4). God has chosen us to be conformed to the image of his Son, that is to be like the Lord Jesus, to have the family likeness (Romans 8:29). The world may despise us and hate us (John 15:18–19; 1 Corinthians 4:12–13), but those who love the Lord Jesus are loved by God (John 14:21–23).

The church is awesome as a great army with banners and we must not allow ourselves to be intimidated by the world. Spurgeon has a sermon on verse 4 which is entitled *'The church as she should be'*. He points out that an army with banners speaks of distinction, discipline, activity and confidence. He sees the distinction of the church in its adherence to biblical truth. He rightly states, *'It is our duty to make a clear and distinct declaration of our principles ... We hear on all sides great outcries against creeds. Are these clamours justifiable? It seems to me that when properly analysed most of the protests are not against creeds, but against truth, for every man who believes anything must have a creed, whether he write it down and print it or no ... After all, there is a Protestantism still worth contending for; there is a Calvinism still worth proclaiming, and there is a gospel worth dying for. There is a Christianity distinctive and distinguished from Ritualism, Rationalism, and Legalism, and let us make it known that we believe in it.'*

How fair and how pleasant you are

Stuart Olyott writes in his commentary, ‘We now come to a passage which allegorical scholars have used to show what pleasure the church gives Christ. Solomon is here giving the answer to the question which has just been asked, and does so in a poem extolling the physical beauty of his bride. Although we do not adopt a naturalistic interpretation for this book, we should not forget that the human body is a marvel of God’s handiwork and is, accordingly, to be admired. Physical beauty, and physical desire, too, are God-given gifts. Their perversion is undoubtedly degrading, but not the gifts themselves’ (A LIFE WORTH LIVING AND A LORD WORTH LOVING – Welwyn Commentary Series).

The feet of the bride are beautiful and this reminds us of the Lord’s estimation of *the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things* (1; cp. Romans 10:15). The word translated ‘*navel*’ (2) usually refers to the whole of the lower part of the body. A goblet was considered to be most beautiful when it was filled with wine. The whole of her body was graceful and her dark hair glistened with a purple sheen and Solomon was held captive in its tresses (5). ‘The figure of the lover held in the locks of the beloved is common in eastern poetry and is found in English literature’ (THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY, IVP. – January 1958 reprint). The fragrance of the apple is much appreciated in the East (8).

The admiring Solomon exclaimed as he gazed on his bride, ‘*How fair and how pleasant you are*’ (6). We will not know perfection until we reach heaven, but the Lord delights in us and we are pleasant to him. **We find some Christians difficult and we may be too ready to see their faults and failings, but they belong to Christ who loves them.** We must be prepared to be thankful for the marks of grace in their lives and recognise that they too are precious to Christ.

Say to the righteous that it shall be well with them

God warned that he would cause Jerusalem and Judah to be in a state of anarchy and distress. He would send famine and deprive them of their military strength, of judge and of prophet, of wise and skilled men. There would be a breakdown of government, of law and order (1–7). This was probably fulfilled when the Babylonians took King Jehoiachin and such people as described above captive to Babylon in 597 BC (2 Kings 24:13–16). Ezekiel the prophet was also among these captives (Ezekiel 1:1–2).

The people had only themselves to blame for the terrible calamity that befell their nation. They were against the Lord in their words and deeds and they had no shame for their wickedness (8–9). The Lord condemned the men for their wickedness in oppressing the poor, and the women for their pride, their luxurious lifestyles and immorality (13–23). The men would be killed in warfare and the women would lose their menfolk and their finery and be reduced to desperation (3:24 to 4:1). No one is able to despise and oppose God without inviting judgment.

What about the righteous remnant living in times of judgment? There is an encouraging word from the Lord: ‘*Say to the righteous that it shall be well with them*’ (10). Christian, are you anxious about the future? Do you wonder whatever will become of this world with its increasing wickedness, lawlessness, pollution, famine and suffering? **Do not fear! God will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). It shall be well with you.** The Lord Jesus is coming again! There is no future for this present world but the Lord will create new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (65:17; 2 Peter 3:13), and we shall be there!

*The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not, desert to its foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavour to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake!*

Come and let us walk in the light of the LORD

The prophet appeals to his wayward people, ‘*Come and let us walk in the light of the LORD*’ (5; cp. 1 Thessalonians 5:4–5; Ephesians 5:8–14). There is a striking parallel between Isaiah’s day and the times in which we live. What were the sins of Judah which are so prevalent in our day and age?

