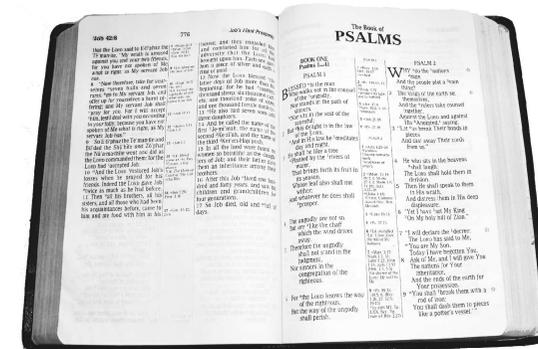


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



August 2013

Bible readings from Isaiah chapters 40 to 57

The High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity

The Lord promised the captives in Babylon that those who trust in him would return to their land and that he would remove every obstacle preventing their return to Israel. This came in sharp contrast to the useless idols which they had worshipped (13–14).

The Israelites were ignorant of the great character of God and Isaiah again proclaims his greatness (cp. 40:9–31). We are now given a glimpse of God in his awe-inspiring majesty. The words of verse 15 are wonderful. *For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit.'* These verses remind us that:

- The Lord is absolutely sovereign over the universe (cp. 40:21–23; Psalm 113:4–5).
- He is the eternal God who does not change (40:28; Malachi 3:6).
- Such a glorious, powerful God who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16) will dwell with those who have a humble and contrite spirit. What wonderful condescension!

*And will this sovereign King
Of glory condescend?
And will he write his name
My Father and my Friend?
I love his name, I love his word,
Join all my powers to praise the Lord.*

(Isaac Watts)

God promises to restore the backslider (16–19). Let us pray for those known to us who have grown cold in their love for the Lord, who have strayed from him. If you are backslidden in heart, you know that you have returned to the ways of the wicked who are like the restless sea. *'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked'* (20–21). **You will never enjoy true peace until you humbly return to the Lord. Why continue in such a miserable state?**

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The righteous perishes, and no man takes it to heart

There is a description here of a nation which had sunk into ignorance and gross darkness (perhaps in the reign of Manasseh; 2 Kings 21:1–16, by whom, according to Jewish tradition, Isaiah was martyred). How did such a dreadful situation come about? The leaders of the nation who should have given spiritual direction were blind, ignorant, lazy, greedy, selfish and drunken (56:10–12). The spiritual life was drained from the nation and sorcery, idolatry and wickedness flourished (57:3–9). When spiritual darkness prevails in a nation, *the righteous perishes, and no man takes it to heart; merciful men are taken away, while no one considers* (57:1). We live in confusing times when there is much ignorance among professing Christians and false religion and wickedness flourishes. **Let us pray much for our nation. May God strengthen and prosper faithful churches.**

*When nations are to perish in their sins,
'Tis in the church the leprosy begins;
The priest, whose office is, with zeal sincere,
To watch the fountain and preserve it clear,
Carelessly nods and sleeps upon the brink.
While others poison what the flock must drink;
Or, waking at the call of lust alone,
Infuses lies and errors of his own:
His unsuspecting sheep believe it pure;
And, tainted by the very means of cure,
Catch from each other a contagious spot,
The foul forerunner of a general rot.*

(From William Cowper's 'Expostulation' which draws parallels between faithless Israel and 18th-century England).

Sin is deceitful and it hardens the heart (Hebrews 3:13). The unfaithful Jews were wearied by their sinful ways but they refused to admit that there was no hope for those who lived in such a way. They would not take it to heart that they had forgotten God who promises blessing to those who trust in him (10–13).

Isaiah chapters 40–66

In the final part of his prophecy Isaiah looks ahead to the captivity in Babylon and the restoration of the Jews to their land in 538 BC. Cyrus, king of Persia, who decreed that the Jews could return home is mentioned by name (45:1), God revealing this to Isaiah at least 150 years before the events took place. The prophet encourages the exiles to return to Israel (48:20–21).

Isaiah also looks beyond the return from captivity in Babylon. The suffering and death of Christ and their purpose are also mentioned in great detail (52:13 to 53:12) and that was written over 700 years before Jesus came to this earth. This final part of Isaiah's prophecy has three sections, each ending with a warning to the wicked:

chs. 40 – 48 *'There is no peace,' says the LORD, 'for the wicked'*
(48:22).

chs. 49 – 57 *'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked'*
(57:21).

chs. 58 – 66 *And they shall go forth and look upon the corpses of the men who have transgressed against me. For their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh*
(66:24).

*The notes for April 2013
contain an introduction to the Book of Isaiah*

The word of our God stands forever

In the first part of his prophecy Isaiah had a message of stern warning and judgment for the godless nations and also for God's own backslidden people. He now looks ahead to the disaster that the Lord would bring to faithless, rebellious Judah – the captivity of the people in Babylon (cp. Psalm 137). This captivity was over 100 years away but Isaiah has a message of comfort from God for that future generation, who are referred to as 'Jerusalem' (1–2). Their captivity would soon end. God told his servant, '*Comfort, yes, comfort my people! Speak comfort to Jerusalem*' (1–2; literally, 'Speak to the heart of Jerusalem'). Matthew Henry points out in his Bible commentary that 'it is the will of God that his people should be a comforted people, even in the worst of times'.

The message of comfort is:

- '*That her warfare is ended*' (2). The time of her trouble and captivity is at an end.
- '*That her iniquity is pardoned*' (2). 'The cause of her trouble is removed, and, when that is taken away, the effect will cease. Tell her that her iniquity is pardoned, God is reconciled to her, and she shall no longer be treated as guilty before him'. (Matthew Henry). This is still the glorious message of comfort that God gives to all sinners who truly repent.

The Jews had rebelled against God and they needed to *prepare the way of the LORD* before he revealed his glory (3–5). The words of verses 3 to 5 are a prophecy relating to the ministry of John the Baptist as he heralded the coming of Christ and preached repentance (Luke 3:3–6).

The message that Isaiah was to cry out to the people was not only that they were to be comforted but also that *all flesh is grass* in comparison to God's word (6–7). *The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever* (8). God's word is true and we can safely trust in all his promises. **Are you feeling discouraged and in need of comfort? Read your Bible and take heart (cp. Romans 15:4).**

The Lord GOD who gathers the outcasts

God's word for the captives returning from Babylon (55:12–13) was that they should be righteous and keep his Sabbath (1–2). Obedience to God's word is the grateful response to his grace and goodness in our lives. There is also a message of hope for foreigners and eunuchs from *the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel* (8). The barbaric practice of mutilating men to make them eunuchs was common in the ancient world. Eunuchs and foreigners were excluded from the congregation of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:1–8). God promised that he would gather them to himself when they joined themselves to him to please and to obey him (3–6). He said, '*Even them I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer*' (7). Are you joyful in God's house? The Lord Jesus quoted verse 7 when he drove out the merchants from the temple (Matthew 21:13).

