



DAILY NOTES

Ezra-Isaiah

Daily Notes Ezra-Isaiah
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These notes are a very simple aid to your daily reading as you make your way through historical books of the Bible. You'll find a simple reflection on each day's chapter followed by a short prayer in response. It is hoped that this will fuel your own prayers as you spend time with the Lord.

A suggested daily time with the Lord might look like this:

- **Read.** In our time with God, it seems right to let him speak first. Whether it's a chapter or just one line, it's all his word.
- **Reflect.** We want to understand what we read, and then think about what it says about God, us, life, and so on.
- **Respond.** Prayer based on what God has said to you through his word means that your prayers are shaped biblically.
- **Request.** God is glorified by our requests as we humbly acknowledge his power and grace.

If your daily time is very short, just pray. If you have a few minutes, read some of the Bible and pray. If you have a little more time, these notes will help you reflect on what you have read and respond to what God has said. If you have a few minutes more, think about how the notes meditate on the Bible passage. You may find that the written prayer doesn't quite match how the Scripture reading has spoken to you; in that case, pray your own response to what God has said.

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Ezra 1 – Supernatural Interventions

Where the Exodus from Egypt was marked by huge, supernatural events and high expectations for the Promised Land, the return from exile seems considerably more humble and mundane. Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon had given way to Cyrus's Persia across the 70-year time span promised by God through Jeremiah, and Cyrus was allowing God's people to return home to Judah – though still as a provincial state in his empire. Notice: (a) God orchestrated events by moving the spirit of Cyrus and the people (v1, 5), so this is no less supernatural than the Exodus; (b) In this, we learn to reappraise events in our own lives and times as God's work; (c) The path to Christ's birth in Bethlehem included this Babylon to Jerusalem road.

Heavenly Father, you moved my spirit by the life-giving, irresistible work of the Holy Spirit, leading me to repentance and faith in Christ. Thank you that you adopted me, and that you continue your interventions in far more ways than I realise. Give me ever-greater awareness of your hand.

Ezra 2 – By the Book

In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah form a single book. That means that the list of names given here must be extremely important because it appears again in Nehemiah 7. (Some numbers differ, usually attributed to simple copyist errors since Hebrew numbering is so wordy.) There are two main reasons for its importance: First, land would be allocated based on genealogy; and second, it would dishonour the LORD and be fatal to the people if unqualified (non-Levite) men served at the temple. This explains the exclusions of v62-63. The Urim and Thummim (v63) were small, marked stones the priests would use to enquire of the LORD. In everything, the returning exiles were trying hard to do the right thing.

Lord Christ, by grace you called me and saved me from sin. You have given me new life and a new future. I pray for the Spirit's help to lead me forward in righteousness, never going back to repeat the sins of the past. Help me to put sin to death and to live a life that pleases you.

Ezra 3 – First Things First

Seventy years after Nebuchadnezzar's forces had destroyed the temple and reduced Jerusalem to rubble, it would still have been easy enough to see where key features had been. But where should the rebuilding begin? They began at the altar in the temple courtyard, a large platform for offering sacrifices to the LORD. In this they were putting first things first: Worship before bricks. In time, they made arrangements for the building of a new temple, with tears and joy an appropriate response to the bittersweet feelings of grief and hope. We worship truly in Christ, who is himself our foundation as the Spirit dwells in us, God's temple (1 Corinthians 3:11, 16).

Holy Jesus, true worship of God is only made possible by you. You are the foundation of my hope, my atoning sacrifice, my sanctification, enabling me to come to the Father. Keep me in true spiritual union, not needing special buildings or places to feel close to you.

Ezra 4 – Years of Opposition

Biblical writers often arrange historical material thematically rather than chronologically, and the writer here has condensed around 60 years of events into this chapter. It begins with an approach from non-Israelite locals offering to be part of Jerusalem's temple rebuild. Judah's leader, Zerubbabel, turns the offer down. The returning exiles are working hard to establish true worship of the LORD and the last thing they need is multi-faith compromise. The rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls eventually came through diplomacy and official channels, alongside other work to discourage the hearts of the builders. Like the disciples of Acts 4, we must pray not for escape but rather for boldness to proclaim Christ's name.

Lord Jesus, in this country we don't face much direct physical opposition but there are plenty of people who would discourage us and hinder us from serving you. I pray for boldness and strength in the Spirit to continue to stand out and stand tall for you, leading others to hope in you.

Ezra 5 – Two Prophets, Two Rockets

At the end of Chapter 4, we read that the rebuilding of the temple halted “until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia” – that is, for 16 years. During that time, worship had continued at the altar site and the people got on building homes for themselves. But the trajectory of the Bible is towards the LORD dwelling among his people: They *needed* the temple because they needed the LORD’s presence. So he sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to rebuke (e.g. Hag. 1:7-9) and inspire (e.g. Hag. 1:14), and the letter to Darius is part of the LORD’s purpose for blessing. We are lazy and foolish to know what the LORD commands and then hide away from obedience.

Heavenly Father, I thank you for both the rebuke and the encouragement of your word, the rod and staff of a Good Shepherd. Help me to be diligent and creative in my obedience to your commands to love others and to speak of you to the lost people around me.

Ezra 6 – Joy-filled Events

The letter from Darius suggests all the bureaucracy and diplomacy of government, and yet to us there is an unmistakable imprint of the hand of God over affairs. The chapter closes with two joyful events: First, the temple is completed and dedicated for service. This meant that God himself could dwell among his people once again, becoming the focus of life and society in Jerusalem, built around the temple. The second joyful event was the Passover feast, properly observed by everyone. Their return from exile in Babylon would surely have added poignancy as they recalled redemption from Egypt. We know joy as we likewise meditate on these two things: God is with us, and God is for us.

Lord Christ, eternal Son, I am blessed to know that you are Immanuel, God With Us. Thank you that you are for us, working to bless us. Forgive me my sins against you and against others. Help me to keep in step with the Spirit, living in joyful contentment in you even in the ups and downs of life.

Ezra 7 – A Teacher of God’s Law

There’s a gap of almost 60 years between chapters 6 and 7, and it’s only here that we’re introduced to the man Ezra. Ezra and Nehemiah sit very much at the end of the Old Testament timeline, when most of the Hebrew Scriptures were complete. Chronicles was being written, and the Psalms were being edited into their final form. So God didn’t send a miracle-working prophet to his people: He sent a teacher of the word already given. Verse 10 highlights the right order and attitude for any would-be teacher of God’s law, and three times we’re told that the hand of God was on him (v6, 9, 28). With the Bible now complete, the church desperately needs more people like Ezra.

Lord God, in these latter days you have spoken to us through your Son, revealed to us in your completed word, illuminated to us by the joy of the Spirit. Give your churches people who study, obey, and teach your word in all humility and truth, so that we might serve and proclaim you to all.

Ezra 8 – Opt In

Around 50,000 people had returned from Babylon in the first wave recorded in Ezra 2. They had rebuilt the alter and, following urging from Haggai and Zechariah, they’d completed temple (the city walls remained in ruins). Here, Ezra takes a further 5,000 or so (including women and children) but has to send messengers to locate priests and Levites since it seems they had opted out of returning. But however gifted a church leader may be (and Ezra was highly gifted), the whole community of believers is needed to accomplish the LORD’s work together. Ezra’s faith was an example, but it was necessary for others to follow.

Lord Jesus, you have given your church many people with a wide variety of gifts to do your will. Help me to see all the gifts you have blessed me with and to use them enthusiastically and joyfully in your service. Lord, with the Spirit’s help, I opt in.

Ezra 9 – Confession of Sin

Ezra was a Bible teacher, not a miracle worker or a prophet. The more of God's works we hear and know, the more we are exposed in our ungrateful sinfulness. So those people came to Ezra with reports of intermarriage: After all the spiritual decline recorded in Kings and Chronicles that lead to exile, and having been given a gracious opportunity to start again, they have repeated the sins of the past. Ezra was devastated, appalled, mournful. His prayer is all shame, all confession, and very much aware of God's righteousness. He offers no excuses and doesn't even seek forgiveness. It is pure confessional worship, wholly exposed before the righteousness of God.

Holy God, I'm quick to excuse my sin with all manner of mitigations. Yet the truth is simple: I have sinned against you. I confess I don't even feel the full weight of shame before you that I ought. As a Spirit-enlightened child, I continue to sin against you to my utter shame. I'm so sorry.

Ezra 10 – Heavy Weather

The heavy rain matched the miserable mood of the assembled Israelites, and for the affected families it must have been a deeply troubling time. The law's prohibition against marrying foreign wives wasn't arbitrary: It was to protect Israel from being drawn away to serve foreign gods. Since each Israelite was to appear before local judges, it seems likely that each situation was weighed fairly. Where a woman committed herself to the LORD (like Rahab and Ruth in earlier times), there would be acceptance. But idolatrous rejection of the LORD would be met with expulsion from Israel. Repentance is often more costly than rejecting temptation.

Heavenly Father, I know that my sins have hurt the people close to me, and I regret that deeply. Forgive me, Lord. May the Spirit shout loudly to warn me of dangerous temptations so that I might always choose your righteous ways.

Nehemiah 1 – Earnest Prayer

Ezra had returned to Jerusalem under the orders of the Persian king Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:21), to teach the Israelites the law of God. The temple was long rebuilt (Ezra 6) but it seems the walls of Jerusalem were being repaired in Ezra's day. Ezra 4 showed us a letter exchange where Artaxerxes ordered the wall repair work halted. So where Nehemiah hoped for good news about Jerusalem renewed he was distraught at the heavy-handed turn of events. He was close to the king as his trusted cup-bearer, but how could he hope to get Artaxerxes to issue another decree opposite to his earlier one? So he prayed earnestly every day all winter long: "Give your servant success today."

Heavenly Father, you know that there are things I have brought before you with great passion, but in my inconsistency and faithlessness I have cooled and drifted in my earnestness. I pray for the work of the Spirit of prayer to keep me ever near you, praying constantly as I ought.

Nehemiah 2 – Expectant Prayer

After months of praying for an opportunity to speak to the king about the state of Jerusalem, Nehemiah was utterly ready for it when it came. His replies to Artaxerxes demonstrate Nehemiah's considerable planning and forethought, which also reveals his expectancy in prayer. His prayer in v4 could be little more than a heavenward glance, a heart inclination, but built on months of earnest prayer it perfectly fitted the situation and was answered by the LORD who had himself been preparing the king's heart for that very moment. Nehemiah understood how the LORD works through us, so didn't shrink back from the hard work of scoping the rebuild and motivating an intimidated community.

Holy God, it is remarkable how you work out your eternal purposes through us. Forgive the lack of urgency, earnestness, faithfulness, and expectancy in my lacklustre prayer life. Spirit, help me to pray, clothed in Christ, loving the Father.

Nehemiah 3 – Take Your Place

The language of ‘building’ is often used to describe church growth. Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matt 16:18); Peter describes us as a “spiritual house, being built to be a holy priesthood” (1 Peter 2:5); Paul wrote of the gifts Christ has given his church “to build up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12). So Nehemiah 3 gives us pointers as to how we take our own place in Christ’s building: First, though Nehemiah was the leader, he didn’t rebuild Jerusalem. In fact, not one person did – rather, everyone did. Second, status played no part: The High Priest got his hands dirty (v1), and (unusually) women are also credited with work (v12). Thirdly, the nobles of the Tekoites are eternally shamed for not lifting a finger (v5). Lastly, there were no gaps in the wall. We must all do our allocated work as one.

Lord Jesus, you are building your church and it is thrilling to see. Grow your kingdom, Lord. Help me fully to grasp my place in the work you would have me do for your church, and then give me the desire and diligence to do everything you have planned.

Nehemiah 4 – Swords and Trowels

Opposition to the rebuilding of Jerusalem began as dispiriting mockery, but once the walls were showing tangible progress things became more menacing. Verse 10 highlights the discouragement that was settling on the Israelite builders, despite progress made. Nehemiah didn’t interact with Israel’s enemies directly; he prayed (v4-5). He understood what it is to pray and to have the LORD work his purposes out through our actions: “So we prayed to our God and stationed a guard” (v9). We do well also to emulate the posture of the labourers (v17), doing good with one hand while fighting sin, temptation, and injustice with the other. We must never take our eyes off the enemy.

Lord Christ, too often I do things that I hope will build your church but I fail to pray and fail to take account of my own sinful heart. Keep me from getting tired in your work; help me to keep focus on all that I’m to do.

Nehemiah 5 – Do What's Right

People were coming to Nehemiah with an assortment of problems, all one way or another connected with not having enough money to buy food. Some of the more wealthy were lending money (which was lawful, Deut. 24) and some were also charging interest (unlawful, Deut. 15). Some money went to buy freedom from slavery, while others sold their children into slavery to buy food enough to live. Nehemiah hit the reset button. It was not a time for lending but for giving; people had been standing up for their rights instead of doing what's right. Deuteronomy's laws were for the protection of the poor, not the rich. So Nehemiah's attitude to wealth distribution mirrors the grace of God himself.

Gracious Father, you hold back no good thing in your love to me, even giving your own Son to save me. Forgive me that I don't reflect your generous, giving heart to those around me. Help me to be prepared to reset things I must, and to do right in your sight always.

Nehemiah 6 – Distract, Deceive, Discredit

We have read several times that the gracious hand of the LORD was on both Ezra and Nehemiah. Any opposition, then, can be attributed to Satan's schemes, and this chapter highlights several for us. First, there's malicious distraction: Opponents try to entice Nehemiah away from the work. Second, there's falsely spiritual deceit, where a "prophet" was hired to lie. There are plenty of rich false teachers still around today, duping millions with their lies. Finally, there's an attempt to discredit Nehemiah by luring him into the temple: Since he was not a priest, entrance to the temple would be forbidden. In each case, Nehemiah's clear vision of his task fuelled godly obedience.

Lord Christ, there are so many things that I allow to distract me; help me to focus on you and your works through me. Give me discernment to be aware of deceit – even in my own heart. Keep me true to you, so that I might never discredit you or your church in the world.

Nehemiah 7 – Faith and Fear

The text from v6 is copied from Ezra 2 (though with some minor copying errors in some of the numbers; Hebrew numbering is awkwardly wordy). The rebuilt Jerusalem would be divided according to the genealogies of those who had returned decades before Nehemiah and Ezra. The appointment of Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, in charge of Jerusalem (v2) is notable. Hanani had given Nehemiah the original report about broken Jerusalem in Chapter 1, so was no doubt intelligent and resourceful, but the reason for his appointment was that "he was a faithful man who feared God more than most" (v3). Character always trumps gifting for leaders of God's people.

Lord Jesus, I know that the church is yours and that you gift us with pastors and teachers for our good. It's also sadly clear that Satan sends wolves to harm the flock. Lord, protect your church, and keep the leaders of our church faithful to you, living in holy awe and respect for you.

Nehemiah 8 – The Joy of the LORD

At Sinai the people had gathered and heard the voice of the LORD. So too, here in Jerusalem, everyone gathered to hear the word of the LORD read by Ezra. It was a crowd of many thousands, so Levites were distributed throughout to make the word of the LORD clear to everyone who could understand. It would be a sobering experience, being reminded of both corporate and individual sins before a holy God. Yet they were to rejoice, not weep (v10), since their collective presence was a sign of God's faithful love and unbounded grace. And this good news if for everyone, so the family heads gathered to learn more (v13). We do well to weep over sin, but we also must rejoice in the Lord always.

Lord God, you are unchangeable in your eternal bliss. My sins are grievous and offensive, harmful to myself and to others. Yet you are gracious and forgiving, and by your grace I enter into the joy you give me in Jesus. Thank you that such joy gives me strength.

Nehemiah 9 – Sinful Through and Through

In Ezra 9, Ezra remembered the LORD's relentless goodness and faithfulness to Israel as he confessed the nation's sin relating to intermarriage with foreign wives. The national confession of sin in this chapter is even more searching, reviewing the history of Israel from Abraham onwards. At every stage, the LORD is shown as powerfully working for his people, ever gracious in his forgiveness in restoration. The people, on the other hand, descend from those who repeatedly turned away from God, rejected his good rule, and spurned his calls to repentance given via the prophets. Now slaves in their own land, they see that God is just. But their hearts, it seems, are focussed on God's future blessings.

Heavenly Father, your word has many occasions where people reflect on times past. You are always seen to be good and faithful in every way; we are always so selfish and fickle. Thank you for the Spirit's work, giving me a heart of flesh, reorienting my desires to serve you.

Nehemiah 10 – Put Sin to Death

As we look at the list of names here we realise that the whole community was involved in this solemn covenant commitment. Reading through the terms of the covenant we see that there's nothing really new here; they're just committing to submit themselves to the law of Moses already given (and taught to them by Ezra). The commitments have different dimensions, covering relationships within the community, with God, and with outsiders. Why these particular terms? They are typical of the sins of the past and represent the most likely sins of the future amid a godless, pluralistic culture. We do well to contemplate our own greatest temptations and to commit to putting sin to death – with the LORD's help.

Holy Spirit, you know my inmost being far better than I know myself. Convict me of my sins and sinful desires, working in me such communion with Christ that I am willing and able to put sins to death as you conform me to his likeness.

Nehemiah 11 – The Holy City

The details of this chapter are taken from 1 Chronicles 9 which (among other things) includes more information on the remnants of other tribes. It makes sense that the various dignitaries should live in Jerusalem, and the rest of the population was settled by lot. Others settled throughout Judah, but some went further north and south into nearby Persian provinces so that they could resettle in their ancestral towns. But what all this detail? It's being made clear that they weren't just lucky refugees: They were connecting with their ancient roots and re-establishing themselves as God's chosen people. Everything was orderly and (most importantly) God-centred. It's no accident that Jerusalem was called the "holy city" (v1, 18).

Heavenly Father, truly the heavenly Jerusalem – the body of your people in Christ – is the glorious and holy city. Thank you for making me a citizen of it. Help me then to live that kingdom life now, joyfully subject to your good and perfect reign.

Nehemiah 12 – Celebrations and Contributions

The emphasis in Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah has been to establish post-exile Israel on firm spiritual foundations. It's entirely appropriate, therefore, that the celebrations for completing Jerusalem's rebuild are essentially religious, led by priests in joyful procession towards the temple. Verses 44-47 seem mundane in comparison, describing the gathering, storage, and distribution of contributions for the priests and temple workers. Yet note that men were appointed to that work on the day of the celebrations (v44). We enjoy special services, conferences, and various spiritual highpoints, but we must prepare for and participate in a whole lifetime of worship in God's community.

Precious Saviour Jesus, thank you that there have been particular times and seasons where I have known your presence and rejoiced. Help me to know what it is to worship you every day, and to contribute rightly to the community of your people, the church.

Nehemiah 13 – Spot the Difference

Back in Chapter 10, the people had willingly entered into a covenant not to intermarry with other nations, to keep the Sabbath for rest and worship, and to provide for the ongoing needs of the temple and its workers. There's a gap of around 12 years between chapters 12 and 13, and it's not clear how long Nehemiah was away serving King Artaxerxes (though it was several months, possibly years). On Nehemiah's return, we see that Jerusalem had abandoned even the terms of their own covenant. The more we compromise with worldly values the less we value true worship of the living God. What made Nehemiah different? Recall his praying in chapters 1 and 2: This man kept close to the LORD.

Gracious God, intimate guide, I've seen many people profess your name only to fade away and go back to the world. I have felt temptation, and I know the pull of sinful desire. Saviour, keep me daily in your presence, and teach me what it is to shun evil.

