

The background is a lush, painterly landscape. It features rolling green hills with varying shades of green and blue, suggesting depth and light. A winding path or stream cuts through the valley. The foreground is filled with a variety of flowers, including large red poppies, blue lupines, and yellow daisies. The sky is a soft, pale blue with wispy white clouds.

G L O R Y

Advent Devotionals From the Book of Isaiah

GLO RY

Advent Devotionals From the Book of Isaiah

2023

Mountain Brook Baptist Church

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

INTRODUCTION

What does “glory” mean? When we think of glory, perhaps we think of sports accolades, of incredible last-minute, come-from-behind victories. Maybe we think of the “glory years” of days gone by. But the theme of glory—namely, God’s glory—is the current that flows throughout the Old Testament. In its simplest form, “glory” in Hebrew means “heaviness.” There is a weightiness and a significance to God’s presence. In the words of pastor Ray Ortlund, God’s glory “is the fiery radiance of his very nature. It is his blazing beauty.”¹ And in this “blazing beauty” we are reminded that God is not like us. He is Creator; we are created. He is Sustainer; we are sustained. He is Provider; we are provided for. He is our Savior, and we are in need of salvation. He is holy, and other, and set apart, and full of majesty and wonder, and worthy of our worship.

Isaiah is a prophet who is concerned with God’s glory. Throughout the book of Isaiah, the prophet reminds God’s people of their covenant with him, the only true God, calling them to turn from their sin and to choose to trust in the Lord, regardless of the circumstances they might be facing. Isaiah certainly ministers during tumultuous times. A prophet from the kingdom of Judah, Isaiah’s service spans from the days of Uzziah to Hezekiah (740–681 B.C.). He lives to see Assyria exile the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and threaten the Southern Kingdom, Judah, before being overshadowed by another worldly power, Babylon, that will eventually destroy and exile the Southern Kingdom.

This Advent, our focus for our devotional guide will be on the third section of Isaiah, Isaiah 40–66. In the first 39 chapters of his book, Isaiah has reminded God’s people of their covenant with him and warned them of the consequences for breaking this covenant.

¹ Ray Ortlund, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, 237

Yet Isaiah also holds out hope that God has not forgotten his people. Though they will face punishment for their sins, this judgment is for the purpose of restoration and renewal. Isaiah 40-66 is a word of comfort spoken to God's people—that God has not forgotten them, and that they will see the glory of the Lord (40:5), revealed through the Lord's servant.

Ultimately, God's people will come to understand that the glory is in the gore and the agony of a suffering servant who took on the punishment they deserved (Isaiah 53). God's glory will be revealed in this messianic figure who will suffer for our sake, that we might have life and forgiveness and freedom through his name. And Isaiah's scope is worldwide: all the nations of the world will know the glory of this God who saves. Isaiah points forward to the promise that one day God's people will behold his glory face-to-face in his presence forever, as he gathers nations to himself in the new heavens and the new earth and all flesh comes to worship before him (Isaiah 66:23).

Because of these promises, we can hold fast to the hope offered to us through Jesus. Even in times of great suffering, we know that he is with us and has not forgotten us, and that one day we will be in his presence forever where there is no more suffering or shame.

My prayer for us this Advent is that we might behold and experience the wonder of God's glory in a new way, as we meditate on the truths found in Isaiah 40-66 and the good news of a God who has come to be with us in the person of Jesus, the full revelation of God's glory (John 1:14-18).

Amy M. Hirsch

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Advent is my favorite season in the Church calendar. Advent, in Latin, means “coming.” It is a season for preparation, repentance, and renewal as we enter into the expectation and hopes similar of Israel, that God might send a Savior. We Christians wait faithfully for that same Savior, Jesus Christ, to return and make all that is wrong in the world right.

But there have been some Decembers in my life where, I must admit, the grandeur and beauty of the season did not match the state of my heart. Where twinkling lights, beautiful wreaths, and holiday festivities seemed to only exacerbate the ache in my soul—because things were not as they ought to be.

I think the people of Judah would have understood how I was feeling. These words in Isaiah 40 are beautiful and moving. They’re especially meaningful in the immediate context of Isaiah 39, when Isaiah predicts the fall of David’s line, Jerusalem, and Judah to Babylon. God will use Babylon as his instrument to judge his people for their wickedness and idolatry. But in Isaiah 40, Isaiah sets the stage for the rest of his book and peers into the future, speaking a word of comfort to those who are weary, that things will not always be this way. “War and exile and famine and loss and grief will not always be the story for my people,” God says. Moreover, God declares that he himself will come—the God who once seemed far away and removed, in the midst of the people’s sin, will make his presence known again. His glory will be revealed to all flesh.

