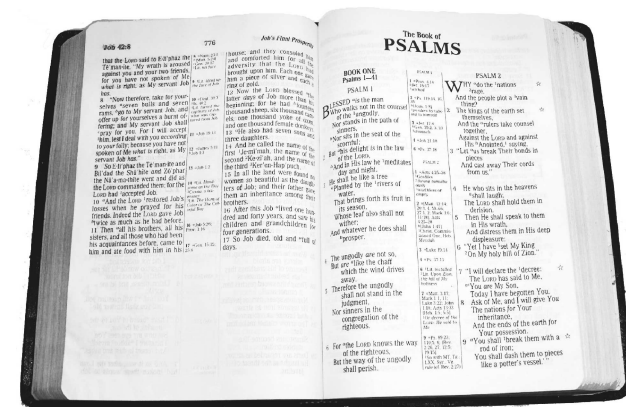


Book	Date
Amos	March, April 2019
Obadiah	April 2019
Jonah	April 2019
Micah	April 2019
Nahum	August 2019
Habakkuk	December 2019
Zephaniah	December 2019
Haggai	January 2020
Zechariah	February 2020
Malachi	April, May 2020
Matthew	January to March, May, June 2019
Mark	August to October 2015
Luke	January to March, June to August 2021
John	April to June 2018
Acts	February to April 2016; Nov/Dec 2021
Romans	October to December 2015
1 Corinthians	July, August 2016
2 Corinthians	November, December 2016
Galatians	February, March 2017
Ephesians	May, June 2017
Philippians	September 2017
Colossians	October 2017
1 Thessalonians	November, December 2017
2 Thessalonians	January, February 2018
1 Timothy	September 2018
2 Timothy	November 2018
Titus	November 2018
Philemon	August 2019
Hebrews	October, November 2019
James	January 2020
1 & 2 Peter	March, May 2020
1, 2 & 3 John	July 2020
Jude	October 2020
Revelation	October, November 2020

Regular notes began publication in 1990. 'Through the Bible in a year' (selected readings from every book) was published in 1989 and 1996.

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



December 2020

**Bible readings from Psalms 22 and 23
Isaiah chapters 40 to 53**

Bible Reading Notes Index 2011 to 2021

Book	Date
Genesis	March to June 2021
Exodus	August to October 2021;
Leviticus	May, June 2020
Numbers	August, September 2014
Deuteronomy	January to March 2015
Joshua	January, February 2016
Judges	May, June 2016
Ruth	June 2016
1 Samuel	September, October 2016
2 Samuel	January, February 2017
1 Kings	March, April, May 2017
2 Kings	July, August 2017
1 Chronicles	July 2019
2 Chronicles	August, September 2019
Ezra	December 2019
Nehemiah	March, April 2020;
Esther	April 2020
Job	February, March 2018
Psalms 1–2	December 2018
Psalms 3 to 23	January, November, December 2019 , Jan/March, July, November, December 2020
Psalms 24 to 66	Jan, June, July, Sept, November & December 2014
Psalms 67 to 78	March and December 2015
Psalms 79 to 89	June, October, November 2016
Psalms 90-106	December 2016
Psalms 107–134	June, August, Sept, November, December 2017
Psalms 135 –150	June, September, November, December 2018
Proverbs	January, February 2013
Ecclesiastes	January 2018
Song of Solomon	September 2020
Isaiah	August, Sept, Nov, Dec 2020, January 2021
Jeremiah	May to August 2015
Lamentations	October 2015
Ezekiel	July to September 2018
Daniel	October 2018
Hosea	December 2018
Joel	December 2018

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all

The fourth ‘Servant Song’ is one of the best known and most loved passages 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 in Jerusalem, witnessing the death and burial of Jesus. The passage begins, ‘*Behold, my Servant ... He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high*’ (52:13) but Isaiah did not see awe-inspiring majesty, but the most appalling suffering. The face and body of Christ were mutilated beyond recognition (14). *He shall sprinkle* (or ‘startle’) *many nations* (15). Kings 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 was silent in his suffering: *He opened not his mouth* (7).