Esther 1 – “More Worthy”

The setting for the book of Esther is distant Persia, the empire that replaced the Babylonians. The scene before us is lavishly extravagant with no expense spared. The king's plan to display his beautiful queen to a hall full of drunk nobles was utterly demeaning to her (and, as it happens, to them) and we applaud her refusal, recognising what it would cost her. A plan is hatched to find a woman “more worthy” than her (v19), by which they mean both stunningly beautiful and humbly compliant. The king is concerned with power and wealth, and his unlimited wealth was amassed from the millions of poor in his empire. Contrast all this with Christ, our servant king, who reached down to lift us up.

Lord Christ, resplendent in glorious majesty, you are honoured and praised for humbling yourself to humanity – even to death. You are the one who makes your bride, the church, beautiful as you clothe us in righteousness. Saviour, thank you.

Esther 2 – Preparations

It speaks volumes that the king's plan to find a new queen is to hold what amounts to a "Miss Persia" contest. We are about as far away from the biblical ideal of husband and wife as we could be. The chapter introduces us to Mordecai and his beautiful charge, Esther. They are hardly model Jews, going along with the king's sordid plans while withholding information about Esther's ethnicity. We notice that there is no mention of God yet, and in fact the book is famous for having no reference to God at any point. Yet, by the end of the chapter, God has Esther with her God-given beauty installed as queen, and Mordecai with unrewarded valour in the royal records.

Sovereign Lord, you prepare your people with gifts and abilities, temperament and intelligence, to do the works you have prepared for us. I pray that I might be kept in step with the Spirit, happily serving you in everything according to your plans.

Esther 3 – The Dragon

The whole book of Esther is often read in its entirety in synagogues around the world to celebrate *Purim* each year. There's often a fun, pantomime atmosphere where listeners hiss and boo whenever wicked Haman's name is read. But where God is the true hero of the book without being mentioned, so too Satan is the ultimate villain. He is Revelation 12's dragon, bent on preventing the birth of God's messiah – here in Esther 3 by the annihilation of all God's people throughout the Persian empire. But God already had Esther and Mordecai in place to pre-empt Haman's evil plot and the devil's schemes.

Heavenly Father, your Son taught us to pray that we be delivered from evil. How many times have you graciously intervened in my life for my good? More than I know, I'm sure. Help me to keep closely in step with the Spirit, doing good and shunning evil.

Esther 4 – “Such a time as this”

Up to this point in her life, Esther has been portrayed to us as a fairly passive victim of circumstance, her life being governed by the men around her. Her written correspondence with Mordecai is revealing in several ways: (a) Mordecai trusts God to bring about a rescue of the Jews somehow (v14); (b) Esther has to come to terms with the fact that her position was ordained in heaven, and that she must go from victim to champion for her people; (c) This realisation changes her. She starts to *give* orders to Mordecai – and he obeys. (d) The call for a fast shows the *collective* passion of the Jews in the city and the severity of their predicament – three days is a long fast.

Gracious Father, you are kind to hear our prayers. More, you are beyond understanding in how you bind your sovereign purposes to our prayers. Give me wisdom to know how to serve you where I am, knowing that you have placed me here to do your will.

Esther 5 – Faith and Works

Esther began as a beauty queen acquired as a decorative trophy wife by the king. In this chapter she truly becomes Queen Esther, risking her life for the benefit of her own people, the Jews. In approaching the king, she has no idea what mood he might be in; an ill-timed approach could be fatal if the king proved unreceptive. But the 3-day fast (and, by implication, prayer) indicates that her action is prompted by faith, and faith without works is dead. She has planned a banquet for the king and wicked Haman and both men are delighted. The king's curiosity is piqued by his lovely wife, but all Haman can see is his own elevated status and Mordecai's rebuff.

Holy Father, your word says that you have prepared works for me to do. Forgive me for my lack of faith and for my disobedience when I fail to step forward. Thank you for Esther and so many like her, who remind me of your constant faithfulness and help in time of need.

Esther 6 – Pivot

The book of Esther is carefully structured so that events turn on a single pivot moment: On the night between Queen Esther's two feasts, the king could not sleep. His heaven-sent insomnia began a sequence of events where fortunes were very much reversed for Haman and Mordecai. The cliff-hanger situation at the end of Chapter 5 begins to unravel here, with Haman's plans to hang Mordecai immediately reduced to tatters. Haman's great moment became his downfall and shame. This is one of the Old Testament shadows of what was to take place when the Messiah came. As Satan worked through wicked men to have Jesus killed, that death became the pivot on which the works of the devil came to an end.

Sovereign God, it's encouraging to think of you intervening in such a simple but profound way. There were no signs or wonders, no prophets, much as things are today. Yet you are no less at work than ever. Help me to be aware of the spiritual realities around me all the time.

Esther 7 – Reversals

Queen Esther played events perfectly, ensuring absolute focus from the king as he waited to hear her request. The scene for all three people is heart-stopping and devastating. Haman had been incensed that Mordecai the Jew would not bow down to him, and now Haman himself bows at the feet of a Jewish woman. The gallows Haman had prepared for Mordecai become the means of his own destruction, just as the cross of Christ is how Satan's power is destroyed. These reversals are typical of Bible imagery and are, in fact, mirrored in our own lives when we come to saving faith. The old is gone; we are new creations in Christ, reversals of what we once were.

Lord Christ, you have brought me from death to life, darkness to light, sin to righteousness. I still feel a twistedness in me that would lead me down old paths, so I pray for the Spirit's help to make this reversal complete.

Esther 8 – Salvation

It was normal practice for a traitor's estate to be absorbed into the crown's, and it is typical of this book's reversals that Mordecai himself should end up as head over Haman's house and land. The date set for the planned annihilation of the Jews became a date when those Jews could legally remove their enemies. Salvation for some is always condemnation and loss for another; the great Hallelujah chorus of Revelation 19 rejoices that the sinful world has been destroyed, finally, at Christ's return. As a side point, it's interesting to note how many of Israel's exiles were spread across the empire, and that though they retained their identity as God's people – for better or worse.

Lord Christ, King of kings, Word of God, your return will be stunningly joyful for your people. That will be met with horror in equal measure by those who have rejected you. Yet you are to be praised and worshipped in all your perfection; all you do is good, righteous, just, and glorious.

Esther 9-10 – War Against Sin and Evil

The edict for the Jews explicitly gave them permission to loot their enemies as the spoils of war (8:11), yet three times in Chapter 9 we're told they took nothing (v10, 15, 16). The true essence of holy war is not about the acquisition of possessions, but the opposition of sin and evil. Any attempt to extinguish God's people as a light to the nations is by definition sin and evil, since to know God is humanity's highest state. The rejoicing of those Jews was appropriate to God's honour, and Purim became a joyful reminder (albeit bittersweet in later sufferings). Christ has sealed victory over sin and evil forever, so it's good for us to gather together to celebrate and remember.

Saviour Jesus, your victory over sin and evil is permanent and glorious, and so in you I may also be more than a conqueror over temptation and sin. Help me to live in newness of life, ever joyfully aware of the victory you have won.

Job 1 – Stripped Back

The description of Job in v1 is startling: “He was a man of complete integrity, who feared God and turned away from evil.” We also learn that he was very wealthy and blessed with a large family. We might be tempted to think that it would be easy to be ‘spiritual’ if we were as wealthy and blessed as Job. And that was Satan’s point: He felt that Job would cave if his life wasn’t so comfortable. But God weighed Job’s heart, knowing him to be one who “fears God and turns away from evil” (v8). And since that is who Job is, he still *has* all that he *is* even after Satan was permitted to strip away his vast livestock and even his sons and daughters. Verse 21 is astonishing in every way.

Lord Jesus, you said that our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions, and Job epitomised that. Give me a true grasp of who I am before you, and help me to live a life of revering you, turning from evil, and facing every problem in godly confidence.

Job 2 – Laid Bare

We probably shouldn’t view the heavenly throne room scenes too literally, but they do teach us some important lessons: (a) Satan is only ever a created being, subject at all times to the limits set on him by God; (b) Knowing the awful suffering of Job in chapter 1, the LORD permitted Satan to go further still. God, in his wisdom, permits terrible things to happen to his people. (c) Job’s suffering was in no sense a punishment for sin since God again describes him in glowing terms (v3). (d) Satan uses material suffering to take our eyes off our spiritual blessings. In all this, Job prepares Bible readers for the Suffering Servant, the innocent Messiah who will die for the sins of his people (e.g. Isaiah 53).

Eternal God, your goodness and wisdom can never be doubted or questioned. I know you permit your people to suffer in many ways, and that you do so with high purpose not always understood by us. When my time comes, heavenly Father, give me grace.

Job 3 – Darkness

The previous chapter ended with Job's three friends coming to him and grieving his condition in silence for a week. It was their finest hour. Among the Bible's 'darker' chapters, Job 3 is pitch black. Job has suffered the loss of his sons and daughters, his wealth, and his health. His trust in God hasn't wavered, but that doesn't diminish his sense of loss and grief. He is not exaggerating when he says he wishes he'd never been born – it's a true reflection of the desperately low state of his heart. We must realise that such anguish is not sin; rather, it's wholly appropriate – and those in such circumstances usually need our presence more than our advice.

Lord Christ, you knew the depths of anguish at Gethsemane, and as our sympathetic High Priest you understand our deepest pain. Give me more wisdom and compassion to comfort those in pain, and grace in abundance when I need it myself.

Job 4 – Discussions: Round One

Chapters 4 to 27 are a cycle of arguments put forward by Job's three friends in an attempt to explain to Job why he is suffering and what to do about it. As readers, we already know the heavenly scenes but that's unknown to Job and his friends. It's natural, when we suffer, to ask why. But as we'll see from these discussions it's easy to be wrong. Eliphaz, unaware that God regards Job as a man of complete integrity who fears God and turns away from evil, suggests that Job is being punished for his sin (v7). Worse, he claims to have learnt this through a mysterious spiritual vision in the night (v12-17), just as so many false teachers, mediums, and sect leaders have done for years.

Holy God, you have communicated to us all we need to know you and the blessings of life in Christ. Yet there are so many things we don't know, and the causes of our sufferings are so often such bearers of anxiety and confusion. Lord, at such times, keep me focussed on you alone.

Job 5 – Presumption

Eliphaz continues his first speech to Job. In v1-7 he reminds Job that no-one is perfect, and that trouble will always come to those who turn away from God. In v8, Eliphaz begins to give advice: After reminding Job of the glorious power and nature of our Creator, Job should appeal to God for help. He speaks of the very great blessings that will come to Job if he appeals to God (v19-27). But as readers we know that Job is already very much in favour with God, so Eliphaz is not seeing things as they truly are. We may know much of the revealed nature of God, but we must beware presuming to know his unrevealed purposed. Even suffering has its purpose in God's plans, epitomised at the cross of Christ.

Gracious Saviour, as your splendour vastly outshines Job's wealth and status, so too your suffering was even greater than his. Yet Scripture makes plain the great truth that you have purpose and work all things for the good of your people. In all suffering, keep me mindful of the cross.

Job 6 – Bland and Empty Help

What possible comfort can come to a person in such suffering? Job is acutely aware that God has permitted it, and *that* knowledge is the greatest pain of all (v4 is key). Death would bring comfort (v8-10), but without death there is no hope (v11-13). Yet he still has friends, doesn't he? We've only heard from Eliphaz so far, but already Job dismisses his words as being bland and empty (v5-7). His friends are like seasonal rivers in a wadi (v14-23); where he might have had cause to hope for comfort from them, all he has found is arid dryness. If they think his suffering is judgment from God for sin, Job calls them to identify his unrighteousness (v28-30). Unwise words from friends can pile up further agony.

Lord Jesus, your words are always pure, true, helpful, and comforting. You draw closer than breath itself, and your presence brings peace. As I am comforted by you in times of uncertainty and pain, so help me bring your comfort to others with godly wisdom.

Job 7 – Why?

Where Job spoke to “you” in plural in Chapter 6, speaking to his friends, the “you” in this chapter is singular, suggesting that he’s speaking to God. He laments months of agony, with nights passing slowly and days quickly, knowing that to God Job’s life is “but a breath” (v1-10). So in v11-21 he openly takes his pain and sorrow to God. He never accuses God of doing wrong, but he asks the age-old question on every sufferer’s lips: Why? As readers, we know the answer in part from Chapters 1 & 2, but Job and his friends know none of that. We might think Job’s words impertinent, but we don’t share his suffering. He might as well have asked, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

Lord Jesus, clearly Job’s agony was very real, felt in his mind and emotions as much as his body. Surely you know such pain yourself and more, so I thank you that I come to a great High Priest who sympathises with me in every way. Saviour, in my anxieties, bring me comfort.

Job 8 – Graceless Logic

Where Eliphaz least attempted some sincere reasoning and sensitivity, Bildad’s first speech has the gentleness of a freight train. His thinking is based purely on a sense of justice: That good comes to good people and bad comes to bad people. He applies it with shocking bluntness to Job’s children (v4), showing absolutely no compassion for Job’s grief. Using illustrations from nature, Bildad is certain that all these bad events are the just outcome for Job’s sin. The danger of such thinking is that it leaves no room for suffering for righteousness. Worse, it has no room for Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice, where a wholly innocent man suffered undeserved agony for others.

Saviour Jesus, you suffered immeasurable pain in the death you did not deserve. The good that comes to me through that is all by your grace. How blessed I am that you became sin for us. Help me to be sensitive to others in pain, pointing people to hope in you.

Job 9 – Justice and Fairness

Bildad had a very clearcut view that good comes to good people and bad comes to bad people. The surprise here is that Job agrees (v2). This is the heart of Job's turmoil: He knows that he has not sinned to deserve the calamity that has come to him, so could it be that God is actually unjust? We often confuse justice and fairness. Fairness is when everyone is treated the same, and God is not obliged to do that. He is, however, perfectly just – unchangeably so. In v24, Job has an inkling that something else might be going on, and of course as readers we know that God has permitted Satan to inflict Job. But that *isn't* a punishment for sin. If anything, it's for *our* edification.

Heavenly Father, your justice, goodness, and wisdom are unchangeably and infinitely perfect. In my confusion, the certainty of your nature is comforting. Thank you that Job points to Jesus as the ultimate sufferer for the good of others, even for me.

Job 10 – This Was the Plan?

Job's reply to Bildad continues, now turning his words towards God. Frankly, he rages against God. He again appeals his innocence in v1-7 and acknowledges the creative work of God in Job's own conception and birth (v8-12), but then rails at God's plan that calamity would come whether Job was good or bad (v13-17). He ends his speech again wishing he had never been born (as he did in Chapter 3). Job's heart was good, though some of his words display a lack of understanding about the nature and wise actions of God. But he is still asking "Why?" – which means he *knows* he's missing something. Crucially, he is still taking his pain to God.

Holy God of wisdom and compassion, it is sometimes hard for us to see you clearly through our pain. Teach me your great glory, so that I will be prepared for darker days. In any and all trouble, I ask that the Spirit keep me in dependent prayer.

Job 11 – No Gospel At All

Zophar, the third friend, now addresses Job. Obvious false teaching is easily dismissed, but Zophar's words sound not unlike something we might hear in our churches today. He calls Job a sinner (v1-6), extols the greatness of God (v7-9), mentions God's justice (v10-12) and then calls on Job to repent and pray to be restored (v13-18) or perish (v19-20). He also incorrectly assumes Job's sin is the root of his suffering (v6, 11, 14). But Zophar's error is subtly dangerous: He urges Job to repent and pray not for God's honour but so that God would *automatically* reinstate his earlier blessings. This "gospel" is all works and no grace.

Great God of wonders, your ways are not our ways. You are glorious in grace, and your wisdom surpasses ours as the sun outshines a torch. Forgive me for ever thinking I could manipulate anything from you, rather than simply delighting in your abundant, generous grace.

Job 12 – The Hand of the LORD

This is the first of a three-chapter reply to Zophar, and it's Job's longest reply to his friends. Where the three friends are locked in a simplistic moral mindset that good comes to good people and bad comes to bad people, Job's suffering is causing him to reappraise that outlook. He can see how people at ease hold "calamity in contempt" (v5) without compassion or depth of wisdom even while "those who trouble God are secure" (v6). Job is as able to reason as his friends (v3), but the situation is forcing him to meditate on the wisdom and power of God (v16). There is so much complexity in the ways of God in the world, and we do well to learn humility before him.

Sovereign Lord, the world is complex beyond understanding yet your word makes it clear that you are perfectly working for the good of your people through all the good and evil in the world. Keep me humbly conscious of your good purpose, especially when things aren't as I'd like them to be.

Job 13 – Turn to God

Job is painfully aware of the wrongness in the words of his three friends and realises that his best route forwards is to “speak to the Almighty” (v3). He says that the arguments put forward are based on deceit and that the friends could not stand before God (v6-12). Spiritual error that leads to hell is deceit from Satan, the father of lies. So Job prepares to speak to God, fully aware of God’s perfect righteousness and right to take the life of any godless person who dares approach (v13-19). His appeal to God is for mercy, that his condition be eased and that he might know the sins that caused it.

Heavenly Father, your word is truth and there is no shadow in you. The world is full of deceit and I’m too willing and able to deceive myself. Show me more of your holiness, Lord, and more of my sin, so that I can praise you all the greater for salvation in Christ.

Job 14 – Resurrection Hope

Job’s longest reply to his friends brings the first round of discussions to a close, although as with his other replies he ends by addressing God. His theme is death, and how it’s permanent for people even though a cut down tree might yet sprout new life (v7-12). The Old Testament understanding of death was blown wide open by Christ’s resurrection, since before that there was only a vague conception of the grave (Sheol) as the place of the dead. Job’s yearning for the possibility of resurrection and the idea of his sins being sealed up and covered over beautifully anticipate our own hope bound up with Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice and resurrection life granted to us by faith.

Lord Jesus, death would only be a prospect of despair and loss without you. You have conquered the grave, and you do offer life and hope. Thank you that I am freed from the gloom of death that hangs over humanity. Help me to live now, here, for you.

Job 15 – Traditional Wisdom

The second round of speeches begins again with Eliphaz, though where he had some sensitivity in his first speech he's very much on the attack here. The common idea of 'Karma' underpins so much religious thought and simply can't find a place for undeserved suffering in the world. Eliphaz claims that Job is flatly wrong (v1-6), and in v7-13 accuses him of ignoring traditional wisdom as if Job had some special insight (which, ironically, Job's suffering *has* given). So in v14-35 Eliphaz applies traditional wisdom to explain how wicked people suffer – using language that Job himself has used to describe his own condition. Simple moralistic religion has no space for grace.

Lord Christ, all my hope is bound up in your own undeserved suffering and the righteousness I'm credited with by your grace. Thank you for the undeserved hope of life with you. Forgive me for ever thinking I deserve anything from you.

Job 16 & 17 – An Advocate in Heaven

Job describes his friends as “miserable comforters” (v1) as they bring only condemnation instead of comfort. Job, as a man who fears God and turns away from evil, would bring comfort if he were in their place (v5). His description of suffering reminds us of Christ's own experiences at the hands of men, innocently crushed within God's perfect plans for us. So Job's awareness of an advocate in heaven (v19) anticipates perfectly Christ's work on our behalf now (1 John 2:1). And yet, Job can see no immediate hope of relief: In Chapter 17 he invites more from his friends though he expects no real wisdom, comfort, or help (v10). With only an Old Testament worldview, he sees hope only in the oblivion of death.