These promises find their ultimate fulfilment in the gospel. Christ has broken down the barrier between himself and men and between Jew and Gentile (Galatians 3:26–29; Ephesians 2:11–18). The Ethiopian eunuch came to faith in Christ while reading the prophecy of Isaiah (Acts 8:26–39). How thrilled he must have been as he progressed from chapter 53 to chapter 56 and saw these promises fulfilled in his own life! He went on his way rejoicing.

Some people feel so unworthy because of their sinful ways, that they despairingly wonder if God will accept them if they come to him. The Lord Jesus promises, '*The one who comes to me I will by no means cast out*' (John 6:37). He is willing to save even the worst of sinners. **If you are not a Christian and wonder whether God would receive you, be assured that if you come to Christ, trusting in him and repenting of your sin, he will accept you (Matthew 11:28–30). He is a wonderful and gracious Saviour.**

Seek the LORD while he may be found

If you are not a Christian, I urge you, ‘*seek the LORD while he may be found*’ (6). Tomorrow may be too late! What is involved in seeking God and coming to him? You must call upon him asking him to forgive your sin and to save you (6). You must forsake your sinful ways and thoughts (7). *God will have mercy and he will abundantly pardon*. Think of that! *He will abundantly pardon you because he delights in mercy* (Micah 7:18).

Who is a pardoning God like thee?

Or who has grace so rich and free? (Samuel Davies)

The unrighteous man must forsake his sinful, selfish thoughts if he is to know pardon from God (7). God’s thoughts are far higher and different from those of men (8–9). He is wise and wonderful in all his thoughts and providential ways. We must remember this truth in every aspect of our Christian work. The Lord goes on to give us a lesson from nature to encourage us to persevere in our work for him. He gives rain and snow to water the earth so that seed will germinate, grow and produce a harvest (10). When he sends forth his word, it will bring spiritual fruit. *So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it* (11).

A farmer does not expect to obtain a harvest without toil and patient waiting. In our work of evangelism and of building up our church, the same principles apply – toil and patient waiting before the harvest. Paul wrote, ‘*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase*’ (1 Corinthians 3:6). We must preach, teach and spread the word of God trusting him to give the increase. God’s word will accomplish his sovereign will – *it shall accomplish what I please* (11). We must not resort, as some have, to gimmicks or entertainment in our evangelism. **Let us trust in God whose thoughts and ways are different from those of men.** Just as the captives left Babylon with singing (12), we too shall rejoice in the Lord, when he is pleased to bless the work of our hands.

Behold your God!

The Jews were faced with two perils in Babylon:

1. Of losing their faith in God when idolatry and occult practices were so influential. We shall consider this peril today.
2. Of believing that God was so angry with them that he had cast them off. This problem is addressed in verses 27 to 31.

The message of the prophet was, ‘*Behold your God!*’ (9). He asked question upon question in order to direct their eyes (and ours) to the living God (12–31). We, too, live in evil days when New Age, occult and pagan teaching have become increasingly widespread and influential. We must stand firm and always fix our gaze upon God who is supreme in power:

- See his greatness compared with the world he created (12).
- See his greatness compared with the wisdom of men (13–14).
- See his greatness compared with the nations of the world (15–17). They are like a drop of water in a bucket, like the finest grains of dust left on the scales. *All nations before him are as nothing.*
- See his greatness compared with idols (18–20). Foolish men worship idols which they made, but we worship God who made us!
- See his greatness compared with the rulers of the world (21–24).
- See God’s greatness compared with the stars (25–26). The Babylonians were expert astrologers but God’s people have no need of horoscopes. The Lord created the vast galaxies and he controls all the stars. He wisely and lovingly cares for all who trust in him and obey him(11). ‘*Lift up your eyes on high, and see who has created these things*’ (26). Come, worship and adore him, for he alone is worthy to be praised.

Are you in the spiritual doldrums? Are you miserable and joyless? Have you been taking your eyes away from the Lord? Are your personal devotions an empty routine so that you do not enjoy meaningful fellowship with the Lord? ‘*Behold your God!*’ If you are backslidden in your heart, come back to him now, repenting of your sin, and he will lovingly restore your soul.

Those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength

Many of the exiles in Babylon were in despair, believing that God had forsaken and forgotten them. They were saying, ‘*My way is hidden from the LORD, and my just claim is passed over by my God*’ (27). When a Christian is depressed, a pall of gloom and despair hangs over him and God seems to be remote. We may sometimes wonder, ‘Does the Lord see the problems that bring so much pressure upon us and the difficulties that beset us? Does God really care for us, or does he disregard our cause?’ What must we do when we are disheartened and depressed? We must lift up our eyes and look to him.

The almighty, everlasting God, the Creator of the world, never grows weary and is infinite in his wisdom (28). Do you feel that God is blind to your problems and difficulties? Do you feel weak and useless? *He gives power and strength to the weak* (29). What must we do when we feel low? We must not only look at God’s awesome majesty and ponder his greatness, we must also look to him by worshipping him and waiting on him. *Those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength* (31). What does it mean to wait on the Lord? It means to depend on him, to be patient and to submit to his will, even in the dark providences that he brings into our lives. It means to have an attitude of expectation, trusting that the Lord will meet with us, knowing that he loves us and is working out his purposes for us.

When we are depressed we may not feel like waiting on the Lord, but we must drop to our knees and call upon him. We will find that he will renew our strength. We will begin to mount up with wings in worship and we will see everything from a different perspective. God is never too tired to hear our prayers and he will surely strengthen us (cp. Lamentations 3:25–26).

Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the LORD!

(Psalm 27:14)

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters

The appeal in this chapter was initially to the exiles in Babylon who were probably seeking satisfaction in material things but it has a far wider application. The first two verses of the chapter picture men and women thirsting and hungering for satisfaction. The chapter ends with a picture of great joy and freedom.

God is gracious and he invites sinners to himself (1–3). ‘*Ho!* (i.e. ‘pay attention’) *Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.*’ He offers salvation freely *without money and without price* to all who will come to him. This gracious invitation is repeated in the closing verses of the Bible, ‘*Let him who thirsts come. And whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely*’ (Revelation 22:17). Many, many thousands of people spend all that they have in the quest for satisfaction. They look for personal fulfilment in seeking for wealth, pleasure and all kinds of earthly comforts (cp. Ecclesiastes 2:1–11). Others turn to drug-induced experiences which lead them to disaster and misery. How terribly sad! There can be no lasting joy and peace apart from God (2).