It is important that we understand that God the Father planned the death of Christ (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). *Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise* (‘crush’) *him* (10). *The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all* (6). He died for God’s people (the elect). *For the transgression of my people he was stricken* (8; cp. Matthew 1:21). The Father speaks, saying, ‘*By his knowledge my righteous Servant shall justify many, for he shall bear their iniquities*’ (11). The sinless Servant was *numbered with the transgressors* and punished by God the Father who will exalt him (12; cp. Philippians 2:9–11). **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)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Spurgeon comments on Psalm 22, ‘Before us we have a description both of the darkness and of the glory of the cross, the sufferings of Christ and the glory which shall follow. Oh for grace to draw near and see this great sight! We should read reverently, putting off our shoes from off our feet, as Moses did at the burning bush, for if there be holy ground anywhere in Scripture it is in this psalm’ (TREASURY OF DAVID).

The Lord Jesus cried out on the cross, ‘*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*’ (1; cp. Matthew 27:46). Why was the Lord Jesus forsaken by God? He was forsaken because of God’s love for sinners. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son* (John 3:16). Our sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2) and the Lord Jesus bore our sins in his own body on the tree (1 Peter 2:24). The sinless Son of God bore the guilt and pollution of our sin at Calvary. *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all* (Isaiah 53:6).

The cry, ‘*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*’ expresses the appalling suffering of our Saviour as he hung on the cross. Jesus He knew and felt the utter desolation, horror and intense loneliness of being punished by God the Father who did not spare him as he bore our sins (Isaiah 53:10–12; Romans 8:32).

*Bearing pain and scoffing rude;
In my place condemned he stood;
Sealed my pardon with his blood:
Hallelujah! what a Saviour!* (Philip P. Bliss)

Are you passing through a severe trial? Do you feel that your cries to God in prayer are not being heard? He heard the prayers of his people in the past and he will hear you (3–5). You may feel forsaken, but the Lord Jesus died a terrible and lonely death so that you would never be forsaken by God; nothing whatever can separate you from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35–39). He has promised, ‘*I will never leave you nor forsake you*’ (Hebrews 13:5). **Christian, take heart!**

All those who see me laugh me to scorn

The Lord Jesus was so crushed, physically and emotionally, when he suffered on the cross that he exclaimed, ‘*But I am a worm and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people*’ (6). This psalm shows the intense hatred of his enemies who are described as ‘*bulls*’ and ‘*whose mouths are like a raging and roaring lion*’ (12–13). They are as ‘*dogs*’ (16). These dogs are not friendly domesticated pet dogs but the wild, scavenging, dirty, nasty, ferocious creatures still common in many countries. The Bible likens these wicked and vile people to dogs: *Outside (of heaven) are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters* (Revelation 22:15).

Compare the crucifixion account in Matthew chapter 27 with this psalm:–

Verse 1 with Matthew 27:46.

Verse 8 with Matthew 27:43.

Verse 18 with Matthew 27:35.

Christ’s crucifixion is spoken of in verse 16, and his thirst is vividly described in verse 15: *My tongue clings to my jaws* (cp. John 19:28). The physical suffering of Christ was terrible, but he had also to endure the wicked mocking of men. *All those who see me laugh me to scorn* (6–8, 12–13).

*Give me a sight, O Saviour
Of thy wondrous love to me,
Of the love that brought thee down to earth,
To die on Calvary.*

*O, make me understand it,
Help me to take it in,
What it meant to thee, the Holy One,
To bear away my sin.* (Katherine A.N. Kelly)

We were bought at a tremendous price. Let us show that we love the Lord Jesus by seeking always to please him. Let us gratefully worship and adore him.

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; put on your beautiful garments.*’ Notice that holiness is linked with strength (1). These beautiful garments had been prepared for Jerusalem while she slept. She was to rise up from the dust and put on these 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). Christians are also freely redeemed, but at a price – the precious blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:19–20; 1 Peter 1:18–19). God has chosen us to be holy (Ephesians 1:4). Let us put on our beautiful garments of purity!

The Israelites had been oppressed throughout their history (Egypt to Assyria). God’s name had been continually blasphemed but his people would know and revere his name (4–6).