Gracious Saviour, where Satan would accuse me of my many sins and lead me to hopeless despair, I thank you that you have been punished in my place, leaving no room for condemnation, and that you are my advocate before the Father. Help me to live today worthy of so great a salvation.

Job 18 – Calamities of Hell

Here we see the complete absence of grace in simplistic moral religion where good comes to good people and bad comes to bad people. Since Bildad is not in Job's place, he assumes that God must reckon him 'good' so that he feels comfortable speaking of the calamities of hell that come to the wicked. In truth, the frightening judgments Bildad speaks of are what we *all* deserve since we're all equally wicked before God. Yet if we imagine a self-righteous Pharisee gleefully reciting Bildad's speech to Christ on the cross we realise how richly complex God's grace is and how fatally empty proud religion can be. Satan is the accuser, but there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.

Gracious Saviour, surely here is a glimpse of the Father's wrath that you willingly suffered in my place. Yours was the ultimate undeserved suffering. Thank you that your gospel is so full of grace. Help me to make that clear to others lest they imagine a false self-righteousness in me.

Job 19 – My Redeemer Lives

Job's expression of suffering is not unlike the book of Lamentations: Verses 1-12 picture Job as a besieged city with enemies all around – and with God as the ultimate enemy. Yet where Lamentations' suffering was indeed judgment from God, Job's situation is very different. As he laments loss of all friendship in v14-22, he cries that "God's hand" has struck him (v21), though we know that it is in fact Satan's hand (2:6). All of which makes Job's faith in v22-27 extraordinary. Who could redeem him from God other than God? Who will stand on the dust of Job's grave and yet enable him to see God? Job's words only make sense in the light of Christ's redeeming work and resurrecting promise, so his final statement in v28-29 is a true warning to his friends.

God of all comfort, you were kind to give Job such insight into your triune nature and redemptive resurrection power. How much more you are revealed now in Christ. Help me to keep an eternal perspective and living trust when things in this life seem so full of struggle.

Job 20 – Non-Mover

Zophar's reply is livid. He makes the same points as Bildad and we feel like these speeches are getting nowhere, except that Job himself is making some progress. So we notice the intransigence of unbelief: The three friends have their worldview and they are intent on squeezing the reality of Job's situation into it. Notice also their poor logic: They are correct to say that God will judge sin and cause sinners to fall, but that simply doesn't mean that if someone is suffering it must be God's judgment on them. Above all, we must also acknowledge the awful truth of Zophar's description of the suffering of sinners under God's judgment, making this chapter another terrible picture of hell's pain.

Saviour Jesus, you give us here another glimpse of the horrors you suffered for us. Thank you. Forgive me for having too small an understanding of the seriousness of my sin or the terrors of hell. Give me an urgent regard for the unsaved people around me.

Job 21 – Truth in the Real World

All three friends in this second round of speeches have focussed on the same argument that since bad comes to bad people, and so much bad has come to Job, he must be bad. So in his final reply in this cycle, Job challenges their thinking by pointing out the simple reality that, in fact, many bad people enjoy lives of wealth, comfort, and ease. Such people go to the grave in peace, yet they say to God, "Leave us alone!" (v13-14). The simplistic view of God's justice that the friends have just doesn't fit with the real world (v29). Job's assessment that good and evil people end up in the same death is despairingly true if this life were all there is (see 1 Corinthians 15:19).

Lord Christ, if we had hope only for this life then we might be pitied by many, yet your resurrection is proof of the vindication of your justice and brings hope of life to me by faith. Help me not to envy the wicked at ease, but to cherish and anticipate the life you give.

Job 22 – On the Offensive

Eliphaz kicks off the third round of speeches. Previously, the friends have concluded that Job must be suffering because of some unspecified, unrepented sin. Here Eliphaz accuses Job of a range of specific sins, generally associated with the abuse of power of a wealthy man. Such accusations don't match the description of Job as "the greatest man among all the people of the east" in Job 1:3. Eliphaz even repeats his plea to Job that he repent, again with the express certainty that God will surely restore Job's honour if he does. Eliphaz's unshakeable religious worldview locks himself out from knowing the true God of wisdom and grace.

Living God, you are wonderfully patient and gracious with us, so much so that we don't always understand your ways. Forgive me for the times when I let religious dogma cloud my view of your beautiful wisdom and grace. Lord, I just want to know you better.

Job 23 – To Stand Before God

As ever, Job's suffering is not only from his obvious grief, loss, and illness, but also from the knowledge that God has permitted it all despite the fact that Job simply didn't deserve it. He'd love to be able to stand before God to plead his case (v1-7), and yet he's sure that despite God being invisible to him (v8-9), all Job's ways are seen by God (v10-12). And even though Job knows his suffering is undeserved, he still fears God because he is so different, so powerful, and so terrifying to mortals. Even so, Job is not destroyed by darkness and he has not cursed God in all his trouble. In dire pain, it's easy for us to wonder if God knows what he's doing: Job's humble trust in pain is a helpful model for us.

Lord God, no-one could stand before you if you counted our sins against us. Thank you that one day I will stand, clothed in the righteousness you grant me in Christ, and I will delight in you. Give me a reverent fear of your majesty and a holy delight of your intimacy.

Job 24 – Compassion

As Job continues his reply to Eliphaz, his words here sound very much like the things his friends have said, yet there is a crucial difference. The friends have drawn attention to how wicked people are punished for their sin (concluding that Job must have sinned terribly to suffer so badly). They even called on Job to repent so that his blessings might be restored. But Job's emphasis is less on the consequences for the sinner and more on the harm caused by those sinned against. If we fear getting caught and punished more than we fear causing hurt to God and others, then we are living under law rather than grace, having a religion of rule rather than compassion.

Holy God, I confess that I don't hate my sin as much as I ought. I allow myself to linger on unhelpful thoughts, and I don't have the compassion for others that I ought to have as your child. You know this. Spirit, help me to become more like Christ, with a sensitive heart that loves truly.

Job 25 & 26 – End of Cycle

Bildad's final words are cut short and Zophar doesn't even get a third speech. It's the last we'll hear from the friends which is fine since they have learnt nothing and have nothing new to say. Here, Bildad mocks the futility of Job's wish to stand before God. But Job's reply sarcastically acknowledges their 'help' before speaking about the surpassingly complex nature of God. Job's words reflect the ancient near eastern language of how the universe is structured: God is sovereign over the under-world of the dead (v5-6) and sits above the heavens (v7-11); he stirs the world's chaos and owns Rahab (Leviathan, the mythical sea monster of deathly chaos, v12-13). And all these are "but the fringes of his ways" (v14). The friends presume a clockwork God.

Living God, as creation itself is comprehensively and beautifully complex, it is surely naïve and arrogant to presume to understand all that you do. As I see pain in the world and even in my own heart, teach me humility and wisdom, rejoicing in your good and sovereign power.

Job 27 – Friend or Foe?

The friends' speeches are over. Job now addresses them with two discourses of his own (Chapters 27 and 29). Job's integrity remains intact and he again states his righteousness as undeserving of all that has happened (v1-6). But he now sees his friends for what they are, spiritually speaking: His enemies (v7). In their relentless accusations they have sided with Satan (whose name means "Accuser"), so that Job is able to replay all the talk of the outcome of the wicked and apply it to the friends. He does this without malice or glee: These are words of warning. We might well show concern enough when people mock our faith to respond with similar heartfelt warnings.

Holy Father, I thank you and praise you that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, and that Satan's darts can have no eternal effect. When others mock the faith you have given me, give me also a heart of compassion and earnest wisdom to point them to you.

Job 28 – Where is Wisdom to be Found?

This chapter is a beautiful stand-alone poem reflecting on the search for wisdom. It interrupts the flow of the book, yet sits here perfectly placed to regard all that's been said so far. As readers, we know that Job truly has suffered without deserving it, and we have some idea of why from Chapters 1 & 2. But why did God allow that at all? We ask "why?" in many ways. The poem celebrates humanity's amazing abilities to search out deep treasures from the earth, but where can wisdom be found? No-one knows. But God has revealed it in v28: "The fear of the LORD – that is wisdom. And to turn from evil is understanding." These are exactly the words God used to describe Job at the start. Despite all Job's anguish and questions, he already had all the wisdom he needed for life.

Lord Christ, in you are all treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and by grace you have called me into union, sealed by the Spirit, to bring me to the Father. No-one could know this but for the revelation you give. Thank you for revealing truth to me in my inmost being and bringing me to life.

Job 29 – That Was Then

Chapters 29-31 are a single speech, tightly connected. Job begins with a yearning for days gone by. He reminisces over the high standing he had in the community, respected and loved by old and young alike. And it wasn't his wealth that provoked such warmth towards him; it was his determined acts of righteousness towards the poor, the widow, the blind, and the lame, and the way he upheld the cause of the oppressed. Understanding all this as the blessing of God, he expected a long and happy life (v18-20). And this brings us to his greatest yearning: For the friendship of God (v2-4). Likewise, all humanity's longings can only ultimately be met with God through Christ.

Righteous Father, you have told us to have no other gods before you. The command is clearly for our good, since lasting peace, joy, and happiness can only ever be known in you. May the yearnings of my heart be redirected more and more into fellowship with you, irrespective of my earthly situations.

Job 30 – Despised and Rejected

We noted earlier in the book how the three friends couldn't grasp the notion that an innocent man might suffer; they were convinced Job's suffering must result from his sin. And yet in his undeserved suffering, Job paves the way for us to Jesus, the Lamb of God slain not for his own sins, but for ours. This chapter reminds us of how greatly the Son of God suffered in his humiliation for us: Job had been the greatest man in the east, feared, loved, and respected by all. But in his stricken state he is abused, mocked, and spat on by the lowest of low-lives around. So it was a thousandfold for Christ, the eternal God, who came to save us yet was cruelly beaten and horrifically executed. But Christ did so willingly.

Lord Christ, your willing humiliation to become human and to be treated so badly for me is astonishing. Saviour, what do I have or hope for other than you? Spirit, cause me to live and love more like Christ today, leading others to praise the Father's glory.

Job 31 – Case for the Defence Concludes

At the start of the book Job was described as a man of integrity who feared God and turned away from evil. Here in this chapter, Job's summary case for the defence spells out what that looks like. He is able to claim a holiness of life both in outward action and inwards purity, he has dealt with everyone with the dignity they deserve as image-bearers of God, and he has remained true to God without putting his trust in wealth or status. And so, here at the end, we see the same old question rotting his heart: Why? Why has God permitted undeserved suffering? Even we might point to Chapters 1 & 2, yet still ask why God listened to Satan there? Suffering cannot help but ask, "Why?"

Lord Jesus, I could not give such a hearty or convincing statement in my defence. I would be better to ask why you should extend undeserved grace to me. Thank you that your great moral perfection made you such a perfect, unblemished sacrifice for my sin.

Job 32 – A Fresh Look

Elihu is a bit of an enigma and opinion is divided among commentators as to his standing in the situation. But since God speaks from Chapter 38 berating the three friends without reference to Elihu, it's perhaps safest to see him as a prophet. Certainly his assessment of the discussions so far is forensically accurate (v2-3): Job's correct insistence on his innocence incorrectly suggests that somehow God has done something wrong, while the friends are clearly wrong to condemn Job without proving their case. There has been too much presumption regarding God's motives and far too little humility before God's infinite wisdom and goodness – more words than wisdom or fear.

Heavenly Father, I am quick to defend myself and feel sorry for myself without sufficient humility for your greatness. For give me for attempting greater understanding than you have revealed in your word. Thank you for the reminder that you are good, and you do good.

Job 33 – God Does Speak

Elihu repeats Job's statements back to him, and the sense is that Job suggests that God has wronged him (v9-11). While it's true that Job's suffering is not the result of any sin, it's also clear that Job's suffering has lead him to say wrong things about God. We must learn wisdom in better days to prepare us for worse ones. A repeating theme from Job is that he wishes God would speak to explain what's going on. But Elihu says that God speaks clearly to everyone in different ways: Sometimes in a disturbed heart (v15-16), sometimes through suffering (v19), yet always God is calling us to turn to him and find joy in God himself (v26). That *is* joy.

Heavenly Father, you are good and wise in everything you do. Please help me to hear your voice in everything. Forgive me my sins, and help me to turn wholly to you, ever conscious of your loving discipline that leads me to delight in you and to walk in paths of righteousness.

Job 34 – Applied Truth

Job's three friends had wrongly accused him of sins he was supposed to have done, and Job had much to say in reply. Here, Elihu continues to charge Job with wrong things he has actually said, and Job has no defence to offer. And lest we think ourselves less fortunate than Job because God did speak to him (from Chapter 38), we hear Elihu speak truth into our suffering and our false notions of God: "It is impossible for God to do wrong, and for the Almighty to act unjustly" (v10). Even silence and apparent inaction from God is no indication of indifference or injustice (v29). The intensity of Elihu's words come from concern, not harshness; Job's danger is that "his answers are like those of wicked men" (v36).

Gracious God, thank you for your great and precious promises, for your bright and clear revelation of your goodness and justice. Forgive me for when I have base thoughts of you due to some pain or circumstance. Give me Job's humility to listen to godly rebuke when it's given.

Job 35 – Crying Out, But Not to God

Elihu is again addressing Job and taking him to task for something he's said. Job wondered what's point of doing good if God permits you to suffer anyway (v3). But Elihu points out that God is transcendent above the heavens, and is never put in debt to you for your goodness nor harmed by your sin (v4-8). Besides, many people cry out in misery without actually crying out *to* God, and Elihu says that that's exactly what Job is doing (v14-16). We struggle to shake off the idea that God will automatically reward good conduct and that suffering must be punishment. But God is most honoured when we seek him for who he is, rather than for what we can get.

Eternal God, independent of all your creation and needing nothing for your perfect bliss, you are gracious to care for a sinful rebel like me. Forgive me that my small thoughts and expectations of you are so far short of your majesty and glory. Help me to know and praise you truly.

Job 36 – Crying Out in Repentance

Elihu continues to orient Job's (and our) thinking correctly towards God. In v5-7 he sounds a little like the three friends in contending God's justice, but he expands our thinking greatly in v8-12: God will use afflictions with grace and wisdom to reveal to us our sinful hearts so that we might cry out in repentance. Although Job's suffering is not punishment for sin, it has exposed some sinful notions of God in his heart. Many, of course, see only the affliction and are lost in sin as they never cry out to God (v13-15). So Elihu's appeal to Job is to see his own suffering in the greater light of God's infinite goodness, and v21 is Elihu's core appeal to anyone suffering in life. Verses 22-33 join with the next chapter to conclude Elihu's speeches.

Heavenly Father, how wise you are in your good dealings with us. Confession of sin and turning in repentance crush our pride and false sense of worthiness. Thank you that only Jesus is truly worthy and that in him only can I come and know you as Father.

Job 37 – Consider God’s Wonders

Towards the end of the previous chapter, Elihu asked Job to consider the wonder of water drops evaporating, becoming mist and clouds, and eventually falling as rain. Here in Chapter 37, he goes further and asks Job to contemplate the spectacular power of a violent thunderstorm. And we mustn’t let our scientific knowledge rob us of awe either – we’re to share in the wonder of our Creator. Elihu’s point is that, in God’s perfect wisdom, the same powerful events are destructive for some and life-giving for others (v13). “Listen to this, Job. Stop and consider God’s wonders” (v14). In suffering and affliction we might think that God is not good, does not care, or is not powerful. Elihu reminds you that those are lies; we must let God be God and fear him with joy and wonder.

Holy God, even as I spend time with you in your word I’m reminded that I spend too little time considering the wonders of who you are and all you have done. Forgive the idolatry of my heart; help me to know you better.

Job 38 – Out of the Whirlwind

In the ancient near eastern poetic language echoed in much of the Old Testament, the sea was a place of chaos and death. More, the realm of the dead (Sheol) lay beyond the deepest darkness of the sea. As God addresses Job with a series of rhetorical questions, he makes it clear that the boundaries of the sea (and, by implication, chaos and death) are set by God himself. He knows the place where the dead go (v16-18). Again, the weather itself is so unpredictably powerful – both giving life and destroying it – and yet God controls it all for his purposes. Even the stars above are all at his command. How can we join Job in the thought that perhaps God makes mistakes or can even be unjust? How can we possibly imagine that we know better than God how things should be?

Eternal Father, in sin I choose to go my own way as if I could know better than you what is good for me or others. I do get confused at the state of the world, but forgive me for when I allow that to cloud my knowledge of your goodness. Rather, give me peace and trust.

Job 39 – Ordered Wilderness

Back in Chapter 1 we were told that Job had 7,000 sheep and goats, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys. His estate was well run, ordered, and domesticated. The range of animals here in Job 39 are all wild, far beyond farming or human control. God emphasises the wildness and the fragility of life, and yet there is clearly a created order providing food for predator and prey, young and old. And while this is outside human sight or control, it is the way of the world under God's rule and order. The message to Job (and to us) is clear: Creation is hugely complex and rich beyond our ordered lives, and our Creator's ways are far richer and more wonderful than ours.

Great Creator God, you made everything by your own goodness and pleasure, and you sustain all life on earth by your will. Forgive me for presuming to suggest I might ever find fault in anything you do. Give me ever greater awe in contemplation of your goodness.

Job 40 – A Sword for Behemoth

Job has no answer to God's powerful and good rule over the natural world (v3-5, concluding the previous chapter). But now the LORD goes much deeper. In Job 40 and 41, God speaks of his control over the great Behemoth and Leviathan. Since this is the climax of God's speech we dishonour him if we try to identify them as hippos and crocodiles (or even, as some do, dinosaurs). Rather, God continues to use the categories of ancient near east thinking: Early readers of Job would have understood the darkly spiritual forces being referenced. The insatiable, indestructible Behemoth, untouched by the passing river of time, and tamed only by God (v19) is none other than death itself. Could Job do better than God (v10-14)? Obviously not.

Great God of Wonders, truly your ways are not our ways and we are fools to question your wisdom, goodness, or power. You are kind to us to keep from us mysteries too deep to grasp. Thank you that in Christ's resurrection you have so clearly displayed your power over death itself.

Job 41 – A Rope for Leviathan

A quick Bible search for the name Leviathan soon reveals his identity as Satan pictured as a vicious, hateful, destructive creature of the sea (with the sea itself another ancient near eastern motif for treacherous chaos). That evil serpent hates God and all God's people with a wicked zeal and energetic passion. Who could tame him, this Leviathan? No human can tame such wild evil. Yet we recall from Job 1:12 and 2:6 that Satan's boundaries are completely set by the LORD. Satan is, after all, only a creature under God's command. But how does this help us when we have big "Why" questions in our life? There comes a time to stop asking why, and let God be God over all his creation.

Holy God, there is much evil in this world. Forgive me for questioning your sovereign goodness through my own limited understanding. Thank you that Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil and succeeded. In the light of your greatness, give me a humble heart.

Job 42 – Grace and Blessing

Job is deeply humbled by the LORD's words to him, saying, "I reject my words and am sorry for them; I am dust and ashes" (v6). He doesn't know why he has suffered so much, but he has begun to grasp the immense power and divine wisdom God wields over the world and our lives; he will let God be God. There will be no more "Why?" from Job. God calls him "my servant" (v7, 8) to make it clear that he is accepted and justified before God, and it's Job who must pray for his friends for God's grace to be extended to them (v8). Of utmost importance, we notice that all this happens before the restoration of Job's wealth and family – he would have been blessed even if left in his dire poverty and sickness. Yet his "resurrection" to blessing foreshadows Christ's own and, wonderfully, ours in the new Creation with Jesus.