The Lord invites us, ‘*Come to me, hear, and your soul shall live*’ (3). The Lord promises the new covenant, *the sure mercies of David*, which comes through David’s greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He was given as a witness when God the Father raised him from the dead (Acts 13:34). **Have you responded to the Lord’s invitation?** You will never find lasting satisfaction until you come to Christ for forgiveness of your sins.

*I heard the voice of Jesus say,
Behold I freely give
The living water, thirsty one,
Stoop down and drink and live.
I came to Jesus and I drank
Of that life-giving stream,
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived
And now I live in him.*

(Horatius Bonar)

The heritage of the servants of LORD

God has not promised us that we will be free from suffering or persecution (cp. Matthew 5:11–12; 2 Timothy 3:12). There are more wonderful promises in these verses for the suffering church. Are you afflicted, tempest-tossed in your trial, and feeling comfortless (11)? Remember that God is too good to be unkind and he is with you in every trial (see verse 10). Your suffering is not for ever. Encourage yourself in the promises of God (cp. Romans 8:18). When the Lord Jesus comes again:

- We will be dazzling in our beauty like a city inlaid with precious stones (11–12).
- We will have great peace (13).
- We will be taught by the Lord himself. We often think how wonderful it would have been to see and hear Jesus teaching in Galilee or Jerusalem, but we will see him and be taught by him in heaven.
- We will be established in righteousness (never to sin again) and free from oppression and terror (14).

No weapon formed against us shall prosper. *This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD* (17). We have a glorious future and we owe it all to God. All our righteousness is from him. **Let us praise him and be encouraged to persevere through every battle and trial in the Christian life.**

*God shall alone the refuge be
And comfort of my mind;
Too wise to be mistaken, he,
Too good to be unkind.*

*When I the tempter's rage endure,
'Tis God supports my mind;
Too wise to be mistaken, sure!
Too good to be unkind.*

(Samuel Medley)

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God

We have another courtroom scene in this chapter (cp. chapter 1). The Gentile nations and their idols are summoned before the almighty Judge of all the earth (1,21). We saw yesterday that *those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength* (40:31). God now challenges the nations to renew their strength as he summons them before him (1). They encouraged each other in their attempts to avert disaster from the threat of the Persian army, but all to no avail. They made more idols but they were useless and had to be fastened to the ground to prevent them from toppling (5–7). These gods could not give help or strength.

God's message to the nations is that he is the sovereign Lord of history. It was he who raised up Cyrus, king of Persia ('*one from the east*'), giving him victory and rule over kings (2; cp. 44:28; 45:1). The Lord (Jehovah) is the eternal God, the first and the last (4). The truth of God's sovereignty over the nations would bring comfort to the captives in Babylon. The same truth continues to be a great encouragement to believers today. **Remember that above all the uncertainty, chaos, confusion and panic around us, our God reigns and he cares for us.** Christian, are you beset by anxious thoughts? Are you troubled in your mind? Listen to the word of the Lord, '*Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand*' (10).

The words '*Fear not*' are repeated three times (10,13,14). We must not fear because:

- God is with us (10; cp. 2 Kings 6:16; Psalm 23:4). When we belong to God, nothing can separate us from his love (Rom. 8:35–39).
- God will help us. This promise is repeated after each '*Fear not*'.
- God will strengthen us, though we feel as weak as worms (10,14).

*Fear not, I am with thee, O, be not dismayed;
I, I am thy God, and will still give thee aid:
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.*

(‘K’ in Rippon’s Selection 1787)

Indeed they are all worthless; their works are nothing

The Lord challenges idolaters and their dumb gods to present their case (21) but they are tried and found wanting (29). They are urged to prove their divinity by prophesying things yet to happen and to give evidence that any predictions that they had made have been fulfilled. They are challenged to fill us with fear and dismay by working good or evil. The truth is that they are quite incapable of doing anything. Those who choose to worship idols are an abomination to God (22–24).

The Lord then demonstrates that he does what the idols cannot do. He powerfully and sovereignly works in the world. He returns to the theme found at the beginning of the chapter. He is the God who controls history. He would bring Cyrus against Babylon from the north (Persia lay to the north and east of Babylon). Cyrus himself would acknowledge God (25; cp. 45:1; Ezra 1:1–2). He speaks and what he says happens (26). Idols cannot counsel or speak. *Indeed they are all worthless; their works are nothing; their moulded images are wind and confusion* (28–29).

The decline of Christianity in the West has left a great spiritual vacuum in the lives of the people. Many who dismiss the gospel as irrelevant are turning to paganism with its worship of the sun god and other deities representing nature. It is also becoming increasingly fashionable to follow New Age religion and other occult practices. These religions are all worthless and useless. False gods cannot meet the deepest needs of their worshippers. *Indeed they are all worthless; their works are nothing. They are wind and confusion* (29).

We are in a situation which calls for much prayer and evangelism. We need to continually point men, women, boys and girls to our sovereign God who created all things. He will never fail those who trust in him!

Enlarge the place of your tent

You may feel that I am mistaken in taking so many of the promises made to Israel to have their main fulfilment in the church of Christ. I feel that I am on solid ground however, and not just because I agree with the great commentator Matthew Henry. The first verse of this chapter is taken up in the New Testament as a promise for *‘the Jerusalem above’* (the church). All these wonderful promises are for us because we *‘are children of promise’* (Galatians 4:26–28). The church is viewed as a bride (1–10) and as a city (11–17), as it is in Revelation 21:9–10.

The church is now challenged to make known the gospel, gathering in God’s chosen ones. Like Jerusalem, we may have been barren as a childless widow, but Christ did not die in vain for sinners. *He shall see the travail of his soul, and be satisfied* (53:11). We must have spiritual vision and expectation in our work for God. *Enlarge the place of your tent ... lengthen your cords, and strengthen your stakes, for you shall expand ...* (2–3). William Carey preached on these verses in Nottingham at a Baptist Association meeting in May 1792. He challenged his hearers, ‘Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.’ Carey went out to India as a missionary where he toiled for forty-one years and the Lord greatly blessed his labours. **Let us rise up to serve the Lord with faith and expectation and think BIG! We have a great God.** *Enlarge the place of your tent.*

Think about the precious promises that come tumbling out in verses 5 to 10. We belong to our Maker and we are wedded to him. The almighty, sovereign God has called us and had mercy on us. The new covenant brings us everlasting kindness and peace from God.