The picture 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 the Lord returns to Zion (7–8). God had done a wonderful thing and would go before the captives as they left Babylon and protect them from behind (11–12). The captives will not leave with haste as their ancestors did from Egypt 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). 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 these uncertain and perilous times.** ‘*Beautiful garments .. beautiful feet*’ – How they are needed today!

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 the past (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 as did 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 the 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, again reminding 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). He is very patient he is with us. What wonderful grace!**

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD

The psalm began with the Saviour isolated on the cross and feeling that his prayer was not heard (1–2). In verse 21 however, he is able to affirm, 'You have answered me.' The glory following his suffering is described from verse 22 to the end of the psalm (see Hebrews 2:12 which shows that verse 22 refers to Christ).

Those who fear the Lord want to praise him and glorify him. How is God glorified? He is glorified by the praise of his people: *You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob glorify him* (23). Christians are the spiritual descendants of Jacob (cp. Romans 2:29; Galatians 3:29). The Lord says, *Whoever offers praise glorifies me* (Psalm 50:23).

The blessings of the gospel will reach every part of the world. The sovereign God will bring people from every nation to acknowledge and worship him (27–28): *All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the LORD* (27). This is a great promise for us in our work of evangelism and an encouragement to support missionary work and to pray for God's servants. We should be encouraged as we make known the gospel, knowing that Christ's death was not in vain. *He shall see of the travail of his soul, and be satisfied* (Isaiah 53:11). He will have a godly posterity serving him for ever and telling of his righteousness to succeeding generations (30–31). They will glorify God in their praise, declaring *that he has done this* (31). We are unable to save ourselves. We owe our salvation in its entirety to our glorious Saviour. He is worthy of our love and praise.

*Jesus, immortal King, go on;
The glorious day will soon be won;
Thine enemies prepare to flee,
And leave the conquered world to thee.*

*Hark! how the hosts triumphant sing,
'The Lord Omnipotent is King!'
Let all the saints rejoice at this,
The kingdoms of the world are his!*

(Thomas Kelly)

The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want

Are you able to recite Psalm 23 by heart? If not, be determined to memorise this psalm which has been a source of comfort for God's people throughout the ages. Never let its familiarity rob you of its richness. I want particularly to direct your thoughts to the significance of the opening words, *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want*. This wonderful promise is for every believer! There is no want (lack) for those who fear the Lord and seek him (Psalm 34:9–10). Consider what this means to us:

- He provides for us, supplying all our spiritual and material needs (2; cp. Philippians 4:19).
- He leads us (2–3).
- He restores us when we stray from him (3).
- He comforts us in the dark valley experiences (4).
- He protects us (5).
- He makes our 'cup' overflow with blessings (5–6).
- He has secured our future in heaven (6).

The Lord Jesus Christ, our good shepherd, purchased these blessings for us at tremendous cost. He laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:11,15,17; cp. Romans 8:32). Are you one of the Lord's sheep? His sheep hear his voice and they follow him in joyful obedience (John 10:3–4). **Have you lost your Christian joy through coldness of heart, through backsliding? Return to your shepherd who will lovingly restore your soul.**

If you are not a Christian, come to the Lord Jesus Christ, repenting of your sin, trusting only in him to save you. You will then be able to say, *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want*.

*He is my refuge in each deep distress;
The Lord my strength and glorious righteousness;
Through floods and flames he leads me safely on,
And daily makes his sovereign goodness known.*

(William Gadsby)

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 3,12,19; cp. 40:1; 49:13; 52:9; 66:13). The faithful remnant in Isaiah's time, and later during captivity in Babylon, suffered much discouragement. If we would be comforted, we must listen to the voice of God speaking to us through his Word (cp. Romans 15:4). The words, 'Listen to me' are found these verses (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. God promised the discouraged captives in Babylon that he would comfort the waste places of Zion. He would make the wilderness like the garden of Eden and there would be joy, gladness, thanksgiving and singing. The Lord keeps his promises. The church may be weak; confusion and wickedness may be increasing, 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 advances and many 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 wicked men. They will be swallowed up in death, but God's righteousness is for ever and his salvation endures.

The word 'righteousness' is found five times (verses 1, 5–8). The comfort of God is for the righteous. He says, '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 comfort of God. How is your life?**

Who among you ... walks in the darkness and has no light?