- Turning to heathen practices from the east. *Filled with eastern ways* (6). This could describe Britain in the twenty-first century. New Age religion and therapies, Hindu meditation, yoga, etc. are rampant and are influential in high places in society. Astrologers and fortune-tellers are also in great demand. All these practices are satanic, however friendly they appear.
- Materialism (7). Looking to silver, gold and earthly treasures for satisfaction rather than to God. Some in Judah loved their superb horses and today many just live for the car. It is a terrible thing to be so taken up with our possessions that we have little time for God.
- Idolatry (8). God hates all forms of idolatry. Good luck charms and talismans are idols. There are also the more subtle forms of idolatry such as covetousness (Colossians 3:5). Idolatry is setting our hearts upon someone or some object rather than God.

‘*The day of the LORD*’ (12) is a day of terror for the ungodly (10, 19, 21), for all those who are guilty of the sins described above. The Assyrian invasion of 701 B.C. was ‘*the day of the LORD*’ for Isaiah’s contemporaries (cp. 7:17 to 8:8) as was the Babylonian captivity in 586 BC for a later generation. There is a reference here to the coming again of Christ which is also described as ‘*the day of the LORD*’ which comes suddenly ‘*as a thief in the night*’ (1 Thessalonians 5:2–4). *The LORD alone shall be exalted in that day* (11,17) as he comes in great splendour and majesty to judge the world (2 Thessalonians 1:7–10). **Will the day of the LORD be a day of terror for you? Have you been straying from God?** Repent of your waywardness and return to your Saviour who loves you.

Come, my beloved, let us go

The Shulamite states for the third time, ‘*I am my beloved’s*’ (10; cp. 2:16; 6:3). She was filled with delight at the very thought that she belonged to her husband and that he loved her. The Christian belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ and this brings a great responsibility to obey him and to live for him. We must also see that belonging to Jesus is the greatest privilege a person can enjoy. To love and to be loved by the glorious Son of God brings priceless blessings. He cares for us and prays to God the Father for us. He guides us through this world and helps us through difficult and testing times. He will never leave us nor forsake us and one day he will take us to be with himself in glory.

The spouse wants to go out into the country to be alone with her beloved and she says to him, ‘*Come, my beloved, let us go forth to the field; let us lodge in the villages*’ (11). Stuart Olyott comments, ‘Lovers enjoy being alone together. Those who do not enjoy being alone with Christ must sincerely question whether they love him at all.’ How much time do you spend alone with your precious Saviour? The spouse expressed her overwhelming desire for Solomon (12). The fruit of the mandrake was thought to stimulate sexual desire and to enhance fertility (13; cp. Genesis 30:14–16). She longed to know him as well as she knew her brother and to have that closeness with him that is enjoyed between brothers and sisters (8:1–2). She again repeats her charge to the daughters of Jerusalem not to arouse love until it is ready to waken (4; cp. 2:7; 3:5).

Do you profess to love Christ, but hardly talk to him or listen to what he has to say to you through his word? If you find more pleasure in material things, in watching television, in sport and leisure than in having fellowship with Christ, what kind of Christian are you? Meditate on the perfection of the Lord Jesus, on the cross, on his victory over death and his reign in glory, on his unfailing love for you and repent of your coldness of heart.

Many waters cannot quench love

In the closing verses of the book the Shulamite is seen leaning on her beloved, asking him to bind her yet more closely to himself. W. J. Cameron writes of verse 6, 'This verse may be regarded as one of the finest descriptions of love ever penned. The seal worn suspended from a cord round the neck, or bracelet, was a symbol of something dear ... The seal would remind him of her, even when he was away from her. cf. Isaiah 49:16' (THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY, IVP. – January 1958 reprint).

Love is as strong as death ... Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it (6–7). Christian, nothing whatever can separate you from the love of Christ, not even death (Romans 8:35–39). **You may feel overwhelmed by floods of suffering and grief. You may be passing through a severe trial, knowing disappointment and perplexity, but the love of Christ for you can never be quenched nor drowned.** He is altogether wise and good. Trust in him, even though the way may be dark.