‘For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but my kindness shall not depart from you, nor shall my covenant of peace be removed,’ says the LORD, who has mercy on you.
(Isaiah 54:10)

The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all

The fourth ‘Servant Song’ is probably the best known and most loved passage in the Book of Isaiah. The prophet wrote these words some seven hundred years before the Lord Jesus died at Calvary. His description of Christ’s suffering is so accurate however, that it would seem that he is actually standing at the cross reporting the death of Jesus. The passage begins with the statement, *He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high* (52:13) but Isaiah did not see a vision of awe-inspiring majesty, but of the most appalling suffering. The face and body of Christ were mutilated beyond recognition (14). *He shall sprinkle* (or ‘stattle’) *many nations* (15). Kings shall see him and bow before him when he is highly exalted (Philippians 2:9–11). They will shut their mouths in wonder as they see his wounds.

The Son of God was born in obscurity and poverty *as a root out of dry ground* (2). His divine glory was veiled by his humble human roots and he was *despised and rejected* (3). His suffering was so intense that he is described as a Man of sorrows (3) who travailed in soul (11) and who *poured out his soul unto death* (12). He died with the wicked (the two robbers) and he was buried in a rich man’s tomb (9). He suffered without complaining. *He opened not his mouth* (7).

It is important that we understand that the death of Christ was no accident. *Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him* (10; cp. Acts 2:23; 4:27,28). Why did Jesus die on the cross? *He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities* (5). He died for God’s people (the elect). *For the transgression of my people he was stricken* (8; cp. Matthew 1:21). The sinless Saviour was *numbered with the transgressors* (12) and punished by God the Father. *The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all* (6). **Do you really love God? Have you responded to his love by forsaking your sin? Do you seek to please him with all your heart?**

*Amazing love! how can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?* (Charles Wesley)

Behold! my Servant whom I uphold, my Elect One

Our reading today is the first of the ‘Servant Songs’ found in Isaiah (the others are in 49:1–9; 50:4–9; 52:13 to 53:12). Israel is described as God’s chosen servant (41:8), but these songs do not refer primarily to Israel but to the Lord Jesus Christ (see Matthew 12:15–21 which confirms this). We were earlier encouraged, *Behold your God!* (40:9) but our eyes are now directed to the Son of God, *Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, my Elect One in whom my soul delights!* (1). Let us think about the Lord Jesus Christ as he is described in these verses:

- God the Father chose (*‘my Elect One’*) the Lord Jesus for a special task and he delights in him (1; cp. Matthew 3:17; 17:5).
- Jesus came as a servant to do the Father’s will in order to save us from our sins (1; cp. John 4:34; Romans 5:19; Hebrews 10:7).
- The Holy Spirit was upon him (1; cp. Luke 4:17–22; Acts 10:38).
- He came to *‘bring forth justice to the Gentiles’* (1), to *‘bring forth justice for truth’* (3). People must admit the truth that they have wronged God by their sin if they want to be saved.
- He will not fail nor be discouraged in his mission to bring justice and truth throughout the earth (4). He will come again in great power and glory, when he will judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31).
- He is gentle in his dealings with us (2–3). Bruised reeds are useless and smouldering wicks, which do not give light; they are of no worth. Our wonderful Saviour patiently and tenderly works in our lives, healing and restoring.

God, the almighty Creator and Sustainer of the universe, gives reassuring promises to his Servant (6–7). He has called him and will hold his hand and keep him until his work is completed. He will be given *‘as a covenant’*, to be *‘a light to the Gentiles’*, to open blind eyes, to release prisoners from the prison house of sin, to make light shine into their hearts (2 Corinthians 4:6). God will not share his glory with graven images or any other god (8). **Are you trying to serve two masters, or robbing God of his glory (cp. 1 Corinthians 6:19–20)?**

I will lead them in paths they have not known

The Lord had declared ‘*new things*’ (9) to reveal the mission and ministry of his Servant. ‘*New things*’ lead to a ‘*new song*’ of praise to God (10) who is likened to a warrior prevailing against his enemies (13). There is a wonderful promise for the Lord’s people, ‘*I will bring the blind by a way they did not know; I will lead them in paths they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, and crooked places straight. These things I will do for them, and not forsake them*’ (16). We may grope in darkness, in unknown paths, but the Lord will lead us, give us light, and he will not forsake us. How wonderful! By contrast, how foolish it is to trust in idols (17)!

The ‘*servant*’ in verse 19 is Israel (cp. 41:8; 43:10) and the ‘*messenger*’ of God is the priest (cp. Malachi 2:7). Israel was blind and her priests were deaf to the voice of God. The Lord has magnified his law and made it honourable ‘*for his righteousness sake*’, but Israel had stubbornly refused to obey that law and to walk in his ways (21,24). God had punished them for their wickedness and the Babylonians had plundered them and robbed them. There was no deliverance for them from their prison houses (22–24). Despite all this they did not take to heart the fact that God was punishing them for their sin (25).

It is foolish to refuse to walk in God’s ways when he promises to be with us and to lead us (16). Do you prefer the bondage of sin to the glorious freedom of knowing God’s forgiveness and peace in your life? Are you seeking to honour God in your life by obeying his word?

*He leadeth me! O blessed thought!
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!
Whate’er I do, where’er I be,
Still ’tis God’s hand that leadeth me.*

*He leadeth me! He leadeth me!
By his own hand he leadeth me!
His faithful follower I would be,
For by his hand he leadeth me!*

(Joseph H. Gilmore).

How beautiful ... are the feet of him who brings good news

The people had prayed, ‘*Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD!*’ (51:9). Now God answers, ‘*Awake, awake! Put on your strength, O Zion.*’ Jerusalem was to rise up from the dust and put on her beautiful garments in anticipation of the deliverance of her captives in Babylon (1–2). They had sold themselves for nothing and now they would be redeemed without money (3). We too, are freely redeemed, but at a price – the precious blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:19–20; 1 Peter 1:18–19). Notice that holiness is linked with strength (1). God has chosen us to be holy (Ephesians 1:4). Let us put on our beautiful garments of purity. The Lord is concerned for his own honour (4–6). Let us honour him by being holy.