Two kinds of people are described in these verses. One *walks in darkness and has no light* (10); the other, an unbeliever, walks in a self-kindled light which leads to disaster (11).

There are three questions in verse 10. The link between the first two is apparent. The person who fears the Lord will obey the voice of his Servant. The third question is addressed to the believer who is walking in darkness: *'Who among you fears the LORD? Who obeys the voice of his Servant? Who walks in darkness and has no light?'* The Servant is the Lord Jesus Christ. In his commentary on Proverbs, Charles Bridges describes *the fear of the LORD* as 'that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father's law.'

Jesus said *'I am the light of the world. He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life'* (John 8:12). How then can a Christian walk in darkness? It is not the darkness of sin (1 John 1:6–7). It is the darkness of the person who fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his Servant. What is the darkness spoken of in verse 10? It is the darkness of bewilderment and sorrow when there appears to be no comfort or where everything possible goes wrong and God is silent. It is when God appears to have forgotten us and we are perplexed at his dealings with us like godly Job who cried out in his anguish, *'When I looked for good, evil came to me; and when I waited for light, then came darkness'* (Job 30:26).

What are we to do when walking in darkness? Here is God's answer: *'Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely upon his God'* (10). God's name reveals his character (see Exodus 34:5–7). If you are walking in darkness, pray, though you may not feel like praying. Trust in God's promises and remember that the Lord will never fail you. **Suffering Christian, there is a bright tomorrow! All will be well!**

I recommend Margaret Clarkson's book, 'Destined for Glory'. It is out of print but you may be able to find a copy on Amazon Books.

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 encouraged 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 this was prophesied 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 August 2020
contain an introduction to the Book of Isaiah*

Comfort, yes, comfort my people

Alec Motyer observes, ‘No sooner the message of disaster (39:5–7) than the message of comfort (40:1–2) Such is the theological acumen that placed (what we call) chapter 40 after chapter 39’ (COMMENTARY ON ISAIAH, page 298).

In the first part of his prophecy Isaiah had a message of stern warning and judgment for the nations around Israel 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*’. God told his servant, ‘*Comfort, yes, comfort my people! Speak comfort to Jerusalem*’ (1–2; literally, ‘Speak to the heart of Jerusalem’).

We must never lose sight of the kindness of God who had a tender and persuasive message for his people. 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.

Christian, are you feeling discouraged and in despair? God is the ‘*God of all comfort*’ (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). He will never abandon you; take heart from *the comfort of the Scriptures* (Romans 15:4).

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 likened earlier 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 his gracious words (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 listened to the voice of God the Father and did not rebel against his will (cp. Matthew 26:38–44; Philippians 2:8). These two verses give 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 trusted in God the Father to help him and vindicate him (8–9).

God warns those who reject the Servant of the consequences of their rebellion: ‘*You shall lie down in torment*’ (11) but those who fear the Lord and obey him are encouraged to trust in the name of the Lord. 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. 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.**

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 that he 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 times 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*' (49:14–16). **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)

The word of our God stands forever

We read of the voice of one crying in the wilderness: '*Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God*' (3). When kings or other very important people were visiting in ancient times, a processional road was prepared for them; it had to be smooth, and level to make a highway acceptable for them. In modern times, we lay out a red carpet. 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 who proclaimed the coming of Christ and preached repentance (Luke 3:3–6). Jesus is far greater than any earthly king, being the brightness of God's glory (2 Corinthians 4:6; Hebrews 1:3; cp. John 1:14).

The message that Isaiah was to cry out to the people was not only to comfort them were but also to remind them that their lives were transient. *All flesh is grass* in comparison to God's Word (6–7).

*We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish — but nought changeth thee.*

(Walter Chalmers Smith)

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.** We see rapid change all around us and this brings fear and instability. To whom are we to point needy men and women? We are to bring God's holy Word to them and to point them to our glorious, eternal, unchanging Saviour. We are to take the gospel of Christ to those who are lost. They need to know the truth which brings true freedom (John 8:31–32).

*Father of mercies, in thy Word what endless glory shines!
For ever be thy Name adored for these celestial lines.*

*Here springs of consolation rise to cheer the fainting mind,
And thirsty souls receive supplies, and sweet refreshment find.*

(Anne Steele)

Behold your God!