The bride probably recalled words spoken to her in time past by her brothers. She was once immature, too young to marry, but now things are different (8–10). Solomon had let out his vineyard in Baal Haman to tenants who each paid an annual rent of a thousand pieces of silver. The Shulamite willingly gave herself and her vineyard to Solomon. She was totally committed to him (11–12). He longed to hear her voice (13). Have you ever thought that the Lord Jesus desires to hear your expressions of worship, devotion and praise? How often does he hear your voice in prayer?

The Song closes with the Shulamite expressing her heartfelt desire for the return of her beloved (14). Those who love the Lord Jesus long for his return. He has promised, 'Surely I am coming quickly.' We respond, 'Even so, come, Lord Jesus!' (Revelation 22:20). We will then see his face, admire him and we will be with him for ever (2 Thessalonians 1:10). Hallelujah!

Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD

Isaiah received his prophecies through visions (he 'saw' – 1:1; 2:1; 6:1). There are two themes in this chapter: 'the mountain of the LORD' (2–3) and 'the day of the LORD' (12). Verses 2 and 3 are also found in Micah 4:1–2.

Godly men differ in their interpretation of verses 2 to 4. H.C. Leupold in his commentary on Isaiah suggests that the scenes depicted in these verses 'would lie beyond the point of the return of Christ'. Others understand these verses to refer to the restoration of Israel as a nation ruled by Christ with Jerusalem as the centre of worship for the people of all nations. I do not agree with the second explanation. Old Testament prophecy has an immediate application for the people of that particular time, but there is also a message which looks to the more distant future. Judah was restored to their land after seventy years of captivity in Babylon but the ultimate blessing prophesied is to be found in the church, not in the nation of Israel (Ephesians 3:20–21).

Israel was restored as a nation in the twentieth century, but this cannot be a fulfilment of biblical prophecy. Modern Israel does not acknowledge Christ as the promised Messiah and is hostile to the gospel. Peter, preaching at Pentecost, quotes from Joel and shows that 'the latter days' refer to the gospel age (Acts 2:16–17; cp. Hebrews 1:1–2). Prophecies relating to Israel in the latter days and of the conversion of Gentiles speak of the church of Christ now (John 4:21–22; Acts 15:16–17; Galatians 4:24–27; 6:16; Hebrews 12:22). This is the view taken by Matthew Henry in his commentary.

The mountain of the LORD was the site of the temple in Jerusalem but the church is God's temple where he dwells (1 Corinthians 3:16–17; Ephesians 2:19–22). There is a call here to worship, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD' where 'he will teach us his ways' so that 'we shall walk in his paths' (3). **Let us pray that we will learn the ways of God and walk in his paths each day**

The city of righteousness, the faithful city

Jerusalem was the holy city where God had his temple, where his glory and presence were known (cp. 1 Kings 8:10–13; Psalm 48:1–3). The prophet laments that Jerusalem, ‘*the faithful city*’, had become a harlot by her unfaithfulness to God (21). In the time of David and in the early years of Solomon’s reign, Jerusalem was full of justice; righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers (21). The righteousness once found in Jerusalem had been mixed with so much dross that it was worthless; it was like wine that had been so diluted with water that it was insipid (22). The princes had joined with thieves and bribery was rampant, perverting justice for the widow and the orphan (23). The leaders of Jerusalem had turned away from God’s holy law which teaches, ‘*You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the discerning and perverts the words of the righteous*’ (Exodus 23:8).

God was not indifferent to the wickedness of the people of Jerusalem! He emphasised the seriousness of their sin against him by the use in one sentence, of three of his titles – *Therefore the Lord says, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel* (24). He would come in judgment to destroy the wicked and to purge the city (24–28). *The terebinth trees* (29) were associated with places of idol worship and God warned that these idols, and those who made, them would be burned up together (31).

The Lord is gracious when he warns of judgment; by doing so he gives sinners opportunity to consider their ways and to repent. This passage also contains a promise of restoration and redemption so that Jerusalem would again be called ‘*the city of righteousness, the faithful city*’ (26–27). Jerusalem is a type of the church of Christ (Galatians 4:24–28; Revelation 21:2). Christian, you belong to a righteous city, a holy church! To go after the world is spiritual adultery (James 4:4). **Be sure to keep yourself faithful to God and shun all the enticements of the wicked world around you.**

ISAIAH

Isaiah’s ministry stretched over a period of some sixty years. He prophesied from before the death of King Uzziah (740 B.C.) and he recorded the death of King Sennacherib of Assyria (681 B.C.) – see Isaiah 1:1; 6:1; 37:38. His name means ‘The LORD (Yahweh) is salvation.’ His wife is called ‘*the prophetess*’ (8:3) and there was prophetic significance in the names of his two sons (7:3; 8:3–4). Jewish tradition holds that he was a cousin of King Uzziah.