The picture now changes as we see a messenger coming from Babylon with good news. The watchmen at Jerusalem see him and sing together as they *see eye to eye* (this does not mean ‘to agree’ but to see with clearness of vision) when Jehovah returns to Zion (7–8). God had done a wonderful thing and would go before the captives as they left Babylon and he would protect them from behind (11–12). These verses remind us of the exodus from Egypt, but there is a difference. The captives will not leave with haste because there will be no oppressor to pursue them.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news (7). These words are taken up by the apostle Paul to describe the ministry of gospel preaching (Romans 10:15). Many misguided professing Christians do not care for preaching. They want entertainment with drama groups, pop groups and even with clowns. We have an urgent message to bring to perishing sinners and preaching is all important because *faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God* (Romans 10:17). **Let us pray that the Lord will raise up many gospel preachers in our day.** We are in desperate need of men with the calibre and gifts of George Whitefield, John Wesley, Howel Harris, Charles Haddon Spurgeon and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

The ransomed of the LORD shall return ... with singing

The people responded to the Lord's message of encouragement (1–8) by calling upon him, 'Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD!' (9). God replied with two messages which also began with the words, 'Awake, awake' (17; 52:1). God had reminded them of what he had done in a past era (1–2) and they now encouraged themselves by recalling his wonderful deliverance of his people from Egypt (called 'Rahab' and Pharaoh, called 'the serpent' – 9; cp. 30:7).

The return of Israel to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon would bring great joy just as in the earlier deliverance from Egypt. *So the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing, with everlasting joy on their heads* (11). We have been ransomed (freed) from the power of Satan because our Lord Jesus came to give his life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).

*Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,
To his feet thy tribute bring;
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who like thee his praise should sing?*

(Henry Francis Lyte)

The Lord responded to the cry of his people with another message of comfort. He again reminded them of his greatness and power. Why should they be afraid of mortal man and the fury of their oppressors when their God is the Creator of the universe (12–13)? The captives in exile, in the pit, would surely be freed.

What an encouragement to know that the almighty God covers us with the shadow of his hand (16)! God urged Jerusalem to 'awake'. She had suffered the fury of the Lord for her sin, knowing desolation, destruction, famine and the sword. The people were staggering under judgment like a drunkard, but God promised to remove their cup of trembling and fury and put it into the hand of their enemies (17–23). **God pleads the cause of his people even though they fall into sin (22). What wonderful grace. How very patient he is with us.**

Since you were precious in my sight

Here is another wonderful chapter containing precious and reassuring promises. These promises to Israel are great, but in Christ we have a better covenant, which was established on better promises (Hebrews 8:6). If these promises were good for the Old Testament people of God, how much more do they apply to the church, the Israel of God (Galatians 3:28–29; 6:16)! Let us now feast our souls on these verses. We are twice encouraged with the words 'Fear not' (1,5). Why have we no need to fear?

- Because God has redeemed us (1). The Israelites had been redeemed from slavery in Egypt, but every Christian has been delivered from an even greater bondage. We were enslaved by our own sin and by Satan, but we have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ (John 8:34–36; Ephesians 2:2; 1 Peter 1:18–19).
- Because God has called us by name (1). We are not just an insignificant number in the sight of God. He called Abraham by name, he called Paul by name, and he calls us by name.
- Because we belong to God. 'You are mine' (1). We are *his own special people* (1 Peter 2:9); we are *children of God* (John 1:12).
- Because we mean so much to God and he loves us though there was nothing in us to commend us to him. 'Since you were precious in my sight.' God gave up men and nations for Israel (4) but he gave up his beloved Son to die at Calvary to save us. *He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?* (Romans 8:32). He is worthy of our heartfelt love, worship and obedience.
- He is with us at all times, even in the most severe trials (5; cp. Hebrews 13:5–6). Look at the wonderful promise in verse 2.

God has called us by name to glorify him in our lives (7). Surely, we will want to please him if we love him. Let us be encouraged as we meditate on these verses and let us rejoice in our great God and Saviour.

You are my witnesses

We have yet another court scene with Israel and the nations summoned before God, the great Judge of all the earth. The heathen have no witnesses who are able to convince anyone that their gods are of any worth or can justify sinful people (8–9). God had chosen his people to be his witnesses. ‘*You are my witnesses,*’ says the LORD (10,12; cp. 44:8). God promised that he would do a new thing – Babylon would be brought down and his people released from captivity (14–21). The language of verse 16 is very similar to that used when Israel was delivered from Egypt (eg. Exodus 14:21–22; Psalm 77:19–20).

Those who call themselves ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses’ are false witnesses. We need to be true witnesses. Like Israel of old we are called to witness to God’s greatness. Our word ‘witness’ is derived from the old English word ‘witan’ which means ‘having knowledge’. To witness is to tell out what we know about the Lord. Our witness is not generally in a courtroom but to the world around us. What are we to witness concerning God?

- That he is the only God (10).
- That he is absolutely sovereign and that he is holy (13–15).
- That he is our Creator (15).
- That he is our Redeemer (14). We must tell the world about the redemption that can only be obtained through the blood of Jesus (Ephesians 1:7). In heaven we will sing the praises of our Redeemer (Revelation 5:9–10).
- That there is no Saviour except God the Son (11; cp. John 14:6; Acts 4:12). We must be bold in affirming this truth. All religions do not lead to God. The Bible alone is the word of God.

We are witnesses to God even if we fail to open our mouths. Our lives also speak volumes. What impression of God do your unsaved friends and acquaintances get from your witness?

Listen to me, you who follow after righteousness

The Bible describes God as the *God of all comfort* (2 Corinthians 1:3) and we read of the comfort of God three times in this chapter (verses 3,12 and 19; cp. 40:1; 49:13; 52:9; 66:13). The faithful remnant in Isaiah’s time, and later during the captivity, suffered many discouragements. If we would be comforted, we must listen to the voice of God through his word (cp. Romans 15:4). The words, ‘*Listen to me*’ are found three times in our reading (1,4,7). God comforts:

- Because all things are possible with him (1–3). The Lord called Abraham out of paganism, blessed him and miraculously gave childless Sarah a son in her old age. The Lord promised the discouraged captives in Babylon that he would comfort the waste places of Jerusalem. He would make the wilderness like the garden of Eden and there would be joy, gladness, thanksgiving and singing. God kept his promise. The church may be weak, wickedness and confusion may abound, but we still have the same God who can revive us and increase us. Let us encourage ourselves in the word of God.
- Because of the triumph of the gospel (4–6). *The coastlands* (the nations along the Mediterranean Sea) were the first to be evangelised by the apostles and those who followed them. God’s salvation still goes forth and many who are presently far from Christ will be saved. Wickedness may increase but evil will not triumph. *God’s righteousness will not be abolished.*
- In the face of opposition and scorn (7–8). We must not fear the reproach of ungodly men. They will be swallowed up in death, but God’s righteousness is for ever and his salvation endures.