The Jews were faced with two perils in their captivity 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 in which false religions, occult practices and militant atheism have become increasingly widespread and influential. We must stand firm and always fix our eyes upon God who is supreme in his sovereign 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). He says, '*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 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!*' and meditate on the verses you have just read. If you are backslidden in your heart, come back to him now, repenting of your sin, and he will lovingly restore your soul.

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

Isaiah's prophecy is divided into three parts (chapters 40–48, 49–57, 58–66 — see page 7). 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 and addresses him here as '*Israel*' (1–3). The nation of Israel had been called to be God's servant but had failed and Jesus came to do the work that 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 and rejected (7; cp. 53:3; John 1:11). God the Father gave him as a light to the Gentiles as well as to Jews (6). His mission was not a failure. 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*. Gentiles are included in this covenant (8, 12; cp. 42:6). There is no evidence that '*Sinim*' (12) refers to China as some believe.

How has God given Christ *as a covenant* to us (8)? He 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 to remove our spiritual ignorance (6) and sets us free from sin's dark prison (9). He cares for us and leads us (10). **We have a wonderful covenant. Jesus says, 'Listen to me' (1). Are you listening?**

*Blessings on blessings through ages unending,
Covenant blessings in glorious flood;
Ours is a hope which no mortal can measure,
Brought in by Jesus and sealed by his blood.* (Jessie F. Webb)

Oh, that you had heeded my commandments!

We have seen that the Lord repeatedly warned the Israelites against idol worship. He will not give his glory to another (to idols, 11). Idols are man-made and their beginning could be traced but 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, said that he would raise up Cyrus king of Persia to liberate the Jews from Babylon (14–15). The Lord said that he loved Cyrus so that he 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 called on his wayward people to obey him: *Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, '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). God was so patient in his dealings with his people. He appealed to them *'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! God's peace is not transient like streams that dry up during the summer, but like a rich, flowing river, like the waves of sea. **We all want peace but do we want peace with God? Do we enjoy his wonderful peace in our life? If we do not, could it be that we are not obeying God's Word?**

The Lord encouraged the captives to leave Babylon with songs of joy. He would lead them and provide for them just as he had led Israel through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan and had cared for them (20–21). Alec Motyer comments, 'To come home to Canaan is not to come back to God' (COMMENTARY ON ISAIAH, page 382). Remember the truth so plainly declared at the end of this chapter that *there is no peace for the wicked* (22; see also chapter 57:21).

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 Christians are depressed, a pall of gloom and despair hangs over them 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, eternal God, the Creator of the world, never grows weary and he 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, but 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 praying or waiting on the Lord, but this is the time that we should seek the Lord in prayer. We will then 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)

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

There is 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 the face of 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. Some commentators believe that verse 2 anticipates the coming of Cyrus, king of Persia (*'one from the east'*), giving him victory and rule over kings (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. **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'*.
- Though we are weak, God will provide for us (10–20).

*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)

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 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* (1). 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. A dumb idol was unable to do this, but they still worshipped it (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).

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

The prophet now taunts Babylon, warning her that he will destroy her. He will humble her so that she will *sit on the ground without a throne* (1). The Lord reminds the Babylonians that he had delivered his sinning people into their hands but they had 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; Romans 12:19)).

Occult practices were found throughout Babylon (12–13) and the wicked, complacent nation will be punished (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 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. Gross darkness has fallen on many people in the western world.

Occult religion is popular because it offers comfort and makes no demands except for money. It allows wickedness to flourish as it did in Babylon because it is itself evil. These dark practices cannot save their devotees in difficult 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.**

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 to be worthless (29). They are challenged to prove their divinity by showing their knowledge of the past and to prophesy of 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). God is sovereign over the nations; 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 (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. They need to know about the Lord Jesus and his work to save sinners. We must encourage them to trust in Jesus and to repent of their sin.