Heavenly Father, your ways are utterly beyond ours – too wonderful for us to grasp. As things happen to me and those I know and love, give me humility to know my limitations and to rejoice in your unbounded glory.

Proverbs 1 – What is Wisdom?

Several collections of ancient proverbs are brought together in this book, and verses 1-7 act as an introduction to the collection. Verse 7 is very much a foundation statement for the whole. The style of the book is that of a father passing wisdom on to his son (e.g. v8, 10) which is reflected in some of the gender language – such as the personification of wisdom as a woman in v20-33. Wisdom is not like law. Law sets firm boundaries, but wisdom helps us steer through the moral maze of life when the boundaries are less clearly seen. In 1 Corinthians 1:24, Paul says that “Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God,” so that to grow in wisdom is to grow in Christ and to grow in Christ is to grow in wisdom.

Lord Christ, all treasures of knowledge and wisdom are found in you. Help me to learn wisdom from these proverbs so that I might partake more fully in your nature. Teach me how to navigate life when the right or best paths aren't always obvious.

Proverbs 2 – Seek Out Wisdom

Proverbs 2 is a single sentence in Hebrew. You're to cry out and seek after wisdom since gaining wisdom is active rather than passive. To grow in wisdom is to grow in the fear of the LORD and to know him (v5), since wisdom is itself given by God and not earned (v6). Wisdom growth also teaches you how to live before others in “righteousness, justice, and integrity” (v9), not through obligation but through knowledge and delight in your heart and mind (v10). Such wisdom (a fear of the LORD and a delight in righteousness) will keep you away from sin (v11-19) and in “the way of the good” (v20-22). When we remember that Christ is himself “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24) the rich logic and truth of this lovely chapter fills us.

Great Saviour, to grow in wisdom is to grow in you. Thank you that such wisdom is given, not earned, so that I can never boast in myself. Lord, give me ever more wisdom, more fear, more delight in you, so that I might be kept from sin and temptation, living in righteous integrity.

Proverbs 3 – Trust the LORD

Verses 5 and 6 are one of the best-known parts of Proverbs but they shouldn't be separated from v7. Many people are wise in their own eyes, but there is no substitute for the wisdom that comes from the LORD. Among several reasons given, we note just two: First, wisdom from God is "a tree of life" (mentioned only in Genesis, Proverbs, and Revelation). Such is wisdom in Christ, who alone gives us the right to eat from the tree of life (Rev 2:7). Second, wisdom is the foundation and rhythm of Creation (v19), so that heavenly wisdom enables us to live as we ought in God's world. Moreover, wisdom is seen in her actions (Matthew 11:19), so v27-35 describe godliness towards others.

Heavenly Father, it's clear that being wise in my own eyes leads me to sin against you. Help me to grow in the heavenly wisdom that delights and honours you. Help me to live such wisdom out as I deal with others.

Proverbs 4 – Brighter and Brighter

Here, a father urges his son to embrace wisdom just as his own father taught him. This is a natural human process simply because growth in wisdom takes time. When we read in James 1:5 about asking God for wisdom, we often really want an instant answer in a given situation. But v11 pictures the path of the righteous as the light of dawn shining brighter and brighter until midday – a result of a slow and steady purposeful growth in heavenly wisdom. It's not a light switch you can turn instantly on. Parents do well to put their children on the path of righteousness and wisdom, and we must all walk this path guarding our hearts (v23) with eyes fixed ahead on Jesus (v25).

Gracious Father, you have promised wisdom to those who ask. Give me a teachable spirit, so that I might learn from you. Spirit, work in me to conform me more and more to the likeness of Christ. Help me not to turn to the right or the left, but to keep my eyes on the prize of being with you.

Proverbs 5 – Entangled in Adultery

Adultery is not a sin of a moment. It's an accumulation of circumstances over time where temptation, desire, and opportunity begin to direct the steps of the unwary into ruin. Proverbs is written as fatherly advice to a son, which explains the emphasis on immoral women in this chapter, but wisdom isn't gender-specific and women need to be equally aware of predatory men. Two remedies are given: First, "Don't go near the door of her house" (v8) – run in the opposite direction. That might be physical or mental, noting that adultery is often an act of the imagination (Matt 5:28). The second remedy is to wholly and fully enjoy your spouse and be completely and joyfully satisfied in one another. As the church is the bride of Christ, applications to idolatry are obvious.

Holy God, Righteous Father, you know the inclinations of my heart better than I know myself. Forgive me my sinful desires, and change me into full Christlikeness in every way. Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil. Give me a pure heart to enjoy all your good gifts.

Proverbs 6 – Burning Coals

What is striking about Proverbs is the broad range of topics covered. It's little use having wisdom in one area of life but being a fool in another. That said, some deficiencies in wisdom are more dangerous than others. In v1-5 you're encouraged to sort out unhelpful debts as soon as you can – your lack of wisdom is still recoverable. If you're lazy (v6-11) you can expect trouble, but again you can turn things round. But outright wickedness has you on the wrong side of the LORD (v12-19) with potentially eternal consequences. Similarly, being lured into adultery leads to a ruined life, bringing calamity to at least one family as well as just retribution. So "corrective discipline is the way to life" (v23).

Patient and Loving Father, your word has many instructions regarding adultery, no doubt simply because we find sin so attractive. Give me a pure heart, a delight in Christ, and wisdom to guide my feet in right paths. Powerful Spirit, show me my sin and drive me to Jesus for refuge.

Proverbs 7 – A Poisoned Feast

We shouldn't be surprised at Proverbs' continued emphasis on the dangers of adultery, especially in our culture of normalised pornography and sexual immorality. Technology only provides new opportunities for sinful seduction in promised secrecy. The seductress in this chapter offers so much to the hapless young man: A night of sensual pleasures with no painful consequences – after all, her husband won't be back for a long time (v20). But why is her house the road to death (v27)? Because adultery is a process of many steps, first flirting with temptation's pleasures and eventually entangling you in a web of deceit and betrayal. The advice is simple: "Don't stray onto her paths" (v25).

Father of all wisdom and purity, truly you know what is good for us. Keep me away from sin's paths, Lord. Give me a discerning spirit to see temptation for what it is and to deal with others in all purity.

Proverbs 8 – Woman Wisdom

Wisdom is personified here as a woman (as Folly will be in the next chapter). She is of surpassing value compared with any material wealth, and indeed to have wisdom is often seen in Proverbs as a means to success in the world. There has been much theological debate over Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 8: Verses 22-23 suggest that wisdom was created – a particular problem given the New Testament's emphasis on Christ as the wisdom of God. But God *is* wise. Since he cannot change, he never acquired wisdom nor learned it. Rather, all wisdom has God as its source. The acts of God *communicate* his wisdom, beginning (for us) at creation (v27), being displayed to the universe in the church (Eph 3:10), and finding its fullest expression in the person and work of Christ (1 Cor 1:24, 30).

God only wise, your interventions in the affairs of humanity are staggeringly intricate and perfect. You always do good even when people work wickedness against you. Grant me the wisdom you have promised to those who ask, and help me to communicate it in actions.

Proverbs 9 – Wisdom and Folly

Wisdom and Folly are personified as two women, each calling out the same thing: “Whoever is inexperienced, enter here” (v4, 16). Wisdom calls out openly from the highest points of the city. She has nothing to hide and calls us to a life of growing knowledge and understanding in the fear of the LORD. But Folly cries out from a place nearby, picking off individuals as they pass by. She offers short-term pleasures and stolen delights, the long-term fruit of which is death. In our soundbite, social media culture of technology and immediacy, Folly’s voice calls to each of us all the time. We’re mostly barely aware of it. We must hear Wisdom’s call to life and pursue the longer way of understanding.

Lord Christ, you are the very wisdom of God, displayed in a redemptive plan that spans all of time itself. Your church is your display of wisdom to the seen and unseen universe. Help me to hear your voice above all others, growing in knowledge and understanding all my life long.

Proverbs 10 – Wisdom’s Breadth

There are many chapters in Proverbs like this one, comprising a string of largely unrelated sayings in no particular order. Closer reading reveals repeated themes and we’ll take one theme each day from tomorrow. But for now, we ask why are they presented so randomly? Why not group them by theme? Two reasons: (a) Life itself is chaotic, and true wisdom is a lively, dynamic response to the wide variety of issues that come at us; (b) In a related point, wisdom itself must be varied in us. If you are wise in one area but unwise in another, you can be sure that Satan will target your weakness. His only rule is hate. We must grow in wisdom in every aspect of our life and character, or we are not really growing at all.

Saviour Jesus, you were consistently wise in your dealing with people, whether they came to you in need, confusion, or hostility. Help me to grow in wisdom for every situation, kept aware of my blind spots and weaknesses. Lord, please protect me and grow me.

Proverbs 11 – Honesty & Generosity

Proverbs has much to say about giving, lending, and taking, especially in business and commercial environments. To use dishonest scales (v1) is simply theft, charging someone for goods you have not provided. The Bible's reply to theft goes further than honesty, however, encouraging us to be generous givers (v24, 25) simply because that is what God himself is like. There's always prudence in Proverbs too so that business is conducted openly (v26) but carefully to avoid being taken advantage of (v18). Loans and security for loans weren't forbidden by law, but Proverbs would dissuade you unless you're prepared for loss (v15). That said, generous love always makes us vulnerable to loss, but we still love.

Great Giver of life and all that is good, it's surely better to be like you than to attempt to hoard things I can't keep anyway. Thank you for the material things you bless me with, and help me to use them freely to love others and to share your love.

Proverbs 12 – Idleness & Diligence

While there will always be exceptions, it is generally true that those who work hardest achieve most in life. Verses 11, 24, and 27 all compare the output of a diligent person with a lazy one. The New Testament also commands against idleness (e.g. 1 Thess 5:14) and urges pursuit of good works (e.g. Titus 3:14). It is an astonishing mystery that God should bind his eternal sovereign purposes to our prayers, but we mustn't lose sight of the fact that he also binds his purposes to our actions. Can we hope for church growth but never evangelise? Or pray for someone's needs to be met but not lift a finger to help? Busyness *can* become an idol, but that's no excuse to be idle. Wisdom is seen in actions.

Heavenly Father, your eternal wisdom is displayed for us in Christ and the amazing eternal plan you have to gather your people in him. In Christ, your wisdom is made visible, now proclaimed through your church. Forgive me for my times of idle inaction, and help me to do the works you have prepared for me to do.

Proverbs 13 – Wealth & Poverty

Wealth and poverty are recurring themes in Proverbs, but there isn't a single all-encompassing statement. Those who are idle can expect poverty (v4, 18), yet some are poor due to the injustice of others (v23). Wealth can be obtained through hard work (v11), yet it brings its own stresses (v8). We might recall the provision of the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25, a measure to prevent anyone amassing wealth without limit while protecting others from poverty without hope. The wisdom of Proverbs helps us grasp the right attitudes to wealth and poverty, work and laziness, justice and inequality, but only on the firm foundations of a fear of the LORD. To be content in Christ is to be rich beyond measure.

Lord Christ, I'm not as rich as I could be nor anywhere near as poor as so many. Forgive me for being taken in by our materialistic culture. Thank you for providing all I need and more. Teach me contentment in you above all things.

Proverbs 14 – Emotional Intelligence

While Proverbs is mostly concerned with external dealings with others, some proverbs subtly draw attention to the inner person. If we are to deal wisely with others, we need to recognise that how they present externally might be quite different from how they feel (v13). In fact, since we are all different with a unique set of circumstances and relationships, you can never truly wholly know another person's emotion – whether sadness or joy (v10). Proverbs goes further still in v30, recognising the link between mental health and physical health – something to be aware of both for others and as we take care of ourselves. "Emotional intelligence" might be a modern phrase, but it's an ancient concept.

Spirit of God, you know the deepest concerns of my heart – all my motives, desires, and needs – along with the experiences that have shaped me. Give me a Christlike compassion and sensitivity towards others, so that I might weep with those who weep and laugh with those who laugh in a way that is deeply true and loving.

Proverbs 15 – Disciples & Fools

In the Bible's wisdom books, "the fool" is someone who is morally deficient; it has nothing to do with intellectual ability. Such people reject wise instruction and have no fear of God. The desire for moral autonomy is the root of all sin and rebellion, so it's no surprise to see "fools" despise instruction and good advice (v5, 12, 32). The tragedy, of course, is that such spiritual blindness will end in hell's ruin (v10). Jesus' great commission to the church is to "Go, therefore, and make disciples... teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). The call to repentance (v31) and the fear of the LORD (v33) lead us to life-long discipleship and learning from Christ.

Great Messiah King, you are so gracious to have called me into your kingdom. I once rejected your laws, not knowing my offence to you or the consequences of rebellion. Thank you that the Spirit has caused me to turn from such foolishness. Help me to learn to be more like you today.

Proverbs 16 – Making Good Plans

As we read through Acts and Paul's New Testament letters, it's clear that he was constantly making travel plans and mission plans, while also remaining sensitive to adjustments and corrections from the Lord (e.g. see Act 16:6-10). God himself is the ultimate planner and worker of plans, displayed in our salvation in Christ. Proverbs makes it clear that the best plans are those made with an awareness of and submission to God's sovereign purposes (v3, 9), since even random acts are actually already known to him (v33). Whether we make plans for work, home, evangelism, or charity, we must check our hearts to see if we're planning to God's glory or our own: The LORD knows which it is (v2).

Sovereign Lord, some of our plans are big and some are small, and you know how seldom I truly consider how or if I'm working for your honour and glory. Spirit, keep my eyes on Jesus so that my plans will put my feet in good places for your purposes. May your will be done.

Proverbs 17 – Family

Proverbs has much to say about family relationships, the whole collection being wisdom passed from father to son. Since the command to Adam had been to multiply and the promises to Abraham included vast numbers of descendants, Proverbs clearly links families and age with blessing (v6). Yet there is sorrow when the next generation foolishly departs from the LORD's ways and blessing (v21). In life, our friends may come and go – though a true friend can be relied on in times of trouble. Verse 17 reminds us that family doesn't come and go, and we are blessed to be able to depend on family throughout our lives. This should be doubly true of our Christian brothers and sisters.

Father of Mercies, how lovely it is that you should choose to adopt me according to your own sovereign will and grace. Spirit of Adoption, work in me so that I might be a dependable help to my brothers and sisters in Christ. Show me where there is need and lead me to action.

Proverbs 18 – Powerful Words

It hardly needs saying that words can be immensely powerful both for good and evil. We often lap up gossip as eagerly as good news (v8), though only one will do us good. Foolish words betray a foolish heart, and they will bounce back at some point (v6, 7), whereas wise words are “a flowing river, a fountain of wisdom” (v4). As we contemplate generals, politicians, and preachers (both false and true), the full strength of v21 is clear: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” All the more reason, then, to listen carefully before we speak and only to speak truth when we do (v13). More still, we must apply all this truth to our written word too, whether in emails, text messaging, or social media.

Lord Christ, you are the very Word of God, the exact representation and communication of the Father to us, mediated here in me by your Spirit. All that comes from you is truth and wisdom, and I'm grateful to have your words available to read. Help me to choose words that are good and true, deliberate and kind.

Proverbs 19 – Friends & Money

There are many proverbs about the value of friendship and how we are to relate to our neighbours. But v4, 6, and 7 point out that friendship relationships can be complicated or even ruined by money. Wealth can attract a superficial friendship, while poverty can leave you abandoned. In Luke 19:6, Jesus tells us to “make friends for yourselves by means of worldly wealth so that when it fails, they may welcome you into eternal dwellings.” Recognising the wisdom in v4, 6, and 7, we can use our wealth to do good to those in need, generating a positive response to the gospel that prompted our generosity. Our giving is an investment in someone else’s eternity – earthly wealth for eternal blessing.

Lord Jesus, you gave up your heavenly splendour to come to save me. My salvation cost you dearly. Forgive me for having worldly attitudes to the poor and rich, and give me wisdom to use the gifts you have given me for your glory and kingdom growth.

Proverbs 20 – Leadership

We’re not subject to the kind of royal rule that existed when Proverbs was written, but the many wise words given on kings still apply to all levels of leadership – in the home, at work, at church, in society. Remembering that Solomon is the author, v8 is very apt. Sadly v2 reminds more of his son, Rehoboam, whose folly caused the kingdom to split. Certainly, a wise leader will seek to do the right thing and eradicate injustice (v26). The “loyalty” in v28 is usually translated as covenant or steadfast love, and the proverb is ambiguous whether that describes the relationship between God and the king or the king and his people. We embrace the ambiguity and seek love in all those relationships for our blessing.

King Jesus, your reign is beyond challenge and your power is exercised with infinite goodness and perfection. Help me to submit always to such perfect rule. Give us leaders in church who love you and your people with a passion, so that all will follow their lead as they lead us to you.

Proverbs 21 – Liars Lie

Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6) and that the devil is “the father of lies” (John 8:44). It’s no surprise to see proverbs about lying and there are two in this chapter. Verse 6 speaks of someone getting rich through lying; the pursuit of riches you cannot keep at the expense of your external soul is truly a “pursuit of death.” Verse 28 speaks against a lying witness – a perversion of justice that flies in the face of God’s demand for righteousness. These proverbs not only speak against liars, but also warn the wise: The second half of v28 encourages us to listen well to spot inconsistency, discrepancy, and deceit. Be “as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16).

God of all truth, you know the times I have been dishonest with you, with myself, and with others. Lord God, forgive me. Forgive my attempts at self-justifying excuses. Your word is truth and shows me what I truly am. May the Spirit of Truth conform me to Christ’s likeness every day.

Proverbs 22 – Words of the Wise

At v17 we begin a new section of the book, and v17-21 form an introductory paragraph to the “words of the wise” in the clear teaching and exhortation style of Chapters 1 to 9. These “words” are probably based on earlier Egyptian sayings but their inclusion here is certainly Holy Spirit-inspired for our good. That in itself is a reminder that since humanity is created in God’s image we should expect to see wisdom in the world, even among those who deny him. Also, after so many pages of proverbs, we might be glazing over somewhat, so the reminders here serve to focus our attention again: Living in a fear of the LORD under godly wisdom will cause your confidence in his goodness and righteousness to grow.

Righteous Father, your word is true and good, and your commands are for our good. Help me to grow in wisdom, attentive to all you have to say in your word. Show me my many shortcomings so that I might grow in the likeness of Christ, speaking truth and life in every situation.

Proverbs 23 – Drunkenness

While certain people in the Bible were banned from drinking alcohol (e.g. Nazirites in Num 6:3), there is no general prohibition. Wine in particular is regarded as a celebratory drink, seen both in the wedding at Cana (John 2) and the feast the LORD will provide at the death of death in Isaiah 25:6-8. And yet, from cover to cover, the Bible denounces drunkenness over and over. So v29-35 are hardly unexpected in a book of wisdom. The loss of sense and self-control described here will be familiar to anyone who has ever been drunk, and it's a state completely at odds with the teaching on godly wisdom seen so far. We recall Wisdom and Folly from Chapter 9: Folly will lead you astray with empty, short-term promises that will never deliver wisdom's lasting fulfilment.

Living God, you give us so much that is joyful, beautiful, and pleasurable, and yet we idolise them and we become so much less that we ought to be. Help me to be wise about my own weaknesses and sinful desires, and to live always in godly self control.