The comforts of God are for the righteous. ‘*Righteousness*’ is mentioned five times (verses 1, 5–8). ‘*Listen to me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the LORD* (1)... *you who know righteousness*’ (7). **If you are not living a holy life, if you do not seek the Lord, you will not enjoy the comforts of God. How is your life?**

A word in season to him who is weary

The third of the ‘Servant Songs’ found in verses 4 to 9 gives us a threefold picture of the Lord Jesus:

- The One who graciously speaks (4). His speech was earlier likened to *a sharp sword* (49:2; cp. Revelation 1:16) but he also knows *how to speak a word in season to him who is weary*. In the synagogue at Nazareth all bore witness to him, and marvelled at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth (Luke 4:22). Let us always aim to imitate Christ in this respect. Our tongues are unruly! An evidence of godliness is a bridled tongue and gracious speech (James 3:2–8). We will then be able *to speak a word in season to him who is weary*.
- The One who obediently suffers (5–6). He had an ear open to the voice of the Father and did not rebel against his will (cp. Matthew 26:38–44; Philippians 2:8). We are here given a preview of the suffering of the Lord Jesus before he was crucified – the scourging, the beating about the face and the humiliation as he was spat upon (Matthew 26:67; 27:26–31).
- The One who trusted in God to help him (7). He was taunted, as he hung on the cross, *‘He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him; for he said, “I am the Son of God.”’* (Matthew 27:42–43). He set his face like a flint and endured the most appalling suffering to save us from our sin. He was sure that God the Father would help him and vindicate him (8–9).

God warns those who reject the Servant of the consequences of their rebellion: *‘Ye shall lie down in torment’* (11) but there is a word of encouragement for those who fear the Lord and obey him. We walk in the steps of the Master and we sometimes know perplexity and darkness. There is no success without suffering, no gain without pain. The Lord Jesus called upon God the Father to help him and to bring him through his suffering (8–9). Let us also *trust in the name of the LORD* and rely upon him (10). **His love for us is very great. He will never let us down, he will never let us go.**

I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions

Israel had not been a faithful witness to God and the Lord here states his case against his people. They had not called upon God because they were weary of him (22). **What a terrible thing it is for a Christian to grow weary of God!** Have you become bored with your Christianity? Has your prayer life ceased? Is your religion lukewarm and insipid? Do you remember what the Lord Jesus said about the lukewarm church at Laodicea (Revelation 3:15–17)?

The Israelites had failed in their religious duties and had burdened and wearied the Lord with their sins (23–24). God challenged them to state their case before him (26). Over and against the fickleness and sin of Israel stands the grace and mercy of God. He freely offers to forgive and to forget our sins. He says, *‘I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake; and I will not remember your sins’* (25; cp. 44:22). Notice that the Lord says that he does all this for his own sake. You may think to yourself that he forgives us for our own sake because without his mercy we would have no hope at all and hell would be our sure destiny. Why do we sometimes pray, ‘for his name’s sake’ (cp. Psalm 23:3; 25:11; 1 John 2:12)? God’s name is honoured as he is glorified in the salvation of sinners and when his kingdom is extended (Matthew 6:9–10).

When God forgives, he does not remember our sins but he blots them out. That is true forgiveness. The Roman Catholic teaching of purgatory, where we are supposed to suffer for our sins after we die and before we can go to heaven, is not found anywhere in the Bible. Christ has fully paid the price of our sin. He has satisfied divine justice and there is nothing for us to pay. **How should we respond to such amazing grace? Surely we will love him with all our heart and we will never grow weary of such a wonderful Saviour.**

I will pour water on him who is thirsty

The Lord again encourages Israel whom he again describes as his ‘servant’. They have no need to fear because he has chosen them. He made them and formed them in the womb and he will help them (1–2). *Jeshurun* (2) means ‘the righteous one’ or ‘the beloved one’ and it is here used as a name for Israel (cp. Deuteronomy 32:15; 33:5, 26).

The Lord has a rebuke for those who are lukewarm towards him and have grown weary of him (43:22–24) but he also has a promise for those who thirst after him. He says, ‘*For I will pour water on him who is thirsty, and floods on the dry ground.*’ The water speaks of the Holy Spirit (3; cp. John 7:37–39). Do you feel spiritually parched, dry and cold? Oh, do not remain in such a state. If you have disobeyed the Lord and are grieving the Holy Spirit, repent of your sin and ask him to restore to you the joy of your salvation. He has promised to fill all those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6). Pray also that God may be pleased to pour out his Spirit upon our churches and that he will turn many to himself (4–5). **Do you thirst after God, longing to know him better and to enjoy a closer walk with him?**

The Lord again proclaims that he is the only God who is sovereign over all that happens now and in the future; we have no need to fear because we belong to him (6–8). Isaiah is scathing in his scorn for idol worshippers. They are witnesses to their own folly of trusting in images which were made by mere men (9–13). The prophet describes how a tree is felled and one part of it ends up being burned as fuel while the other part is shaped into an idol and then worshipped. The idolater is in such spiritual darkness and ignorance that it does not occur to him that he is worshipping a useless block of wood which he could have just as easily cast into the fire (14–20). In whom or what are you trusting to save you? Are you trusting in material possessions, in your own goodness, or in your own ideas? If you are, you are just as foolish as those ancient idol worshippers. Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, follow him, and you will prove him to be a wonderful Saviour.

See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands

The captives (referred to as ‘Zion’; verse 14) in Babylon were in a wretched state and in Judah Jerusalem lay in ruins. They were not convinced that the deliverance God promised (13) would really happen. They thought that the Lord had forsaken them and forgotten them but he assured them that this was not so (14–15).

God promised that he would take away their *destroyers* (Babylon) and would restore them to their own land (17–20). They had been taken as a prey by Babylon (*the mighty*) but they would be delivered from their captivity (24–25). They may have thought that God had annulled his covenant with them and that he had divorced them from himself on account of their sin and unfaithfulness to him. There was no certificate of divorce, however, and there were no creditors to whom God had sold them (50:1). The Lord still called to them, offering mercy and deliverance, but no one was answering his call. Did they wrongly believe that he had lost his power to deliver them (50:2–3)?