Behold! my Servant whom I uphold, my Elect One

The first of the ‘Servant Songs’ in Isaiah is found in our reading today (the others are in 49:1–9; 50:4–9 and 52:13 to 53:12). Israel is described as God’s chosen servant (41:8), but these songs do not refer 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 the Lord Jesus, his ‘*Elect One*’ 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) and *as a light to the Gentiles* (6). The gospel is for all nations; the Lord Jesus came to save Gentiles as well as Jews.
- He is gentle in his dealings with us (2–3). Bruised reeds are useless and smouldering wicks which do not give light are of no worth. The Lord Jesus patiently and tenderly works in our lives, healing and restoring.
- He will faithfully *bring forth justice for truth* and *he will not fail nor be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth* (3–4).

God, the almighty Creator and Sustainer of the universe, gives reassuring promises to his Servant (5–7). He has called him and will hold his hand and keep him until his work is completed. The Lord Jesus was given ‘*as a covenant*’, to open blind eyes, to release prisoners from the sin which holds them captive, 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). He alone fulfils all that he says will happen (9; cp. 41:22–23). **God and his Son are worthy of our love and service (cp. 1 Corinthians 6:19–20).**

I will carry you

Isaiah again contrasts faith in the living God and trust in idols. Bel was the chief of the Babylonian gods and Nebo was his supposed son. Their names are found in the names of kings such as Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. The magnificent temple of Bel (or Marduk) stood in Babylon on the banks of the river Euphrates. These idols were unable to save Babylon from defeat by the Persians. They were carried away into captivity on carriages pulled by weary beasts (1–2). So much for Bel and Nebo!

The Lord 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 his people in verses 3 and 4: ‘*I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry you, and will deliver you.*’ There is tremendous comfort here for the child of God. 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).** Christians belong to 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 trust in him; repent of your sin, and he will forgive you and save you.

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

Isaiah calls on us to look us to God, the Creator of the world? (12,18; cp. 40:26,28; 42:5; 44:24). The Bible has no place for Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Though God hides himself (15), he does speak to us openly through his Word (19). Idol worshippers pray to gods that cannot save (20). The Babylonians were to prove this when their city was taken. Alec Motyer points out that 'false religion begets mental blindness' (COMMENTARY ON ISAIAH, page 365). Millions worship idols in the twenty-first century. We must point them to the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone can save them from their sins (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.

The sovereign ways of God are wonderful! 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).

Who among you will give ear to this?

Alec Motyer understands that verses 10 to 17 are 'a call for world praise in response to the worldwide work of the servant (42:1–4, 5–9)' and that chapters 42:18 to 44:23 concern the redemption of Israel (COMMENTARY ON ISAIAH, pages 323,326). 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). He brings devastation but also tenderly deals with others in their spiritual ignorance (15–16). 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 prophet (cp. 44:26). Israel was spiritually blind and was deaf to the messenger of God. The Lord had 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). Isaiah prophesied 700 years before Judah's captivity in Babylon, but he writes as if it had already happened. God punished them for their wickedness and the Babylonians plundered them and robbed them. There was no deliverance for them from their prison houses (22).

The Lord asks, '*Who will listen and give ear for the time to come?*' (23). It was Israel, God's servant (19) who had refused to listen to God's Word and had sinned because '*hey would not walk in his ways, nor were they obedient to his law*' (24). 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 we know that they are true and bring his blessing upon us.** Are you seeking to honour God in your life by obeying his Word?

*When we walk with the Lord,
In the light of his Word
What a glory he sheds on our way!
While we do his good will,
He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey!* (John Henry Sammis)

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 which enslaves everyone. 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 has called us by name.
- Because we belong to God who said, ‘*You are mine*’ (1). We are *his own special people* (1 Peter 2:9), *children of God* (John 1:12).
- Because we mean so much to the Lord. He loved Israel, of whom he said, ‘*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.

Truly you are God, who hide yourself

The Israelites saw their king as the Lord’s anointed (1 Samuel 16:3, 12–13; 24:6–7; 26:11). The Lord now speak to Cyrus as ‘*His anointed*’ (1). He was earlier described as God’s ‘*shepherd*’ (44:28). He would subdue nations, disarm kings and break into the fortified city of Babylon (1–2). The ancient historian, Herodotus, recorded that Babylon had one hundred bronze gates. God said that he would open these gates to reveal the treasures concealed in the vaults they protected. He would give these riches to Cyrus (3).