Proverbs 24 – Attitude to Unbelievers

Proverbs helps us to have godly attitude and insight as much as to do good actions. If we are honest, there are times when we do envy the success of wicked people. But v1 reminds us that trouble *will* come to the wicked, and v15 puts it even more strongly by saying, “the evil have no future.” So what should our attitude be to the unbeliever if we know their fate better than they do? Negatively, “Don’t gloat when your enemy falls” (v17) because that’s a clear sign that you have forgotten that you were once the same, saved only by God’s gracious intervention in your life. Positively, v11 tells you to “Rescue those being taken off to death” which, in our Christian context, means sharing the good news about Jesus. Verse 12 urges you not to make excuses.

Heavenly Father, there are still times when I wistfully contemplate the easy lives of others who don’t know you. Thank you for the wisdom of your word, always pointing me to the bigger picture of your grace.

Proverbs 25 – Living Sacrifice

When someone wrongs us we often want to take revenge, even in the most trivial and meanest of spirits. But that is anything but charitable. Verses 21-22 urge you to ‘retaliate’ with unexpected kindness and generosity, since such behaviour can bring shame (“burning coals”) on the person who has wronged you, and it is to be hoped that you might prompt repentance and reconciliation. This is, after all, how God extended grace to you. Paul quotes v21-22 at the end of Romans 12, saying “as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom 12:18). Such wise actions are the outworking of God’s mercies in us as his people: So we see here what “living sacrifices” look like (Rom 12:1).

God Only Wise, thank you for showing me so clearly how you want me to live as your child in Christ. Thank you that such living is in response to your gracious forgiveness, rather than in a desperate attempt to attain a holiness far beyond my natural abilities.

Proverbs 26 – Proverbs and Law

Verses 4 and 5 directly contradict each other. They illustrate a key difference between proverbs and law: If these words were laws, they would make no sense but as proverbs they highlight that different situations require different actions. A wise person fears the LORD and knows his commands already, and the path of wisdom steers a good course even through the murkiest of moral choices. Jesus was the master of wise words and actions, confounding his opponents who tried to trick him with awkward questions (e.g. see Matt 22:15-22 on giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s). It’s clear that such wisdom doesn’t come quickly to us but grows over time as we spend time with the LORD and meditate on his word.

Lord Christ, in whom are all treasures of knowledge of wisdom, it is good to learn from you. You knew the laws, you understood the hearts of men, and you were perfectly wise, gracious, and good in everything you said and did. Lord, grant me such wisdom as I meet with you day by day.

Proverbs 27 – Time Moves On

Some people urge an outlook of *live for today* and say you should live every day as if it's your last. But there is always a tomorrow, even if it may be filled with uncertainty (v1). Time moves forward, and daily care today helps us face tomorrow. Indeed, a wise fear of the LORD helps us prepare for eternity with him. Verses 23-27 capture a shepherd's wisdom, working with care every day as the seasons and years pass by. He will provide for himself and his family, knowing that wealth is not forever and that all things pass in the end. Whether at home, in work, or in church, we do well to honour the LORD's wisdom, daily moving forward with him.

Heavenly Father, the eternal relationship you have called me to is my only unchanging permanent joy. Neither time nor circumstance can remove me from your hand. Grant me wisdom to love and care for all those in my life, and to use my fleeting time well for you.

Proverbs 28 – Greed or Grace?

In the Bible, there is no sin in being rich or poor, though attitude towards wealth and poverty reveals much about the state of our heart. This chapter has several proverbs speaking against greed and idleness among those who want to be rich (v19, 20, 22, 25), and others warning against oppression, injustice, and self-confidence among the rich (v3, 6, 8, 11). We can see from these same verses some positive traits of a godly believer, whether rich or poor: Integrity (v6), kindness (v8), discernment (v11), diligence (v19), faithfulness (v20), trust in the LORD (v25), and generosity (v27). Such a heart comes only from the work of the Holy Spirit in us, conforming us to Jesus' likeness since he is all these things and more. May we learn contentment in Christ always.

Father of the heavenly lights, from whom all good things come, forgive me that I cling so tightly to passing things and that my heart is so formed by the materialistic culture around me. Spirit, help me to have the humility and generosity of Christ, and to learn contentment in him.

Proverbs 29 – Anger or Temper?

We have seen several proverbs on anger and there are three in this chapter (v8, 11, 22). Anger is not inherently sinful: It is right to be angry at cruelty and injustice, for example, and God himself most certainly does get angry as we store up his wrath against ourselves (Rom 2:5). But his anger is holy, just, measured, and appropriate; ours might have righteous roots, but tainted by our sinful nature we struggle to contain it. Our reactions are hasty, ill-informed, and disproportionate. Verses 8 and 22 speak of those who revel in anger and stir it up in others, but it is better to control oneself where possible (v11), and better still to dampen unhelpful rage in others (v8).

Lord Christ, you said, “Blessed are the peace-makers” and I would want to be known as that, rather than as someone who stirs up trouble. Yet I pray also for wise, Spirit-led reactions to seeing sin around me, so that I can do right and put right in a measured and controlled manner.

Proverbs 30 – Three or Four

We have no idea who Agur was and this chapter stands out as one of the trickiest to translate from Hebrew. That said, its message remains clear and lovely. Back in Proverbs 3:19 we read, “The LORD founded the earth by wisdom” and this chapter encourages us to examine the wonders of Creation around us in a thousand tiny details, meditating on our God and Creator as the only one who can truly make sense of it all. Between such reflective proverbs there are reminders to keep in God’s truth (v5-6), to flee from sin (v17, 20, 32-33), and to live in a material contentment under the LORD’s care (v8-9). True wisdom is humble before God and delights in his good and wise works.

Living God, I could not count the things that are beyond my understanding and I’m delighted to know that there is absolutely nothing beyond your knowledge or control. Grant me a humble joy to meditate on you and your beautiful works.

Proverbs 31 – Nobility

The identity of King Lemuel is unknown and it's likely he wasn't even an Israelite. His mother's advice (v1-9) warns the king against the distractions of women and alcohol so that he will reign wisely – principles for all Christian leaders too (1 Tim 3:2-3, 8, 12). Verses 8 to 31 form a Hebrew alphabetical acrostic describing “a wife of noble character” in idealistic, poetic terms. We note two things: (a) She has all the characteristics of wisdom that we have been reading about in Proverbs, especially being someone who fears the LORD (v30). (b) In the Hebrew Bible, the next book is Ruth; though a foreign, destitute widow, she is called “a woman of noble character” (Ruth 3:12). And *that* is beauty.

Gracious God, it's easy to have our heads turned by the world's short-term pleasures. It's easy to compare ourselves with others and feel we need more things. Thank you for calling me to yourself and granting me faith in Christ. Help me to serve you in godly, noble sobriety.

Ecclesiastes 1 – Absolute Futility!

Psalms 113:6 says that the LORD “stoops down to look on the heavens” but the worldview of Ecclesiastes is restricted to life “under the sun” (v14). It is a search for meaning in life from a Teacher whose perception of God is distant and dim. He sees life as “Absolute futility. Everything is futile” (v2), as substantial as visible breath on a frosty morning. He concludes that since everything goes round and round in circles then anything we do is just a futile “pursuit of the wind” (v14). The book is therefore a description of his pursuit of wisdom and meaning in life, justifying his conclusion. But time is not cyclical, it's linear: It has a direction determined by the significant events of God's plan of redemption. There is meaning only in life under the Son.

Heavenly Father, there does seem to be much futility in life. Thank you for revealing your salvation to us, and for the hope you have given in Christ. Help me to keep my heart focussed on him when all around seems such chaos and despair.

Ecclesiastes 2 – Finding Meaning in Experiences

The Teacher (the author, see 1:1) explains how he tried to find meaning in life by experiencing as much of it as possible. While there is pleasure in many things, he found ultimate meaning in none of them. Some activities yield fleeting pleasure (e.g. laughter, sex) while others have more lasting outcomes (e.g. building projects). But even our best work will be passed on to someone else when we die. The Teacher's investigation concludes that you might as well enjoy life even if it has no purpose (v24-26). Job 28 is a poem exploring the earth and humanity's abilities to search out wisdom, ending with words from God: "The fear of the LORD – that is wisdom." When we fear God and know him in Christ, everything has meaning as good gifts from him.

Lord Christ, you bring meaning and purpose as you grant eternal hope to us. I delight in all the good things you give, reminding me of your graciousness and kindness. Forgive me for seeking purpose in worldly things, and help me to put them to good purpose in your kingdom.

Ecclesiastes 3 – Time and Eternity

The rhythmic poetry of v1-8 chimes well with our own experiences of life. And yet since God put eternity in our hearts (v11) we all have an innate sense that there must be more to life. The Teacher knows this, but since his wisdom is restricted to life under the sun he has little comprehension of God or life after death (v19-22). He knows that God is just and righteous, but that justice and righteousness are often absent from the courts of men (v16). His conclusion that people are spiritually the same as animals (v19) is little different from an atheist's outlook, though the Teacher agonises precisely because he knows that there is a God. How thankful we are for the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Eternal God, you exist outside all time and space and yet you intervene in our tiny, time-bound lives with such care and compassion. We all sense eternal things beyond this life, so thank you for opening the way to them in Christ – the way, the truth, and the life.

Ecclesiastes 4 – Envy and Contentment

Verse 4 stands as a powerful commentary on our advert-driven consumer culture. We fill our lives with things we could easily live without, and the pursuit of these things inevitably demands money. Many people are trapped in jobs as they work to pay for things they don't need but want because they see others having them. We work rightly to avoid poverty (v5), but we must avoid being slaves to work (v6). The Teacher speaks of someone who becomes wealthy alone, and wonders what pleasure there could be in that (v7-8). We are made for community and friendship, even in the pursuits of work (v9-12). Our highest contentment is to be adopted into the holy community of the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Living God, I am far more invested in the things of this world than I realise. I do get taken in by adverts and I do envy the lives I see others leading. Forgive me for losing sight of the richness of my adoption in Christ, and teach me contentment in your presence every day.

Ecclesiastes 5 – Speaking to God

The chapter divisions in Ecclesiastes aren't always well-placed, and v8-20 really for a unit with the next chapter on the theme of wealth. Verses 1-7 instruct the Old Testament believer on his approach to God in the Temple, rather like preparing a subject to meet their king. The words are full of appropriate reverence: "God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few" (v2). As those who are in Christ, we dwell in the presence of holiness all the time, and our prayers ought not to have any less reverence than the Teacher's. However, as God's children we also have an intimacy with God that the Teacher couldn't imagine. Our transcendent, imminent God welcomes our heartfelt prayers.

Heavenly Father, holy God and Creator, thank you for the astonishing intimacy into which you have called me. Please grant me such understanding that I would always come with the immediacy of a dependent child while constantly being in awe of your holy greatness.

Ecclesiastes 6 – Contemplating Wealth

The Teacher contemplates wealth in 5:8-6:12 in his search for meaning in life, but sees only unhappiness. He sees how wealth flows up, not down, in society (5:8-9), and how riches never satisfy (5:10-12). Lost wealth is seen as catastrophic, despite the fact that we brought none into life and will take none out (5:13-17). To be content with what we have is a gift from God (5:18-20), and yet the Teacher says that sometimes God will take riches away and give it to someone else (6:1-7), and that in such loss it would be better not to have been born. When we search for meaning by observing life under the sun we will always draw wrong conclusions about God, no matter how perceptive we are.

Heavenly Father, when we look to ourselves to see you we have only a god in our own image, deeply flawed. Thank you that you are so perfectly and completely revealed to us in your Son, the Lord Jesus. Keep me learning and meditating on your word, knowing and seeing you truly.

Ecclesiastes 7 – Wonky Wisdom

Having made many observations in his quest for wisdom and the meaning of life, the Teacher now dispenses wisdom to us. As a perceptive observer of life under the sun, we might expect him to give some helpful advice. Yet we've also seen how dim his understanding of God is, and how distant he is from knowing the LORD himself. So the proverbs of v1-12 seem to fit the world, but v13 sits uncomfortably with us: God didn't make the world crooked; we did. The Teacher's suggestion that we moderate wickedness and righteousness (v15-18) is world away from God's command, "Be holy, for I am holy." So again, we're reminded in v23-29 that all the Teacher's enquiries are under the sun. He neither asks God anything nor seeks his word.

Spirit of Truth, there are often voices in the world that seem to teach wisdom and yet you grant true heavenly wisdom as you work in me. Please continue to reveal more of Jesus to me, the very wisdom of God, and give me discernment to distinguish true wisdom every day.

Ecclesiastes 8 – Life to the Full

The Teacher's limited wisdom "under the sun" continues. Here we are urged to be careful to obey authorities, not because it is right but rather for self-preservation. Verse 14 captures a moral enigma that has caused many people pain and confusion, and as long as life is viewed only to end at death then there is no answer, just as if Christ is not raised then we are to be pitied (1 Cor 15:19). His conclusion in v15 is wholly wrong and actually distant from the fellowship and holiness God calls us into with himself. It is better to read v14 in the shadow of the cross of Christ, giving thanks that he was pierced for our transgressions and that we are credited with righteousness by faith. Then live and enjoy life fully in him.

Lord Christ, you are the good and perfect King over all and it is good to serve you. Risen Saviour, thank you for your sacrificial death in my place that means I can be wholly forgiven and credited with a righteousness I haven't earned. Help me to live life to the full in you, with you, for you.

Ecclesiastes 9 – Seize the Day

Our culture urges us to complete bucket lists of "100 places to go" or "100 things to do" before you die. "Seize the day," we're told. "You only have one life: Live it!" This all sits very comfortably with the Teacher's words in this chapter. For him, whether you're good or bad, wise or foolish, rich or poor, we're all soon forgotten in the oblivion of death, so you might as well seize the day and enjoy life while you can (v10). Such is life under the sun with only a minimal concept of God. Jesus smashed all this wide open in his incarnation, his teaching, his death, and his resurrection. If there is only one thing to do before you die, it is to come to saving faith in the Son of God.

Lord Jesus, in you only there is meaningful life given and eternal life promised. You have given me so much: Help me to know deep contentment in you and to enjoy life received from your hand with joy and gratitude.

Ecclesiastes 10 – Uncertain Futures

There isn't an obvious coherency to this chapter, but a connecting thought may be the uncertainty of future events. Folly and fools will be foolish, but a wise person will tend to do right (v1-4). But things still don't always go as you'd expect (v5-7), and even the normal activities of life can lead to disaster (v8-11, 18). Things become especially precarious when our leaders are fools (v12-17), but the Teacher advises against speaking up (v20) and rather favours living for the enjoyment we can (v19). The Teacher's thoughts drift to the future in the last two chapters, but with an outlook of such uncertainty he is not offering much meaning to us, despite having eternity in our hearts (3:11). In the end, Christ is our only certainty in life.

Lord Jesus, you are from everlasting to everlasting, the Alpha and the Omega, the same yesterday, today, and forever. It is good to know that all my days are in your hands, secure in the here and now and into eternity. May your will be done in my life today.

Ecclesiastes 11 – Investing

Since the future is so uncertain from our perspective, the Teacher's advice is not to put all your eggs in one basket. Invest time, money, and energy into a range of things, not knowing where they will land or what disaster may come (v1-3). Don't try to predict the future that only God knows may seem sensible (v4-6), but as ever the Teacher never actually prays or commits his way to the LORD. His thinking is one of self-sufficiency in an unstable world where God is distant and disinterested, so enjoy life (especially while you're young) and leave nothing to chance. But while we are wise to plan ahead and be prudent, we do so under God's sovereign will, confident of his parental care in Christ.

Lord Jesus, you told us not to worry about the future but to trust in the goodness and wisdom of the Father. You have never let me down. Forgive me for my tendency to self-sufficiency; help me face the future with wisdom and confidence in you, whatever you have planned for me.

Ecclesiastes 12 – All Has Been Heard

The Teacher advises us to “remember your Creator in the days of your youth” largely because old age is so hard: Verses 1-7 poetically describe a failing, ageing body (e.g. losing teeth and eyesight in v3). For the Teacher, if all we have to look forward to is difficult old age and then death, we should make the most of our younger years. He knows nothing of the Holy Spirit renewing the inner person into older age (2 Cor 4:16), of life beyond death, or of resurrection. In this the Teacher is like many moralistic people today. Verses 8-14 are a separate commentary on the Teacher’s wisdom, acknowledging some helpful words but also directing us to true wisdom: “Fear God and keep his commands” (v13).

Heavenly Father, yet again I’m driven to give you thanks for revealing yourself to us in your Son, himself revealed to us in your word. As I grow older in this failing body, may I be renewed in my inner self in union with Jesus, ever anticipating the life to come.

Song of Songs 1 – The Ultimate Song

This is the only book in the Bible whose primary theme is love. The phrase ‘Song of Songs’ is part of the text and has a double meaning: It is a series of songs and poems brought together into a single love song, and it is also a Hebrew idiom meaning “the ultimate song.” It is full of garden imagery, reminding us of when Adam and Eve were naked without shame (Gen 2:25), and the language is charged with sensual desire and delight. Is the song about human relationships or is it an allegory for God’s love for his people? It is primarily about a husband and wife in passionate, faithful, joyful union, and as we contemplate the depths and challenges of their love we shed greater light on the ‘love of loves’ God has for us in Christ.

Loving God, thank you for this beautiful book. Thank you that in our sexualised culture you have given us such a positive and helpful blueprint for flourishing relationships. Help me to contemplate these things in a healthy and godly manner, growing to love you better.

Song of Songs 2 – My Love is Mine; I Am His

The woman speaks of her lover in delighted, sensual, satisfied language (v3-6). It seems his very approach excites and thrills her (v8-10). In turn, he calls to her with the language of Spring, the time for new life when the animals mate. That said, none of the erotic language is overtly concerned with procreation; it is all for mutual pleasure. Such intimacy is much more than physical, however, since their desire for one another is rooted not in empty lust but in powerful love: “My love is mine and I am his” (v16). This is why she gives the warning of v7 three times. Our shallow, image-led culture needs to regain the value of life-long, loving relationships.

Glorious Saviour, you have displayed your powerful love to me over and over, and most spectacularly in calling me from death in sin to life in you. Thank you that intimacy is only possible where love is found, and that that is what you have called me to.

Song of Songs 3 – Dreams of Love

It's difficult to know for sure whether the dream-like language of the song depicts an actual dream (see, e.g., 3:1, 5:2) or is simply a happy meandering of thought. The image of the woman searching the streets certainly feels like a dream, though the troubled anxiety of the search reminds us that their love is being realised in the ordinary, real world. That said, v6-11 seem to portray Solomon as a desirable model icon that any woman would desire, and the dream-like language seems to associate the Song's man with Solomon, presumably because that is how the man seems to the woman. How can such passion be maintained in the real world? By two people consciously desiring and dreaming of one another even when apart.

Living God, your word urges me to set my mind on things above, to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus. Forgive me that I'm so distracted so easily. Spirit, help me to meditate on Christ, to desire to be with him, and to delight in his presence every day.

Song of Songs 4 – Physical and Exclusive

Back in 1:5-6, the woman was described as having heavily tanned skin. That means she was an outdoor, manual worker and not an indoor, wealthy trophy wife. And yet to the man she is “beautiful” (v1, 7), and his description of her leaves little to the imagination. But the Song reminds us that marital love is physical: He calls for her to come to him and he delights in her caresses (v10). The Song also makes it clear that such is love is exclusive: She is a “locked garden” (v12), locked to all others but open to her one lover, her husband, her man. Our world sings songs of casual relationships, of pornography, and all sorts of sexual immorality, but this husband/wife marriage is truly the Song of Songs.