We have already seen that prophecies relating to Zion refer ultimately to the church (cp. Hebrews 12:22–24). We too may sometimes feel forsaken and forgotten in these wicked days in which we live. A mother may forget her small child, but God will never forget us. He says to us, ‘*See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands*’ (15–16). **Our names are on those hands that were pierced for us and the Lord will never forget us.** Let us take comfort in these wonderful truths and sing the hymns based on them:

*My name from the palms of his hands
Eternity will not erase;
Impressed on his heart it remains
In marks of indelible grace;
Yes, I to the end shall endure
As sure as the earnest is given;
More happy, but not more secure,
The glorified spirits in heaven.*

(Augustus M. Toplady)

I will preserve you and give you as a covenant to the people

We have already seen that the third section of Isaiah's prophecy is divided into three parts (chapters 40–48, 49–57, 58–66 — see page 3). The emphasis now changes from the greatness of Jehovah, the folly of idolatry, Babylon and Cyrus, to the Servant of the Lord and the glorious future of his people. Today's reading contains the second 'Servant Song'. In verses 1 to 6 the Servant speaks, and in verses 7 to 9a the Lord speaks to his Servant.

The Servant (Jesus) calls on the people to listen to him. God the Father had called him from the womb. He says to him, '*You are my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified*' (1–3). God had also called the nation of Israel from the womb to glorify him, to be his witnesses, but Israel had failed to honour and obey the Lord (3; cp. 44:2; 43:10–24). The Lord Jesus came to do what Israel had failed to do.

The ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ was marked by suffering. He knew discouragement (4; cp. John 6:66–67) and he was despised by men and rejected by his own nation (7; cp. 53:3; John 1:11). God the Father speaks words of encouragement to his despised Servant. Kings and princes shall worship him (7). He has *heard* him, *helped* him and *preserved* him. He has given him *as a covenant to the people* (8; cp. 42:6). His mission was not a failure. He saves Jews and Gentiles (6) and he draws people to himself from all over the world (12; there is no clear evidence that 'Sinim' refers to China as some believe).

How is Christ *a covenant* to us (8)? God gave him to die for sinners, sealing the new covenant with his own precious blood (John 3:16; Matthew 26:28; Hebrews 9:14–15). God preserved him from wicked men until the appointed time came for him to die at Calvary (cp. John 7:30; 8:20). Some of his covenant blessings are described in these verses. He gives us light (6) and sets us free from sin's dark prison (9). He provides for us and guides us (9–10). **What a wonderful covenant! What a wonderful Saviour! He says, 'Listen to me' (1). Are you listening?**

You will not be forgotten by me

The Israelites had suffered much in exile in Babylon and those who read the words of Isaiah which had been written over 150 years earlier would have found much comfort in them:

- That Israel is his servant and that he has chosen them (21; cp. verses 1 and 2).
- That he had not forgotten them. **If you feel disheartened, be encouraged from God's word.** He says, '*You will not be forgotten by me*' (21). We are never out of his sight nor out of his mind. We may forget God, but he will never forget us. The Lord Jesus is our great high priest who prays for us (Hebrews 4:14–16; 7:25). The Holy Spirit also makes intercession for us (Romans 8:26–27). Let us be determined to trust in the Lord, however dark our path may be.

*Can a woman's tender care
Cease towards the child she bare?
Yes, she may forgetful be,
Yet I will remember thee.*

(William Cowper).

- That he would blot out their transgressions. He was their Redeemer and he urged them to return to him (22; cp. 43:25). When we come to the Lord Jesus, asking him to save us and sincerely repenting of our sin, all our sins are blotted out from the records that would accuse us. We are no longer condemned (Romans 8:1).

The almighty Creator who confounds and confuses the occult diviners, promised that he would soon restore the Jews to the land of Judah, and that Cyrus the Persian would be his instrument in their restoration (24–28). Cyrus is described as God's shepherd and his anointed one to perform the pleasure of the Lord (28; 45:1; cp. 41:25). We must never forget that God uses even godless rulers and leaders to further his own sovereign purposes. How different is our God from dumb idols or lucky charms (20). How different is our religion from that of spiritist mediums and fortune tellers (25)!

Truly you are God, who hide yourself

The Lord now addresses Cyrus (1–10). He has already been described as God's 'shepherd' (44:28) and now he is described as the 'anointed' of the Lord (1). He would subdue nations, disarm kings and he would break through into the fortified city of Babylon (1–2). The ancient historian, Herodotus, recorded that Babylon had one hundred bronze gates. God here says that he would break up these gates to reveal the treasures concealed in the vaults they protected. He would give these riches to Cyrus. This was fulfilled at the fall of Babylon.

Cyrus would not understand the significance of what he was doing (4–5). Many Jews could not accept that God would use a Gentile king to further his purposes. They had no right to argue with their Maker. We can no more argue with God than clay argue with its potter (9–10; cp. Romans 9:20 where the same words are used to those who question the justice of God's sovereignty in bestowing or withholding mercy). God raised up Cyrus and would direct his ways so that Jerusalem would be rebuilt and the exiles in Babylon set free (11–18).

Idols can be seen, but not God. *Truly you are God, who hide yourself* (15). He hides himself from sinful men until they repent of their sin (cp. Hosea 5:15). There are also times when he hides himself from us to test us and to deepen our faith in him. The Lord then appears to be remote and prayer is very difficult, but we must persevere and trust in him. **Though we cannot see him, he is never absent from us. He is always with us and he is working out his sovereign purpose in our lives.**

*He hides himself so wondrously,
As though there were no God;
He is least seen when all the powers
Of ill are most abroad.*

*Thrice blest is he to whom is given
The instinct that can tell
That God is on the field, when he
Is most invisible.*

(Frederick W. Faber)

Oh, that you had heeded my commandments!

We have seen that the Lord repeatedly warns the Israelites against idol worship in his message through Isaiah. He will not give his glory to another (to idols, 11). Idols are man-made and their beginning could be traced. God is different. He is the supreme and eternal God. He again says, '*I am the First, I am also the Last*' (12; cp. 41:4; 44:6; Revelation 1:17). He created the universe and sustains it (13).

God, the almighty Creator, had raised up Cyrus king of Persia to liberate the Jews from Babylon (14–15). The Lord said that he loved Cyrus who would do his pleasure concerning Babylon. Isaiah reminded the Israelites that he had plainly declared God's word and that he was God's messenger (16).

The Lord appealed to his wayward people to obey him. He was their God, not the idols of Babylon. '*I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit* (that is teaches things which are for your blessing), *who leads you by the way you should go*' (17). He encouraged the captives to leave Babylon with songs of joy. He would lead them and provide for them just as he had led Israel of old through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan and had cared for them (20–21).