God would use Cyrus for the sake of Israel, though he would not know this (4–5). Many Jews could not accept that God would use a Gentile king to further his purposes but they had no right to argue with their Maker. We can no more argue with God than clay argue with its potter (9–10). These words are quoted in Romans 9:20 to those who question the justice of God’s sovereignty in bestowing or withholding mercy. God would raise up Cyrus and direct him so that Jerusalem would be rebuilt and the exiles in Babylon set free (11–17). Verse 8 is a prayer for God to pour out his blessing to revive his work.

The wonder of God’s ways in saving Israel brought an exclamation of praise from Isaiah: ‘*Truly you are God, who hide yourself, O God of Israel, the Saviour!*’ (15). God would wonderfully work out his purposes to deliver Israel from her enemies, using Cyrus. In trouble and trial, the Lord sometimes hides himself from us and appears to be distant from us, 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.**

*Be still my soul: the Lord is on thy side;
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change he faithful will remain.
Be still my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

(Katharina A.D. von Schlegel; translated by Jane L. Borthwick)

You will not be forgotten by me

The Israelites were to suffer much in exile in Babylon and those who read the words of Isaiah which had been written over 150 years earlier would find much comfort in them:

- Idols are formed by men and they cannot save ((17–20) but Israel was formed by God and is God’s servant whom he has chosen (21; cp. verses 1 and 2).
- That God 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 to God the Father 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 circumstances.

*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 bring back the Jews from exile 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 to perform the pleasure of the Lord (28; 45:1; cp. 41:25). We must never forget that the Lord uses even godless rulers and leaders to further his own sovereign purposes. How different is our God from dumb idols or lucky charms (15–20)! How different is our religion from that of spiritist mediums and fortune tellers (25)!

You are my witnesses

We have yet another court scene with the nations and Israel summoned before God, the great Judge of all the earth. The heathen have no witnesses who are able to convince anyone that they are right and that their testimony is true (8–9). God had chosen Israel to be his witnesses that he alone is God and that he is invincible in his power; they had no foreign god: *‘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 would be 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 and 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 who is our Creator (10, 15).
- That there is no Saviour except God (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.
- That our God is absolutely sovereign and that he is holy (13–15).
- 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). We will sing the praises of our Redeemer in heaven (Revelation 5:9–10).

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

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

Israel had not been a faithful witness for God who here states his case against his people. They prayed but their prayers were part of a religious ritual lacking in reality. They had not truly called upon God because they were weary of him (22). They wearied God who said, ‘*You have burdened me with your sins, you have wearied me with your iniquities*’ (24). **Christians can also grow weary of God, our prayer life becoming little more than vain repetition.** Have you become bored with your Christianity? Has your prayer life ceased? Is your religion lukewarm? Remember what the Lord Jesus said about the lukewarm church at Laodicea (Revelation 3:15–17)!

The grace and mercy of God stands in sharp contrast to the fickleness and sin of Israel. He said, ‘*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). He freely offers to forgive and to forget our sins. Notice that the Lord says that he does all this for his own sake. We may believe that God forgives us for our own sake because without his mercy we would have no hope and hell would be our sure destiny. This is true, but God states that forgives for his own sake. We sometimes end our prayers saying, ‘for Jesus’ sake’ (cp. Psalm 23:3; 25:11; 1 John 2:12); this is because God’s name is honoured when he answers our prayers.

The Lord challenged Israel to state their case that they may be acquitted, but they had a record of failure (26–28). When God forgives, he does not remember our sins but he blots them out (25). 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 left for us to pay (1 Peter 3:18). **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 same Hebrew word translated ‘*But now*’ (43:1) is again used to open this chapter of Isaiah’s prophecy (1). It is followed by the words ‘*Fear not*’ (2, 8; cp 43:1,5). The Lord encourages Israel/Jacob whom he again describes as his ‘*servant*’. They have no need to fear because he has made them and chosen them 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 promises those of Israel who will hear him (1) that refreshment awaits them rather than judgment (43:22–24) He says, ‘*I will pour water on him who is thirsty, and floods on the dry ground*’ (3). Water speaks of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39). There is a promise of the conversion of Gentiles in verse 5. 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). **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 of idol worshippers. They are witnesses to their own folly of trusting in images which are 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.