Lord Jesus, you warned us to beware of our sinful thoughts, conscious of our willingness to sin in our imaginations even if not with our hands. Thank you for healthy relationships, and help me to keep my thoughts good, pure, and pleasing in your sight.

Song of Songs 5 – My Love, My Friend

Verses 1-7 have a dream-like quality whose sequence of events feel disjointed. Intimate bliss is followed by anxious searching, even to the point of attack in the city (v7). The woman describes her man in beautiful language, calling him “notable among ten thousand” (v10). As ever in the Song, her passion is rooted in love that is deeper even than their physical attraction: “This is my love, and this is my friend” (v16). If we raise our thinking to the relationship between Christ and his church, we must ask two searching questions: (a) Can you say of Christ truly, “This is my love, and this is my friend”? (b) If you lost him, would you go out searching with an anxious heart until you found him again?

Lord Christ, you are the fairest beyond ten thousand times ten thousand. By grace you have called me to sweet communion with you, enabling me to dare to call you my love, my friend. Forgive me my faithless, cold heart. Help me to cherish you more and more each day.

Song of Songs 6 – Balance and Exclusivity

Back in Genesis 3, after Adam and Eve sinned, the curse on Eve included the statement, “Your desire will be for your husband, yet he will rule over you” (Gen 3:16). Tension exists between men and women in every society and culture. In the Song, we’re seeing equal and complementary words from the lovers and a glimpse of how Eden’s love was meant to be: She can truly say, “I am my love’s and my love is mine” (v3). In a world of promiscuity and adultery, the man enjoys delighted exclusivity with his bride, choosing her over a harem of queens, concubines, and young women. When Christ’s bride is called to the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, union will be perfect: There will be no more curse (Rev. 22:3).

Lord Christ, I pray for all who are in married relationships in our church, that they might experience such Eden-like love with balance and delighted exclusivity. More, I pray that we would taste more and more of the perfection of life with you. I yearn for that world without curse.

Song of Songs 7 – Dancing and Devotion

The Hebrew text begins this chapter one verse earlier, at 6:13. We can then see that the man delights to see her dancing, which explains something of why his visual delight in her begins at her feet and works up her body. She is a garden of pleasure to him, and her invitation to him is filled with blossom and bloom. Back in Genesis 30, the childless Rachel had bargained for mandrakes with Leah, since they were considered to have aphrodisiac properties; so it’s no surprise to read of mandrakes’ fragrance here in Song 7:13. Most lovely of all is how she has treasured everything up, both “new and old” (v13), holding nothing back of all she is and has in her love.

Lord Christ, you need nothing from me because you are utterly perfect in yourself, and yet it is entirely appropriate that I should hold nothing back in my devotion to you. Forgive me, Lord, that I still cling on to things as if they were mine, when all I have and am are already yours.

Song of Songs 8 – An Almighty Flame

It's possible that public display of affection was frowned upon for couples but not for siblings, in light of v1. Verses 5-7 are the climax of the book, reflecting on love itself rather than just describing it. Though God is not mentioned in the whole book, his name is hinted at in the Hebrew of v6, wholly appropriate given the powerful imagery. The woman wants to be a seal on the man's heart and arm – for his whole person to be permanently marked with her identity; they are one. The climax of the Song is not sex, but relationship. Her brothers want to barricade her sexuality but she has already matured in love (v8-12). The Song is open-ended and ongoing (v13-14), as all real-life loving relationships are.

Gracious God, your word tells us that you are love, and the evidence given is the salvation you grant in the sacrifice of Jesus. Thank you that I am called from condemnation and punishment into astonishing relationship, into a union with you that will outlast the ages.

Isaiah 1 – Judgment and Hope

These opening chapters act as an introduction or overture of all that's to come in Isaiah's spectacular book. The appeal to the heavens and the earth in v2 is to the witnesses of God's covenant with Israel. The nation is keeping its formal religion in place but their hearts are far from true worship of the living God. That is seen in their injustice towards the weak (e.g. v17) and in their wicked rulers (e.g. v23). As such, their worship is repugnant to the LORD and he will not accept it (e.g. v13). Yet all this is a call to repentance and blessing, to forgiveness and hope (v18, 27). It should not surprise us, then, to see Christ's work prophesied in this book.

Holy God, there is none like you and yet we are quick to turn aside to other gods even while carrying on with a performance of religious ritual. Forgive me, Lord. Keep me in repentance and faith, ever coming to you in spirit and truth.

Isaiah 2 – Mountain of the LORD

Chapters 2 to 4 form a mini unit, bookended with visions of a glorious future. Mountains are an important image in the Bible, where the hill/mountain of the LORD is the place of his presence (e.g. Sinai, Mt of Transfiguration). So v2-4 point forward to the “last days” when people from all over the world will enjoy peace with each in the presence of God. But v5-22 contrast that future hope with the present reality of a nation steeped in sin and idolatry – a world such as ours today. We do well to repeat Isaiah’s call to our own rebellious generation, inviting people to “walk in the LORD’s light” (v5) in view of the coming Day of the LORD’s judgment (v12). Unbelieving people will even reject the LORD on that day (v21).

Holy God, who may ascend your holy mountain to approach your holy presence? Truly Jesus has opened the way, torn the curtain, and made it possible even for me to come to you. Keep me from sin and temptation. Help me to walk in your light, warning others of their sin.

Isaiah 3 & 4 – Unjust Leaders

The words of judgment in Chapter 2 continue, now with the LORD bringing societal collapse through the introduction of young, unstable leaders (v4). It is a judgment against Jerusalem’s leaders who have plundered the poor instead of caring for them (v14-15). The judgment on the women in v16-26 is brought by their habit of flaunting wealth with expensive clothing and jewellery while others starve – a state of affairs still unchanged today in our designer label culture, though now on a global scale. But Isaiah 4:2-6 is a message of hope: God will one day bring cleansing to his people, even to dwell among them as he did at Sinai and in the wilderness in blessed fellowship.

Lord Christ, you have brought the kingdom of heaven to earth, and to serve you is life. Thank you for cleansing me so that I can know you and that the Spirit may dwell in me. Help me to care for others as you do, not lining my own nest but rather having compassion on the poor and needy.

Isaiah 5 – Vineyard and Woes

In v1-7, God's people are described as a vineyard, carefully prepared, tended, and nurtured by the LORD. But the only fruit it bore was "worthless" (v2), despite all the advantages of having the LORD as farmer. Verses 8-23 spell out six "woes" for Israel: They were greedy instead of generous (v8-10), pleasure seekers in the world, rather than worshippers (v11-17), mockers of God without humility (v18-19), twisters of morality (v20), self-sufficient in pride (v21), denying justice for money (v22-23). So v24-30 spell out the distressing judgments that will fall on them as a result of God's wrath. And yet the vineyard imagery reminds us that his anger is only the outcome of his love so shabbily rebuffed.

Holy Father, thank you for this reminder that my sins – even my 'secret' sins – are unbecoming for your children and despicable in the light of your love. While I know there is no condemnation against me in Christ, yet I pray for a heart to live as I ought in delighted holiness.

Isaiah 6 – The Holiness of King Jesus

In 2 Chron. 26, King Uzziah had failed to see that the temple was the earthly seat of the true king, the LORD of Armies who filled the temple with the very *hem* of his robe (v5). For sinful Isaiah to see God in all his resplendent holiness was devastating, and our own lack of awareness of our sin has much to do with our dim grasp of the LORD's holiness. Yet God is gracious and provided atonement for Isaiah (v7), enabling him to speak to and to serve God. The task given to Isaiah would be to continue to preach to a nation who refused to hear (v10), though by God's grace there would be a living remnant who survive (v13). Jesus applied v10 to his own teaching (Matt. 13:14-15), not least as he is the Lord on the throne in Isaiah's vision (John 12:40).

Lord Christ, majestic in holy splendour, forgive me that my meditations on your holiness are so slight that I downplay my sin and unworthiness. Thank you that all my sins are wholly atoned for. Help me speak truth even to hard hearts for your glory, confident that you will save some.

Isaiah 7 – Who Will You Trust?

King Ahaz is here faced with the question, “Who will you trust?” He stands by the aqueduct that brings water into Jerusalem – a strategic vulnerability in the event of a hostile siege. Two neighbouring countries are allied against him. Isaiah arrives with a promise that God will deliver Jerusalem and destroy those nations, inviting Ahaz to ask for a sign. In unbelief and mock piety, Ahaz refuses to ask (v12). But God’s grace is unstoppable, and he himself will provide the most remarkable sign – a boy called Immanuel, whose ultimate fulfilment is Jesus (Matt. 1:23). His promised appearance marks judgment against unbelief (v20-25) as well as bringing salvation.

Lord Christ, Immanuel, you are glorified in both judgment and salvation, perfectly achieving justice and forgiveness in your death for me. Thank you for sending the Spirit to lead me to you. I trust in you now for the ever and ever you grant.

Isaiah 8:1-9:7 – A Light Has Dawned

King Ahaz’s Judah was under threat from Damascus in Aram (Syria) and Samaria in Israel. We know from 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28 that, rather than trust in the LORD, Ahaz asked the Assyrian empire for help. Here in v1-8 the LORD says that Assyria will indeed come like a flood from the North, bringing gloom and affliction starting at Galilee and working South, with Judah “up to the neck” in trouble (v8). There’s a call to fear the LORD only (v13-14), even when trouble comes. Why? Because he will cause a light to shine in the gloom, starting at Galilee (9:1-2), bringing a surprising deliverance more powerful than Gideon’s over Midian (v4, Judges 7). Verses 6-7 are one of the Old Testament’s highest descriptions of Christ, worthy of deep meditation.

Holy Jesus, Eternal Son, you became that child. The government of the universe is on your shoulders, and your reign over us is good. Forgive me that am so often as untrusting in you as Ahaz was, and help me to know you in your splendour and glory every day.

Isaiah 9:8-10:4 His Anger, His Hand

Everything so far has been spoken against Judah and her king, Ahaz. But Isaiah lived through the end of the northern kingdom of Israel at the hands of the Assyrian empire's invasion. Here, he gives four judgments against Israel, each ending with "In all this, his anger has not turned away, and his hand is still raised to strike" (V12, 17, 21, 10:4). Importantly, judgment will fall because God has been abandoned by the whole nation. So they will be invaded (v8-12), will lose both leaders and led (v13-17), will self-destruct in in-fighting (v18-21), and ultimately end far away in exile (10:1-4). It is clear that the LORD takes no pleasure in all this: He would always have sinners repent and return.

Righteous, holy God and Father, how my sin must grieve you. Forgive me that I simply don't take my sin seriously enough. Father, I would much rather live a life pleasing to you, for which I ask the Spirit's help.

Isaiah 10:5-34 – A Remnant Will Return

Judah's king Ahaz turned down the LORD's help in the face of Assyrian invasion, but here we see that the Assyrians were also under God's command – his chosen instrument of judgment on Israel. But Assyria will also be subject to his wrath for daring to think their success is their own work, defeating Israel and the LORD (e.g. v10-11, 13). In the face of God's promised covenant curse, a remnant of Israel's people will return – not to the land, but to the "Mighty God," the promised son of Isaiah 9:6. As for Judah and Jerusalem, Assyria will sweep across the land right up to Jerusalem's neck (8:8) but won't prevail. The LORD God of Armies will always fight for his own glory and honour and the good of his people.

Mighty God, Saviour of all, you will always have a remnant of humanity who will call on your name. Thank that although by nature I am as rebellious as anyone, yet by grace you called me to turn to you for life and peace in Christ.

Isaiah 11-12 – God is My Salvation

When Ahaz rejected the LORD's word through Isaiah, we read that the LORD would give a sign of salvation anyway: Immanuel, born to a virgin. So again, after chapters of judgment on Israel and Assyria, we read that a "shoot will grow from the stump of Jesse" (i.e. from King David's father). Isaiah was looking ahead to the coming of Jesus, born into David's line, and some of his Eden-like prophecies are yet to be brought about at Christ's return (v6-9). This Christ is the banner around which his people gather from all over the world in happy unity (e.g. v11, 12). We will praise him who is our strength, song, and salvation (12:2, Exodus 15:2), and by his grace we will rejoice that the Holy One of Israel is Immanuel, God with us and among us.

Holy One of Israel, you are indeed the great Banner to which your people gather – because you live. I will give thanks to you, Lord. Your anger against me has turned away and you have comforted me. Help me to make this known to others for their very great blessing.

Isaiah 13 – Babylon Will Fall

Despite the glorious anticipation of Immanuel and God's rule throughout the earth, we can still be overawed by the world around us. In the following chapters we'll see God's mighty judgment on the nations of the world – and draw comfort. But why start with Babylon, since it wasn't the primary aggressor in Isaiah's day? From Genesis 11 to Revelation 19, Babylon is a symbolic representation of worldly opposition to God, reflected in the cosmic language of v4-5. But that symbol is realised in specific, particular times, so Isaiah predicts the fall of Babylon under the Medes (v17, Daniel 5:30-31). Likewise we must recognise that God's judgment will be visited on the ungodly and unbelieving folk of our time.

Lord Christ, sometimes I read these things as if they only apply to other people in other times. Help me to have true spiritual eyesight to see the awful truth about Babylon all around me. Help me to point lost rebels to repentance and faith in you.

Isaiah 14 – The LORD is Over All

The bulk of this chapter is a “song of contempt about the king of Babylon” (v4), a position that would become the most powerful in the world after Isaiah’s lifetime. The language used of him is cosmic, alluding to a wicked one far greater even than the king of earthly Babylon (v12-13), and may well be a reference to Satan (see Luke 10:18, Rev. 12:7-9), “ruler of the power of the air” even now (Eph. 2:2). Yet no matter how high and mighty a king or president might become, the grave awaits them all (v9-11) while the LORD continues to reign. Philistia rejoiced when Judah’s king Ahaz died (v28-29), yet they would be wiped out by Assyria at the LORD’s command (v31-32). We trust not in earth’s rulers, but only in the LORD.

Great King of kings, your reign is eternal and far beyond challenge. As I see world leaders strutting about, I’m reminded here that they will all one day face you. Have mercy, Lord, and restrain their wickedness now. May the leaders of this country learn to bow the knee to you.

Isaiah 15 – The LORD’s Heart Cries Out

After the pronouncements against Babylon (13:1) and Philistia (14:28), we have a third against Moab (v1) spanning this chapter and the next. Isaiah didn’t travel to these places to deliver the messages; they are written for our benefit: (a) They assure us that the LORD is powerful and just and will hold all the earth’s nations to account; (b) They remind us not to copy Ahaz who put trust in people rather than God; (c) We glimpse the awfulness of coming under God’s judgment; (d) We also glimpse the sorrowful heart of God even as he executed divine justice (v15). In these things we understand yet more of God’s passion in sending Christ to suffer wrath for us, and marvel at Christ’s loving determination to save.

Holy God, you are righteous, good, and just, and you leave no sin unpunished. How my sin must grieve your compassion and love, and how much you must love me to have done so much to save me. Lord Jesus, thank you for your terrible suffering in my place.

Isaiah 16 – The LORD’s Tears

We have the rulers of Moab sending gifts to Judah (v1) in return for refuge from Assyrian invasion (v2-4a). But Judah’s refuge is the LORD, so the terms on which Moab may come include being under the LORD’s chosen king in covenant love (v4b-5, ultimately speaking of Christ). But Moab are too proud! They want salvation but not lordship (v6), and the result is judgment under Assyria (v7-8). The LORD never takes delight in judging those who reject him, and his own tears mix with those of the Moabite town Jazer (v9, literally “I weep in the weeping of Jazer”). We can expect similar rejections today as we call people to find refuge in Christ; we must therefore pray for his compassion in us.

Father of mercies and God of all compassion, thank you for revealing your heart in this way. There are so many tears in the world, so much pain. People point the finger at you, not seeing your grief at our sin. Lord, give me compassion, and a passion for lost to find their refuge in you.

Isaiah 17 & 18 – Plotting in Vain

This fourth pronouncement is against Damascus, the capital city of Aram (Syria) and also against Ephraim (the largest northern tribe, often used as a synonym for Israel). They were allied against Judah (Chapter 7) and against Assyria, but since Assyria was the LORD’s instrument of judgment against Israel this coalition was doomed (V1-3). On “that day” of Assyrian invasion (v4, 7, 9), there would be terrible destruction, though some would return to their Maker rather than their hand-made idols (v7-8). *Any* coalition of nations will fail before the LORD (v12-14) and when envoys from Cush tried to form an alliance against Assyria the LORD proclaimed their grim failure (18:5-6) as sure as Aram/Israel’s. “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?” (Psalm 2:1)

Great King of kings, your rule for us is good since you are good and you do good. Countries and cultures conspire against your good purposes but I’m grateful that none can prevail. Lord God, help me to move with your purpose, not against it.

Isaiah 19 & 20 – Unity Only in Christ

By virtue of geography, wealth, and power, Egypt might seem a good ally for Judah and neighbouring countries against the brutal Assyrians. But this fifth pronouncement against them condemns them for their idolatry (v1-3) and predicts their collapse (v4-15). Remarkably, there is still a message of hope and grace “on that day” (v16, 18, 19, 23, 24), when a fear of the LORD will unite Egypt, Judah, and Assyria in true worship. Such unity could only come under one God, united in Christ, while rejection of him will always promote disunity and even enmity. So Chapter 20 describes how Isaiah acted out a prophecy that Egypt and Cush would fall to Assyria, along with Ashdod who trusted them (20:1), leading to captives in dismay and naked shame (20:4-6).

Gracious, Holy God, your word constantly paints a picture of peace, hope, and love for all who will turn to you, along with despair and enmity for those who won't. Yet we so naturally choose rebellion. Thank you for your grace to me. May the Spirit continually turn my heart to you.

Isaiah 21 – Will It Ever End?

After five pronouncements against Babylon, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, and Egypt, we begin another five, the titles of which are more vague. Isaiah's prophecies will broaden out in time and space which is being reflected in his style of words. That said, digging in to each of these pronouncements here we do identify them as being against Babylon, Edom, and Gentile Arab tribes. The background is still Assyrian dominance, and Babylon's fall (v9) is its brutal destruction under Assyria with no help from their powerless idols (v9). Will it ever end? Verses 11-12 call for 'wait and see.' And again, the third pronouncement reveals Arabian impotence under Assyrian invasion. All of these visions are based on the question Ahaz faced in Chapter 7: Who will you trust?

Living God, if it's folly to trust in anything other than you then how doubly foolish to trust in an enemy. You know the future because you hold it in your hand, so I thank you for calling me to such eternal security.

Isaiah 22 – Valley of Vision

Despite the enigmatic title in v1, it's soon clear that this chapter related to Judah at a time when its leaders have left the city after a siege. The best fitting event is the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, long after Isaiah's time (2 King 24-25). Those left in the city celebrated their survival (v2, 13). Jerusalem had trusted its walls and water supply rather than the LORD (v9-11), but they fell. Seeking short-term self-sufficiency, they had the breadth of vision of someone in a valley, failing to see the long-term effects of abandoning the LORD. The upstart Shebna would be removed, and even godly Eliakim would not be able to bear the weight of government on his shoulders. We need Immanuel.

Lord Jesus, you said that apart from you we can do nothing and yet I go about things as if that weren't true. I stumble in the valleys when I should ascend your holy hill in prayerful dependence. Lord, forgive me such foolishness.