Historical Background (see 2 Kings chapters 15 to 21; 2 Chronicles chapters 26 to 32). Uzziah (also known as Azariah) was a good king who enjoyed a long and prosperous reign of fifty-two years. During his reign, however, Judah drifted into spiritual decline which continued through the reign of his son, Jotham. Ahaz, son of Jotham, was a wicked idol worshipper who sought the help of the Assyrians rather than trust in the Lord when Syria and Israel came to attack Judah (chapter 7; cp. 2 Kings 16). The Assyrians had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. taking the people off into captivity. They repopulated the land with people from other parts of their empire (2 Kings 17). Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, was a godly man who led Judah in spiritual reformation. When the mighty army of Assyria threatened Jerusalem, God brought a miraculous deliverance (chapters 36 and 37; cp. 2 Kings 19; 2 Chronicles 32). Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh, was the most wicked king ever to rule over Judah. According to Jewish tradition, he had Isaiah sawn in half (cp. Hebrews 11:37 which may refer to this).

Contemporary Prophets. Micah also prophesied to Judah during Isaiah’s lifetime. Hosea prophesied to the northern kingdom of Israel.

Isaiah’s Message. He repeatedly warned Judah about the folly of their sin and of trusting in political alliances for their security. Looking ahead of his own lifetime to the Babylonian exile, he had a great message of consolation for the exiles. He prophesied of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and of his sufferings and death, more than any of the Old Testament prophets.

1. Prophecies of Condemnation (chapters 1 to 35)

Prophecies to Judah and Jerusalem	chs. 1 to 12
Prophecies against surrounding nations	chs. 13 to 23
Isaiah's apocalypse (revelation of last things)	chs. 24 to 27
The doom of the nations and the redemption of Israel	chs. 28 to 35

2. Prophecies to Hezekiah (chapters 36 to 39)

Hezekiah's crisis	ch. 36
Hezekiah's prayer	ch. 37
Hezekiah's sickness	ch. 38
Hezekiah's folly	ch. 39

3. Prophecies of Consolation (chapters 40 to 66)

Deliverance from Babylon (The comfort of God's greatness)	chs. 40 to 48
Redemption through suffering and sacrifice (The comfort of God's grace)	chs. 49 to 57
Triumph of Jehovah's kingdom (The comfort of God's glory)	chs. 58 to 66

But Israel does not know, my people do not consider

Israel was desolate (7) when the words of this chapter were written, probably following Assyrian invasion in 701 B.C. The prophet introduces charges against the southern kingdom of Judah (referred to as 'Israel' in verse 3). We have a courtroom scene with God as plaintiff and judge; heaven and earth are called on to support God's charges against Judah; Isaiah is the chief witness for the prosecution. There was plenty of religion in the land but it made no difference to the way the people led their lives. They had rebelled against the Lord and forsaken him. They had provoked him to anger by their wickedness (2–4). Corruption had so permeated the nation that it was like a person whose body was covered with evil-smelling, running sores (5–6). Judah had sunk into such sin and degradation that she was likened to Sodom and Gomorrah which God had destroyed hundreds of years earlier (10; cp. Genesis 13:13; 19:1–29).

What lay behind the folly and sin of Judah? Their religion was not thought out nor considered according to God's word. They were worse than dumb beasts. *The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not consider* (3). They had all the outward trappings of religion – holy days and festivals, sacrifices and prayers, but it was empty and futile and God hated it all (10–15). God had his small remnant who were salt and light in a wicked society. He withheld judgment for the sake of the faithful few (9). Small remnants are important! If you are in a small church, seeking to remain faithful to God's word in difficult and confusing times, be encouraged and let your light shine.

Mindless religion is useless! God called upon his people to 'reason' and to consider the options open to them – obedience and blessing, or rebellion and destruction (18–20). **How is your religion? Is it real or is it an empty pretence?** Oh, seek the Lord now and his forgiveness if your heart is not right with God.