God was so patient and gentle in his dealings with his wayward people '*Oh, that you had heeded my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea*' (18). Obedience to God's word brings great peace and blessing into our lives! Do you enjoy this wonderful peace in your life? If you do not, could it be that you are not obeying the Lord? Remember the truth so plainly declared at the end of this chapter that there is no peace for the wicked (22). **Is it well with your soul?**

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

(Horatio G. Spafford)

Called a transgressor from the womb

Many of the Israelites had turned away from God even though they had the outward trappings of true religion:

- They had a great religious heritage, being descended from Jacob, but this did not prove that they were right with God (1). Let us remember that the enemies of the Lord Jesus boasted in the fact of their descent from Abraham, but he told them, ‘*You are of your father the devil*’ (John 8:39,44).
- They used the name of the Lord to swear their solemn oaths and they spoke about him, but their religion was *not in truth or in righteousness*. There is all the difference in the world between religious talk and godly living! In his book THE PILGRIM’S PROGRESS John Bunyan introduces us to a man by the name of ‘Talkative’. Christian warns Faithful to beware of him. – ‘He talketh of prayer, of repentance, of faith, and of the new birth; but he knows only to talk of them ... His house is as empty of religion as the white of an egg is of savour. There is there neither prayer, nor sign of repentance for sin.’ **If your profession of God does not show in a love for truth and in godly living, it is false. Beware of hypocrisy.**
- They identified with Jerusalem the holy city, and leaned on the God of Israel (2). It is not enough to lean on our church connections, on our baptism, or on our profession of God. We must show that we are truly the Lord’s people by being holy (1 Peter 1:15–16). God reminded these obstinate people that whatever he predicts must surely come to pass. Dumb idols were unable to do this, but the people still worshipped them (3–5).

God is very merciful and he deferred his anger and restrained his judgment on Israel (8–11). How can religious people, as well as those with no religion, behave treacherously? It is because we are all born rebels, ‘*called a transgressor from the womb*’ (8). **We sin because we have a sinful nature!** We must repent of our sin and trust in Christ to save us if we want to be right with God. We will then be ‘*a new creation*’ in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Look to me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth

The Bible has no place for the theory of evolution. Have you noticed how Isaiah points us to God, the Creator of the world? (12,18; cp. 40:26,28; 42:5; 44:24). Though God hides himself (15), he does speak to us through his word (19). Idol worshippers pray to a god that cannot save (20). The Babylonians were to prove this when their city was taken. There are millions who still worship idols in the twenty-first century. We must point such people to the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone can save them from their sins and who freely forgives (21).

We do not look in vain to God for salvation! Here is his great invitation: ‘*Look to me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth!*’ (22). The Lord used this verse in the conversion of C. H. Spurgeon. He was unable to go to his usual place of worship because of a snowstorm and he turned into a little Primitive Methodist chapel. No more than fifteen people were present and the minister did not arrive because of the snow. One of the men in the congregation was obliged to preach and his text was Isaiah 45:22. The man was not a preacher and he kept repeating the text because he had little else to say.

How wonderful the sovereign ways of God! The young Spurgeon was gloriously saved. He writes, ‘I saw at once the way of salvation. I know not what else he said — I did not take much notice of it — I was so possessed with that one thought. Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed, so it was with me. I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word “Look!” what a charming word it seemed to me! Oh! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them of the precious blood of Christ, and of the simple faith which looks alone to him. Oh, that somebody had told me this before, “Trust Christ, and you shall be saved.” ’ (page 88 of C. H. SPURGEON – THE EARLY YEARS published by Banner of Truth Trust).

I will carry you

Isaiah again contrasts faith in the living God and trust in idols. The magnificent temple of the god Bel (or Marduk) stood on the banks of the river Euphrates in Babylon; this god had a son called Nebo. These idols were unable to save the Babylonians from defeat by the Persians. They were carried away on weary animals into captivity (1–2). So much for Bel and Nebo!

The Lord is so different. He cannot be carried around like an idol. He carries his people. He had supported Israel from its birth as a nation. Notice the repeated references to God carrying us in verses 3 and 4 – ‘*I will carry you.*’ There is tremendous comfort here for the child of God. He has made us and he will sustain us and deliver us. Are you anxious or fearful about the future? You are safe in the tender, loving hands of God who will carry you through every trial and difficulty.

It is foolish to liken God to dumb idols which cannot save us out of our trouble. He declares, ‘*To whom will you liken me, and make me equal and compare me, that we should be alike?*’ (5–7). **Our circumstances change and we change, but the Lord never changes. His power never diminishes. He reigns for ever and all his sovereign purposes must stand (10).** We serve the incomparable God who says, ‘*I am God, and there is none like me*’ (9). Let us encourage ourselves in him and worship him with our joyful ‘Hallelujahs’.

*E’en down to old age all my people shall prove
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love;
And when hoary hairs shall their temples adorn,
Like lambs they shall still in my bosom be borne.*

(‘K’ in Rippon’s Selection 1787)

If you have not trusted in God to save you, do not be stubborn-hearted and far from righteousness (12–13). Come to the Lord Jesus Christ and repent of your sin. Trust in him and he will forgive you, accept you, and be with you.

Let now the astrologers, the stargazers ... stand up and save you

The prophet now utters a song in which he taunts Babylon because God will destroy her. The Lord reminds the Babylonians that it was he who had delivered his people into their hands because of their sin. They had, however, shown no mercy to the Jews (6). Babylon is described as a ‘*virgin daughter*’ and as ‘*The Lady of Kingdoms*’ (1,5). She considered herself to be a beautiful virgin and she was honoured by many. She was however, cruel, pleasure-loving, proud and wicked. She made blasphemous claims and indulged in the occult (5,8,10,12–13). The Lord warned her, ‘*I will take vengeance*’ (3). Vengeance belongs to God and not to us. He has promised that he will deal with all our enemies and that he will repay those who have wronged us (cp. Deuteronomy 32:35).

The wicked, complacent people of Babylon were ripe for judgment and there would be no one to save them when God sent judgment on them (11–15). Occult practitioners in the twenty-first century are enjoying greater popularity than ever. Their counsel is sought by the rich and the famous. They are often heard on radio and seen on television. We must not be deceived by their friendly image – they are agents of Satan. Horoscopes appear in almost every newspaper and New Age religion is flourishing. What gross darkness has fallen on so many people in the western world.

Occult religion is popular because it offers comfort without repentance. It allows wickedness to flourish as it did in Babylon because it is evil. These dark religions cannot save their devotees in evil and troubled times. We must warn them, ‘*Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, and the monthly prognosticators stand up and save you from these things that shall come upon you. Behold, they shall be as stubble, the fire shall burn them; they shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame*’ (13–14). **What an awesome responsibility we have to make known the gospel and to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.**