Isaiah 23 – Wealth is No Refuge

This second cycle of pronouncements ends with Tyre. The other four had enigmatic titles, being to the Desert by the Sea (21:1), Dumah (21:11), Arabia (21:13), and the Valley of Vision (22:1). The enigma in this pronouncement against Tyre comes at the end. Tyre was a wealthy seaport controlling trade routes from Tarshish in Spain through inland passage to the east. All its power and assurance was founded in its wealth, but the LORD would use the Assyrian invasion to bring it low (v8-9) just as had happened to Babylon (v13). So Tyre was devastated in 701 BC by Assyria, only to revive around 630 BC when Assyria fell before the Babylonians (v17). But since everything comes from the LORD, so everything must go back to him (v18).

Great God of mercies, there is no security in human power, wealth, guile, or even religious passion. There is no place of refuge from your wrath against my idolatry except in you. Forgive me that I am guilty of so many of the same sins as those nations you judged. Guide my paths.

Isaiah 24 – A Polluted World

The five pronouncements of chapters 13 to 20 were tightly bound to specific nations in the light of Assyria's threat. The next five in chapters 21 to 23 were a little more enigmatic, hinting at events in broader time and space. All is under the LORD's command. Now the vision expands wider still, with judgment coming to the whole earth "polluted by its inhabitants" (v5). Even the sun and moon (so often objects of worship) will be put to shame and disgraced (v23) in a day when the LORD is revealed. Amid it all, some will sing praises to God (v14-16a). As New Testament readers we see that Isaiah is looking even into *our* future as we anticipate Christ's return, and it's crucial for evangelistic urgency that we grasp the awfulness of judgment.

Lord Christ, it is sobering to read these words as a description of what is to come to the world around me here today. Thank you for saving me. Lord, may I have an appropriate urgency and intent in evangelism.

Isaiah 25 – Death Swallowed Up

The praises of the remnant of God's people who survive his world-wide judgment (24:14-16a) are given here in Chapters 25 and 26. In language rooted in the events of his day (v1-5), Isaiah's vision soars far beyond our own lifetimes to the day of Christ's return: We will feast with the LORD (v6); he will "swallow up" death's curse (v7-8a, 1 Cor. 15:54) and come to us in gentle intimacy as he wipes away our tears – once, forever. All the praise is to "our God" who saves us: "Let's rejoice and be glad in his salvation" (v9). Back in Chapter 16, Moab's pride prevented them from coming to the LORD for salvation and so they're mentioned here again as representative of all who will miss out (v10-12). The LORD will weep for them (16:9) even as he dries our tears.

Living God, abounding in mercy and forgiveness, thank you that my salvation is all your work of grace. It could only be so, since I am so undeserving of any good thing from you. Thank you that in forgiving me you will welcome me into that great feast, a day of unparalleled joy.

Isaiah 26 – Close Your Doors Behind You

Isaiah's view of the end times at Christ's return continues with a call to "open the gates" to the "strong city" (v1-2). The proud will be brought low (v5-6), but the godly will wait patiently for the LORD (v7-9). Yet no-one may boast in the kingdom of God for we were once as ignorant as any (v10-11) and live only by God's grace to us (v12-13). Isaiah knows that Israel sinned like any other nation and yet, for the faithful, there is anticipation of resurrection to eternal life with Christ (v19), granted from above like dew. The gates of heaven will open (v2) and we will enter and close the doors (v20) – an eternal echo of Noah's ark and the Passover salvation events, safe from God's wrath.

Lord Christ, you give us such strong images of eternal security. I don't deserve such grace or kindness, and you are greatly glorified. Preserve me from ever taking such hopes for granted, Lord, so that I might praise you rightly for the salvation you give.

Isaiah 27 – The Perfect Vineyard

It is no surprise that these visions of our future include a reference to the utter destruction of the sea-serpent Leviathan, that ancient near-eastern symbol of evil and a biblical metaphor for Satan (v1). God's people were a failed vineyard in Chapter 5, but in v2-6 the LORD is at peace with his perfect vineyard, his people perfected in Christ. The LORD disciplined his people, but did not wipe them out as he had other peoples (v7-11). Rather, we will be free of all sin and idolatry with all sin atoned for (v9) in Christ, while all others will be eternally excluded (v11). Verses 11 & 12 use the language of Isaiah's time to speak of the return of Christ at a great trumpet call, when he will harvest all his people to himself to worship the LORD forever.

Holy God, it's amazing that you should plan such things for us. How good it will be to be free from sin and idolatry, free of Satan's temptations and accusations, with sins wholly atoned for and our holiness perfected in Christ. Lord, give me grace to live in that reality now, shining for you.

Isaiah 28 – Cornerstone

Isaiah listed six 'woes' in Chapter 5 and begins a longer cycle of six here. This woe begins with Samaria, the capital city of Israel (referred to here, as often in the prophets, as Ephraim). It is a prophecy of swift destruction under the invading Assyrians (v1-4). Ephraim preferred drunkenness (v7-8) to a sober contemplation of Isaiah's "childish" preaching (v9-10). Judgment would come (v11, 13), and yet in the future great grace also (v5-6). Those in Jerusalem should take note (v14), being so confident that calamity would not come (v15). But God will build his people from the Cornerstone of Christ (v16, 1 Peter 2:6) in dimensions of justice and righteousness (v17), as a farmer ploughs, sows, and harvests as he will.

Lord Jesus, great Cornerstone of your church, building us in justice and righteousness according to your own will, forgive me that I am so frequently inadequate and weak in your kingdom. Lord, help me to take my place as a living stone in the church you are building.

Isaiah 29 – Lip Service and Rebellion

Two more 'woes' are given (v1, 15). "Ariel" means "altar hearth," the place of continual fire for burnt offerings to God. So Jerusalem will actually become a place of burning wrath from God despite their festivals "year after year" (v1-4). God would quash Judah's enemies (v5-8, 2 Kings 16), but they are so spiritually sleepy that they can't perceive the LORD's hand (v9-12). Jesus used v13 to condemn the lip service of Jerusalem in Mark 7:6-7, and Paul quoted v14 to distinguish worldly wisdom from spiritual in 1 Cor. 1:19. The third 'woe' (v15) is against those who think they can hide their plans from God, not knowing that he will turn everything upside down (v17-21) in great blessing to those who honour and worship the Holy One of Israel.

Lord Christ, I know that I am often guilty of going through the motions of worship without truly engaging my heart and mind on you. Please forgive my unworthy lip service and fuel me with a spiritual vitality in both personal and public worship – as is due to your greatness.

Isaiah 30 – Faithless Judah, Faithful God

As we come to this fourth ‘woe’ we’re reminded again of the question Ahaz faced in Chapter 7 and we all face at some time: “Who will you trust?” In v1-7, Judah are condemned for choosing to go back and trust “completely worthless” Egypt (v7). In v8-17 they reject God’s word, preferring messages of their own choosing (v10-11) over trusting in the LORD (v15). Yet the LORD is full of mercy and compassion, waiting for his people to turn (v18). When they do, he’ll shower them with covenant blessings (v19-26). Isaiah again grounds these truths in the urgent reality of his day and the impending threat of Assyria. For those who trust the LORD, Egypt will be no help (v1-7) and Assyria no danger (v27-33).

Faithful God, you know how often I turn to family, money, work, and all sorts of things for the kind of deep peace that can only truly come from you. Teach me what it means to remain in Christ, and to experience ongoing trust in you.

Isaiah 31 – Like a Lion or a Hovering Bird

The fifth ‘woe’ takes up Chapters 31 and 32 and continues on the theme of who trust. Faced with an Assyrian threat, Isaiah says it would be disaster to look to Egypt for help instead of the LORD (v1-3). He explains why with two images from nature to describe the LORD’s relentless focus on his people: He is like a lion that won’t be separated from its prey (v4), or a hovering bird over Jerusalem, watching and protecting it (v5). There will be a supernatural end to Assyria’s threat to Jerusalem (v7-9) which we’ll see in Chapter 37. But v7 remains key for us: We still look to sources of help that will let us down, failing to perceive the spiritual warfare dimension of our troubles, forgetting the focussed, passionate power of the LORD to protect us from evil.

Heavenly Father, thank you for these images of your passion for your people, your special possession. Forgive me that I repeatedly fail to contemplate or appreciate the intensity of your love for me, even to the point of neglecting time with you and forgetting my utter dependence.

Isaiah 32 – The King and the Spirit

The fifth 'woe' continues to urge us both to anticipate disaster for relying on human sources and to look ahead to the blessing of the kingdom of heaven. Verses 1-8 speak of transformations personally and culturally under the coming King, Immanuel. But v9-14 call on the complacent of Jerusalem to shudder at the horrors their unbelief will result in – Assyrian invasion of Judah. But grace must have the last word, so v15-20 give a picture of Immanuel's kingdom, a place where "the Spirit from on high is poured out on us" (v15), a world of justice, righteousness, and peace. While we live in Christ's kingdom today, indwelt by this Spirit, we must strive to live out this justice, righteousness, and peace every day.

Heavenly Father, your discipline is always good and wise, always pointing towards hope and forgiveness in Jesus. Thank you for kingdom life now, and the prospect of being with you in heavenly perfection forever. May the Spirit urge me to live in that frame every day.

Isaiah 33 – The LORD is our King

Isaiah's six 'woes' conclude here with a message to Assyria (v1), the great threat to all nations in Isaiah's lifetime, along with an assurance of salvation for Judah (v6). Just when Assyria has its peak devastation in Judah, then at just that moment ("now" x 3 in v10) God will act. Such deliverance ought to lead to fear of God even among those who are saved (v14), along with a call to holy living (v15). Ever since Ahaz's trust in Assyria in Chapter 7, Isaiah's words have made the same point over and over: The LORD is king over *all* the nations and will judge all, even destroying death (25:8) and Satan (27:1) in the future. God alone is our hope against all that would oppress us, saving by his gracious forgiveness in Christ (v22-24).

God of all wisdom, you are wise and kind to show us the folly of trusting in worldly powers, systems, and people when we ought to trust in you. You are to be reverently feared, served, honoured, and loved for choosing to save me by the death of your eternal Son.

Isaiah 34 – A Day of Vengeance

Chapter 1 began with a call to the heavens and the earth to act as covenant witness against Judah, and yet in spite of their repeated unbelief God still determined to save through a promised Immanuel. Here, the LORD's judgment is pronounced against *all* the nations of the earth! It's surprising, then, that the little country of Edom should be singled out in v5-17 until we recall that Edom was founded by Esau, the brother of Jacob (renamed Israel). Edom's destruction is a 'type' or model of what will come to all nations who are 'not Israel' (see also Obediah v1, 15, 18). So v8 gives a glimpse of all that will happen at Christ's return, but the victory will be the LORD's, not ours, since we will only be saved by grace, not merit.

Almighty God, you have the might and the right to judge the whole earth. You would be just and good to condemn me for my sin, and yet you chose to save me and for your own glorious Son to be punished in my place. Father, forgive me. Spirit, help me live a life worthy of Jesus.

Isaiah 35 – The Holy Way

Chapters 34 and 35 are two sides of the same coin. The judgment on the whole world in Chapter 34 is matched by the renewing of the earth when God shall come (v4). Since Christ is Immanuel, God With Us, it is no surprise that he quotes v5-6 to the disciples of John the Baptist in Matthew 11:4-6. Jesus is the one who has redeemed us from sin (v9) and who calls us to walk in the Holy Way to unending joy in the city of God (v8, 10). Jesus has begun the last days of earth as we know it, and his return will bring both eternal judgment and eternal life, depending on our knowledge of him in this life. The way of holiness is joyful communion with God, and therefore a good way to live our lives today.

Eternal God, you are gracious to provide a perfect Redeemer who has saved us by grace. Thank you for Jesus, the very way of holiness himself. Thank you for the prospect of unending joy with you. Help me in the way of holiness today, and give me an urgency to point others to you.

Isaiah 36 – “What are you relying on?”

The events of Hezekiah's reign in Isaiah 36-39 have already been given in 2 Kings 18-20 and 2 Chronicles 29-32, but their inclusion here is vital to Isaiah's overall design. Back in Chapter 7, King Ahaz had stood by “the conduit of the upper pool, by the road Launderer's Field,” and now the Assyrian official stands on the same spot to parley with those locked in Jerusalem (v2). The Assyrian asks the very question that threaded through the first half of the book: “What are you relying on?” (v4). He weaves truth and lies in an enticing offer, but receives no reply. Hezekiah has already learned to trust the LORD, and in spite of terrible odds against him, he will continue to do so.

Heavenly Father, your word asks, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” I understand the logic, and yet I'm weak and don't always feel the truth of it. Thank you that you are utterly faithful, and teach me to trust you always – in the small things and the large.

Isaiah 37 – “Because you prayed to me...”

This is a spectacular example of faith, grace, and salvation coming together. The situation was as dire as it could have been, with the brutal Assyrians ready to take Jerusalem. But unlike King Ahaz, King Hezekiah was ready to trust the LORD. He openly acknowledged his helpless dependence when he spread that letter before the LORD, while also grieving the potential harm to God's own honour among the nations if Assyria were to take the city. God binds his sovereign purposes in salvation to the prayers of his people, so his word to Hezekiah begins, “Because you prayed to me...” (v21). As ever, Israel's salvation means terrible judgment against those who mock Israel's God (v35-38).

Heavenly Father, how many blessing from you have I missed out on simply by not praying? Forgive my foolish, independent heart, and help me to remember who I am as your child. I can do all things in Christ but apart from him I can do nothing. Lord, help me to keep close to you daily.

Isaiah 38 – Wellbeing and Bitterness

With a little arithmetic, it's possible to work out that this sickness in Chapter 38 happened before the dramatic deliverance of Chapter 37. Hezekiah's near-death illness led him to learn dependence on the LORD so that he could say, "it was for my own wellbeing that I had such intense bitterness" (v17). The king's trust in the LORD then led to the nation's salvation, and in this he became a model of faith for all the people: Faced with the question of who we will trust, we must put our faith in the LORD. Christ's obedience to his Father was unshakeable, and since we are incorporated into his life through union, he is both our example and our enabler in our life of faith.

Lord Christ, you wisely give us trials so that we will learn the obedience of faith, preparing us for the inevitability of hard times in a broken world. Lord, strengthen my faith by your gracious work in me. Help me to live by faith every day.

Isaiah 39 – Faith Subverted

The connection between Hezekiah's illness and the visit from the Babylonian envoys is likely the reason that this material is placed after the deliverance of Chapter 37. Hezekiah saw the threat of Assyria for what it was, but by not consulting the LORD here he failed to see the danger in the Babylonian flattery. Isaiah's attention, then, is switched to Babylon, the nation that will take Judah into exile a hundred years or so after his death (v6). In fact, the tone of Isaiah's book switches so that he is looking into the future more and more, envisaging a coming Servant and Messiah, leading all the way to a new heavens and a new earth. The devil will attempt attack, diversion, and subversion to trip us up, but we must keep looking forward to all that God has in store for his church.

Lord Jesus, this world is full of things that will entice me away from you. You are the First and the Last, and you know my future. Lord, help me to keep my focus on you, trusting you in everything, wise to the schemes of the devil who would trip me up to discredit you.

Isaiah 40 – Comfort, Comfort

The devastating prophecy of exile to Babylon (39:6-7) is met immediately with words of “Comfort, comfort” (v1). Three voices cry out the grounds of comfort: (i) God himself will come to the earth for all humanity (v3-5); (ii) His promises and covenants will stand whatever nations rise and fall (v6-8); (iii) the LORD will come to bring justice and to tenderly care for his people (v9-11). The fulfilment of these words is only truly found in Christ (e.g. see Matt. 3:3), and our “comfort” is often amid turmoil, confident that our God will carry us (v11). Can he do it? The meditation of v12-26 reminds us of who God is in his power and glory. Doubt not his grace: The Strength of Israel will strengthen you (v27-31).

Heavenly Father, all my hopes and fears are answered by the comfort you command. In Christ, you have given us an assurance of the certainty of Isaiah’s words. I’m comforted by your immeasurable power applied to my salvation, and by your tender grace to me in Jesus.

Isaiah 41 – Tell Us the Future

The comfort of Chapter 40 ended with the promise that “those who trust in the LORD will renew their strength” (40:31), and here in v1 “the people” of the world are invited to do the same. In a world subject to Babylonian rule, v2 speaks of another ruler from the end who will bring a new power and reign. Unbelieving nations encourage one another with manmade idols (v5-7), but the LORD’s message to Israel is full of hope. He calls Israel “my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen... my friend” (v8), promising help and restoration to covenant blessing (v8-20). All this is prophecy and the unbelieving nations are invited to state the case for their idols (v21-24). But the LORD not only knows the future, he *directs* it (v25-29) – and that is real comfort for all who will trust in him.

Living God, while we make plans about this or that for our futures, it is truly comforting to know that my days are in your hands. You are good and you do good, and you work all things for the good of those who love you. Lord, renew my strength today.

Isaiah 42 – Song 1: Light for the Nations

Chapter 41 ended with the emptiness of idolatry, but here v1 responds immediately with news of a “servant.” Verses 1-4 are the first of four Servant Songs in Isaiah, though his identity is initially enigmatic. He will bring justice and goodness to the nations, but will do so with a gentleness we don’t typically see in world leaders. Verses 5-9 are the LORD’s words to the servant, this “light to the nations.” He will be the object of song (v10-13) and hope (v14-17). In 41:8, the LORD called Israel “my servant” but here v18-25 make it clear they were not to be the servant of this song, this light to the nations. Matthew 12:16-21 quotes the song in full, identifying Jesus as the servant who will bring justice to the whole world.

Lord Christ, your rule is perfect in righteousness and comes to us with such gentle compassion. You are the light of the world and the only hope for us all. Forgive me that I don’t shine for you before others as I ought. Help me to make you known and to walk in your light today.

Isaiah 43 – Redeemer and Saviour

The chapter divisions in this part of the book aren’t as helpful as they might be. Israel are described as slaves both to Babylon and to idolatry (political and spiritual slavery), and the LORD is Redeemer and Saviour. Israel’s sin would lead them to impoverished slavery (42:18-25), but the LORD’s words of redemption, salvation, and gathering from Babylon are some of the most beautiful words in the book (v1-21). But then v22-28 speak of Israel’s neglect of the LORD and how they weary him with their sins (to be met with grace in the next chapter). The LORD is relentlessly gracious towards us, despite our ungrateful, neglectful, forgetful idolatry.

Heavenly Father, how patient you are, how gracious and forgiving. Despite all you have taught me about the blessedness of walking in your righteousness, my head still gets turned by transient follies. Lord, have mercy. Keep me close in the Spirit’s strength.

Isaiah 44 – Bow Down to a Block of Wood?

Israel's neglect of the LORD in 43:22-28 is answered here by the reminder that they were his chosen servant (v1) and by promises of rich blessings in relationship with the LORD (v2-3). The LORD is our maker, our living King and Redeemer (v8), and v8-23 highlight the utter folly of serving a manmade God rather than the God who made man (e.g. v16-17). We still serve the things we have made: For many, that means being at the beck and call of our tech notifications; others are dominated by sports results; some fret over investments; others fill days with unending home improvements. And all the while the LORD calls to us, "Return to me, for I have redeemed you" (v22). Life to the full comes to us from the only God who has life in himself.

Living God, I confess that I do still look to all manner of manmade things for the peace, security, and contentment that can only be found in knowing you. I allow so many things to distract me. Lord God, help me to remain in living fellowship with you today.

Isaiah 45 – Every Knee Will Bow

Isaiah 44:24-28 is one long sentence on the sovereignty and power of the LORD to *be* the Redeemer of Israel, notably here to redeem them from exile in Babylon. Remarkably, he planned to use the Gentile ruler King Cyrus to achieve it, even calling him "my shepherd" and "anointed" (44:28, 45:1). No-one can question the LORD's good plans (v9, 10) since he is our Maker, our Creator (v12). All this was written before Cyrus was even born and then happened in the days of Ezra (see Ezra 1). We can draw enormous confidence in God from seeing such prophecy fulfilled as we await the return of Christ. The emphasis in the declarations beginning in v14 and v18 is that the LORD will call all the nations (v22) as he does now, and will do once for all at Christ's return (v23-25).

Sovereign Lord, not only do you know all things but you determine outcomes for your glory and our good. Thank you for the Bible's examples of your promises fulfilled, giving such confidence in salvation.

Isaiah 46 – “I will bear you up”

The comparison between the LORD and the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo is graphically displayed here. As Babylon will fall, its gods will be carried away on carts pulled by animals (v1-2). But the LORD will carry his people all the days of our lives, from the cradle to the grave (v3-4). Can the living God possibly be compared to gods and idols we form with our hands (v5-7)? It's a ridiculous idea. But this isn't armchair spectator theology – it's a warning to all who transgress his laws that the LORD will achieve his plans for judgment (v10-11), while also being a word of encouragement for his people awaiting salvation (v13).

Heavenly Father, in your arms I am safe. What's more, you carry me all the days of this life and forever. Help me to keep my hands empty of idols, and to raise my thoughts to you when tempted to idolatry.

Isaiah 47 – Fire for Babylon

Although Assyria was the dominant force in Isaiah's lifetime, he continues his prophecies relating to Judah's exile in Babylon (aka Chaldea) a century or so later. Here we see that although Babylon was the LORD's instrument of judgment for rebellious Judah (e.g. v6), Babylon itself would be judged for its own idolatry and wickedness. Portrayed as a woman, twice she says, “I am, and there is no-one else” (v8, 10) – language the LORD has used to speak of himself (e.g. 44:6). Babylon worships herself. No wonder John uses such imagery in Revelation 17 and 18 to describe the world we live in as Babylon, similarly prophesied for judgment (see v 7-8, Rev. 18:17). Isaiah's prophecy has a double time horizon, both true, and we await the second fulfilment.

Heavenly Father, I sometimes wonder if I am so much part of the Babylon world around me that I don't really see the extent of its wickedness. Show me the idolatry around me and within me, so that I can flee it and cling more tightly to you.

Isaiah 48 – Leave Babylon

King Ahaz trusted in politics rather than the LORD and we saw how the LORD delivered Judah for his own sake – while also demonstrating power over the nations (Chapters 7-20). Hezekiah did trust the LORD and saw Jerusalem saved from Assyrian invasion – a clear lesson to Judah to trust in God. But as their rebellion would lead to Babylonian exile, so too God would bring about the downfall of Babylon. Such prophecy was meant to cause Judah to see the spiritual dimensions of their captivity and release (v5-6), to return to covenant peace in obedience (v18-19), escaping the fate of the wicked (v22). Exodus and exile imagery (v20-21) combine also for Christians, all called out of the world (Rev. 18:4).

Living God, I know you have not saved me and united me to Jesus only for me to continue to live in the sinful ways of the world around me. Help me to live as a citizen of your heavenly Jerusalem even while I live in this Babylon, bringing praise and glory to you.

Isaiah 49 – Song 2: Light to the Gentiles

Babylon gets no further mention in Isaiah, and we come to a renewed focus on the people of God. Verses 1-6 are the second ‘servant song’ and again the servant’s identity is enigmatic. He says, “listen to me” (v1), as only the LORD does in Isaiah’s book. Yet he is clearly human too. This divine man is identified in the New Testament as Jesus, the light to the Gentiles (Luke 2:32, Acts 26:33), and v4 can only be truly understood at the cross. The salvation Christ brings is described beautifully in v7-12, ending in worldwide praise (v13). But as the gospel goes global, Jerusalem feels abandoned (v14)! The LORD answers graciously with promise of blessing as the world will honour the land where the saviour trod (v22-23).

Lord Christ, you were despised and abhorred as you became the servant of all, the ransom for many. You are the light of the world, the hope of us all. Thank you for saving me, and for giving me such hope that I yearn to see you as you are: King of kings.

Isaiah 50 – Song 3: Trust the Name of the LORD

The first 3 verses complete the LORD's words to Israel as he answers their complaint of being "abandoned" (49:14). Israel was an unfaithful wife to the LORD, but he never divorced her (v1): Her exile was due to her sin. Verses 4-11 form Isaiah's third 'servant song': Christ was instructed and obedient to the Father (v4-5), even in the face of cruel treatment (v6-7). Christ's face was set on his crucifixion (v7, Luke 9:51), certain of ultimate vindication and victory (v8-9). So the Servant gives us a choice in this dark world: We can fear the LORD, hear the Servant, walk in his light, and trust in the name of the LORD (v10), or light our own pathetic torches and walk by their light all the way to hell (v11).

Lord Jesus, Son of God, your determined obedience in order that I might be saved is humbling to me even as it glorifies you. Teach me to face my obstacles with such trust, ever obedient, ever confident in you.

Isaiah 51 – Wake Yourself Up

Isaiah 50:10 calls us to listen to the Servant and trust in the LORD. This chapter is a resulting dialogue between the LORD and his people. We're to listen and remember Abraham's faith credited to him as righteousness (v1-3); we're to listen and meditate on the LORD's universal dominion (v4-6); we're to listen to the LORD, not taunts of the wicked (v7-8). The people reply by asking the LORD to "wake up" and bring about the promised Messianic era (v9-11, 35:10). He replies with a reminder of who he is: Our Creator, Saviour, and Sustainer (v12-16), and then tells them to "Wake yourselves up" to the fact that their judgment is over, soon to come to their oppressors (v17-23). We're fools not to listen and trust in the God who rules time and space.

Lord God, it's easy to see wickedness in the world and to be overwhelmed by it. Help me to listen to you in your word and to trust you in your world, confident of your goodness, wisdom, grace and righteousness.

Isaiah 52 – Your God Reigns

Again the LORD tells Israel to “wake up,” this time to realise who they are (v1): Though they have known slavery in Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, they remain the LORD’s chosen people. Their sin demeaned the LORD’s name (v5, Romans 2:24), so they are to wake up and know that the LORD is with them (V6). More still, they are to hear the good news of salvation grounded in the universal truth, “Your God reigns!” (v7). So God’s people are to rejoice and be comforted at the LORD’s display of “his holy arm in the sign of all the nations” (v10), and having experienced his salvation we too must purify ourselves in union with Christ (v11-12).

Reigning Lord of all, you have chosen me to be part of your people. Forgive me that I slumber in forgetfulness of your greatness, and too often I dwell in a fog of compromise with sin. You have saved me from that, so please help me to live my salvation and adoption out today.

Isaiah 53 – Song 4: Pierced for Us

The fourth and longest ‘servant song’ runs from 52:13 to the end of Chapter 53. The song has five stanzas. Stanzas 1 and 5 (52:13-15, 53:10-12) both speak of universal victory coming through the Servant’s suffering in the divine purpose of God. Stanzas 2 and 4 (v1-3, 7-9) are more personal, highlighting the nature of the Servant’s suffering, rejection, and submission to death. The song is structured to draw attention to the theological heart, the very centre of the gospel in v4-6: The Servant’s death would provide substitutionary atonement for our sins. By his works, “the punishment for our peace was on him” (v5) – and yet he will live after his anguish (v11). In Acts 8, Philip used this song to proclaim Christ; our own hearts must likewise rejoice to be reminded of Jesus’ saving work in the eternal plans of God.

Lord Christ, your work is simultaneously cosmic and personal. You have accomplished all you set out to do but you did so at terrible cost to yourself. I’m sorry for my sins that caused you the pain of punishment. Lord, help me to live in the light of the future your kingdom is bringing.

Isaiah 54 – Covenant of Peace

Each of the servant songs has been followed by a response from God, and both Chapters 54 and 55 are the response to Song 4. This chapter spells out the blessings to come to God's people as a result of the work of the Suffering Servant: First, Isaiah writes of an explosion of growth (v1-3) such as happened after Pentecost (Acts 2). Second, he writes of the deep love and compassion the LORD has for his people with an intimacy unknown under the Old Covenant. So the "covenant of peace" (v10) is the New Covenant in Christ, utterly unshakeable. Lastly (v11-17), the description of Jerusalem's fortunes is so lofty it must refer in its fullness to the heavenly Jerusalem (v12, Rev. 21:19-21).

Lord Christ, Isaiah wrote that there is no peace for the wicked and yet you have bound me into your covenant of peace. Truly the punishment for my peace was on you, in the Father's will, to bring me into intimacy as a child of God. Saviour, thank you.

Isaiah 55 – Seek the LORD

The growth of God's kingdom in Chapter 54 resulting from Christ's work of atonement in Chapter 53 is now expressed in the gospel call to the whole earth. Since Christ has paid the price of our salvation, we may "buy" without cost and enjoy the fullness of blessing Christ brings us in his "permanent covenant" (v2-3). Such salvation is not by our efforts, but by repentance of sin and faith in his work (v6-7). It must be so, based solely on trust in the LORD whose thoughts and ways are so much higher and fuller and wiser than ours. The LORD's gospel is powerful and brings life to the dead, like rain on dry ground (v10-11). And his gospel is joyous good news for the redemption of God's people and all creation. Such a chapter warms our hearts and fuels our evangelism.

Holy Saviour, we seem so wired to think that we must earn our salvation in some way. Thank you for the clarity of your word, revealing how salvation is all your work from beginning to end. Thank you for bringing life to me, and help me to take your gospel to others.

Isaiah 56 – A House of Prayer for All Nations

The startling, far-reaching implications of the coming Messiah are being spelled out here. The law explicitly excluded eunuchs from approaching the LORD or gathering with his people (Deut. 23:1), and yet here they are promised blessing that outstrips parenthood. Further still, “foreigners” (non-Israelites) who love the LORD will also be able to come to him (V6), and the LORD’s house “will be called a house of prayer for all nations” (v7). This vision of a future blessing to all nations was what enraged Jesus in the temple (Matt. 21:13), since their trade was excluding non-Jews from worship. This makes the salvation of the foreign eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 so beautiful and remarkable: The gospel comes to us all.

Holy God, no-one but Christ has ever approached you in their own righteousness, and yet by grace you enable us to come. My own sin would exclude me, and yet here I am, in your presence, able to call you Father, being heard because I am loved. Lord, thank you.

Isaiah 57 – The Spirit of the Lowly

The theme of peace has been running through these chapters, not least in Song 4 where we read that “the punishment for our peace was on him” (53:4). Here, those who are declared righteous by faith will go to their graves in peace, though the ungodly don’t take that to heart (v1-2). The ungodly will trust in false religion, paganism, and politics (v3-11), but those will prove worthless when finally faced with the LORD (v12-13). Verses 14-21 contrasts (a) the peace that comes to the contrite, repentant sinner who is saved by the gracious condescension of the God who came to save us, with (b) the utter lack of peace that comes to the wicked who refuse God’s grace. Only those at peace with God in Christ now will truly rest in peace in death.

Great Prince of Peace, all I see in the world is turmoil and anxiety. Lord, thank you for reconciling me to God by your substitutionary death. I pray for peace of heart and mind every day, and that the Spirit would keep me in that peace to the very end.

Isaiah 58 – Delight in the LORD

It's tempting and easy to have transactional expectations in our dealing with God. We read, we pray, we attend church, we even do good works – all in expectation of blessing from the LORD as if he is obligated towards us. So Israel wonder in v3 why God has ignored his people's requests despite their outward religious effort in fasting. But the LORD corrects them, pointing out the inconsistency between outward their religion and inward devotion to the LORD (e.g. v4-5). He then teaches us how true goodness flows out from a heart for God, delighting in time spent with him rather than seeing his day as wasted opportunity for other things (v13-14). True religion flows out from this God who saves us. You can't hoodwink the LORD.

Holy Saviour, I know I will spend eternity amazed and awestruck in your presence. I also know that too often I go through the motions of private or gathered worship – to my shame, my loss, and your dishonour. Lord God, Spirit, help me to find ever greater delight in your presence.

Isaiah 59 – His Own Arm Bought Salvation

These chapters are preparing us for the revelation of the Messiah so that we will understand the nature of his salvation for us. The LORD is hardly unable to save (v1), but we must see the sin in ourselves and those around us that robs us of peace (v2-8). Some *do* lament their sinfulness, growling like bears and moaning like doves (v11), and then crucially they confess their sins to the LORD without excuse or defence (v12-13). But repentance alone won't save us – we need saving by God, and so Christ came with decisive aggression to destroy the works of the devil (v15b-18, 1 John 3:8). This is our salvation. And what a salvation it is: No less than the gift of the Spirit to us and his words in our mouths.

Saviour God, Holy Father, I am too quick to defend my sin, to point out extenuating circumstances, to make excuses. Lord I sin, and I choose to sin. Father, forgive me. Thank you for the work of Jesus in my life. Thank you for the Spirit in me.

Isaiah 60 – Everlasting Light and Splendour

The four servant songs (Ch 42, 49, 50, 52-53) had us anticipating a servant who will come to bring salvation to the nations through his own substitutionary death and yet see his own length of days. Entrance into this worldwide, expanding kingdom would not be through religious rites but rather through repentance and faith (Ch 54-59). This chapter could potentially fuel a vision of the kingdom that is too literal and far too small: The language of v17-20 is more reminiscent of the heavenly Jerusalem ushered in by Jesus (see Heb. 12:22-24, Rev. 21:23-26). So the flow of these chapters is building for us a wonderful picture of our Saviour whose death brings atonement and forgiveness, and whose life lights up an eternal kingdom.

Great Saviour Jesus, the kingdom over which you reign is glorious precisely because it is yours. Lord, help me to live the holiness of life that marks your city's splendour, and to keep my eyes forward when the issues of this life loom large.

Isaiah 61 – The Messiah

After reading these verses in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus sat down to teach: “Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled” (Luke 4:16-21). The Father anointed him by the Spirit at his baptism, as the Spirit descended on him like a dove. The Hebrew word for ‘anointed’ is where we get the word ‘Messiah’ so this is a real high point of Isaiah’s book. The Suffering Servant is the Messiah saviour and we are now in the (figurative) “year of the LORD’s favour” until “the day of our God’s vengeance” at Christ’s return (v2). His people will be lifted up in joy to his glory, renewed and restored by his work in us (v3-7), growing more like him in justice, righteousness, and holiness in union with Christ.

Mighty Messiah Jesus, anointed by the Father to bring good news, thank you for this year of favour, this season of mercy and grace. Forgive me my many sins, Lord, and help me to live as someone in union with you in your holy splendour.

Isaiah 62 – Neither Silent nor Still

The words of the Anointed One (Messiah) in 62:10-11 continue into this chapter. He will keep neither silent nor still as he builds his holy city (v1), and so Jesus intercedes for us as he builds his church today (Heb. 12:22-24, Rev. 21:23-26). The promised exaltation of God's people in v2-5 could hardly be higher as we receive new names and splendour as the bride of Christ. But our calling is high too: We are also called to intercede without rest, giving the LORD no rest until his church is built (v6-7). Such intercession is in line with the LORD's own plans to bless his people (v8-9), to call us out of our Babylon world of sin and idolatry (v10), and to have Christ proclaimed in all the earth until he comes in triumph (v11-12).

Interceding Saviour, it is humbling to be reminded that you pray to the Father for us, and that the Father delights in us because we are in you. I pray that the Spirit will ever prompt me to pray for the growth, holiness, and passion of your people as we live in this fallen world.

Isaiah 63 – You, LORD, are our Father

We have rejoiced to read of our Suffering Servant and Messiah saviour whose work has ushered in a new kingdom of peace, though we still await the final outcome at Christ's return. Here, v1-6 show this same Lord having completed the other side of his salvation work – the final judgment on the world on the day of his vengeance (v4, 61:2). As we come to the end of the book, Isaiah first reminds us of the LORD's great love and acts towards his people (v7-14), and then leads Israel in prayer from v15 into the next chapter. Isaiah calls on God to look down on Israel with mercy, as he freely acknowledges how far they have turned. Verse 14 reflects how God gives us over to our sins; only grace *could* save us.

Lord Christ, this portrait of you is majestic and terrifying – a timely reminder of who it is I'm speaking to and who has saved me. You are gracious and faithful, and I thank you that you intervened to soften my hard, unbelieving heart. More, I thank you that I am now a child of God.

Isaiah 64 – Righteous Acts like a Polluted Garment

Isaiah's prayer for Israel continues with a desperate desire to see the LORD doing wonders for his people as he did at the time of the Exodus (v1-4). Yet Isaiah is under no illusions about the nation's sin that has made them so unworthy to be near God (e.g. v6). He confesses their sins without caveat or excuse, knowing that the LORD is right and just in his actions. But Isaiah also knows that God is gracious, that he loves his people, and that he makes and keeps covenants, so in v8-12 he begs for the LORD's compassionate mercy on an undeserving people. After the glorious vision of all that Messiah would bring, Isaiah's lament over Israel's sin is passionate and appropriate. We do well to pray likewise.

Lord Jesus, so often I feel that even my best efforts for you are tainted with unbecoming self-interest and pride. At other times, I linger too long over sinful thoughts. If you counted this against me, I would have no hope. You are my hope, my strength. Forgive me once again I plead.

Isaiah 65 – New Heavens and a New Earth

The LORD answers the prayer of the previous two chapters and it's a key text behind Romans 9-11. In Romans 10:20-21, Paul applies v1 to the Gentiles as the kingdom of heaven is extended worldwide under Christ, but he applies v2 to Israel who rejected his covenantal love (later the Messiah) over and over (v3-7). Yet within Abraham's blood descendants there will always be a remnant saved by faith in Jesus, though unbelievers will remain condemned (v8-12). The difference between believers in Christ and unbelievers irrespective of ancestry is spelled out in v13-16. So Isaiah reveals the spectacular future that God has in store for his believing people: A new heavens and a new earth (v17), eternally secure, joyful, and peaceful in perfect relationship with the LORD (v24).

Wise and holy God, you are to be worshipped and revered for your great patience and perfect justice, your infinite grace and beautiful promises. Saviour, thank you for including me among your people who will one day walk with you on that new earth. Help me to walk with you today.

Isaiah 66 – Peace Like a River

This final chapter is a call to honour the LORD as he truly is: Our Creator and Lord of the whole earth. No manmade temple could hold him (v1), and pagan manmade religions are abhorrent to him (v3). We do well to tremble at his word (v2, 5), since he is as sure to bring about salvation for his people *and* judgment against the wicked as a pregnancy will end (v6-11). His tenderness to his own (v12-14a) is matched by his fury against all unbelievers (v14b-16). The final universal state is spelled out in the vocabulary of Isaiah's time in v18-24: Peace and security with the LORD himself for all his people from all nations in a new Creation, but eternal torment for all others. We choose our destiny in this life.

Great Holy One of Israel, you have promised so much in these words, and yet I know the reality will be bliss beyond imagination. You are life; you are the end of the journey. Gracious God, thank you for Jesus – Immanuel, Suffering Servant, Messiah Lord and Saviour.