Are you feeling weary this Advent? Take comfort—perhaps you need this good news as well. It’s not the news that you are capable, or that you are good enough. Instead, it’s the news that you’re not. It’s the news that you are like the grass that withers and the flower that fades. You are frail, and feeble, and a sinner. And yet you have a God who is coming with might and in strength to save, and you have a God who loves you. He is a God who cares for you as tenderly as a shepherd cares for his sheep.

And this isn’t just news for you; this is news worth being shared. We’re called to be heralds of God’s comfort, ready to proclaim this same good news to the rest of the world. Is there someone in your life who needs to hear these words of encouragement today? Remind them of this truth: the God who loves his children is coming to make all things (including our sin) right.

“GOOD ADVENT
NEWS FOR
THE WEARY”

Sunday, December 3

Isaiah 40:a1-11

Amy Hirsch

"THE GOD
WHO COUNTS
THE STARS"

Monday, December 4

Isaiah 40:12-31

Amy Hirsch

I am from western North Carolina and grew up walking outside and beholding the glory of a pitch, black sky, void of ambient light from surrounding cities, lit up by stars. Do you know that scientists don't even really know the number of stars in existence? There are billions of stars that exist in billions of galaxies, and supposedly it would take us thousands of years to actually count them.

The role of God as Creator is foundational to Scripture. In Genesis, we read that God breathed life into what was once void and without form. Throughout the Bible, we are reminded that God alone creates and sustains of life. Here in Isaiah 40:12-31, Isaiah uses these same images to reassure God's people that he is, in fact, able to keep the promises he has made in Isaiah 40:1-11, promises to save, to restore, and to redeem.

Isaiah gives us so many beautiful pictures of God as Creator to remind us of his capability. He is the God who measures the waters in the hollows of his hand (Isaiah 40:12), the God who carries the nations like they are a drop in a bucket (Isaiah 40:15), the God who commands the affairs of men and world rulers for his own glory (Isaiah 40:23). After all God's people had walked through, I can imagine it would have been difficult to hear these words of comfort and really trust that God could keep the promises he was making. Yet Isaiah reminds God's people that the One in whom they trust is unlike any other. He isn't like the idols or the nations that they've served in the past. He is the God who orders time and space and the God who is everlasting.

Billions of stars exist in billions of galaxies—and yet God named them all and knows them all.

The same God who called the stars into existence, who placed them perfectly in the heavens and is intimately acquainted with their ways, is the same God who knows you and loves you. He is the same God who cares for you intimately and knows your deepest struggles. He is the same God who promises to bring his good purposes out of our most painful moments. He is the same God who promises strength to the weary. And he is the same God who is able, for he is the same God who called all things into existence out of nothingness.

For a season of my life, I was fascinated by the British monarchy. I loved the glitz, the glamour, and the intrigue. I even remember waking up very early in the morning as a preteen to watch Princess Diana's funeral on television! As influential as the British monarchy may seem, they are also figureheads; the kings and queens who "rule" are leaders, but many would argue they have no real power.

In Isaiah 41, we are reminded that this is not the case for the Lord. He is the first and the last (Isaiah 41:4), the one who summons world leaders to unknowingly do his bidding (Isaiah 41:2), the one who makes a way in the wilderness and calls streams into existence in the desert (Isaiah 41:18). In other words, he's the opposite of a figurehead. Not only does he rule as leader, but he has all power and all authority. When we glance at the world around us and the affairs of the nations, we can see God's hand at work in the midst of it all—even among those who would deny and oppose him.

In verses 21-24, this God calls a debate between himself and the idols of the nations, who must summon someone to bring them into God's presence, because they have no power—neither to do good nor to do harm. They don't control the future. They don't even know the future! The Lord essentially says they are nothing. All of the idols in this world can never truly satisfy or save, because they are not God.

So what kind of ruler would you want on your side? If you are a "worm" like Jacob (Isaiah 41:14), a word used to describe Israel's inability to save themselves, you need the kind of ruler who isn't just a figurehead—you need the kind of ruler who is really able to save the day and who really cares about you and for you. This, according to Isaiah 41, is our God. He is the God who works in the midst of human history. Yet he is the God who cares for his servant Jacob, the God who made covenant promises with his people, and the God who is faithful and able to keep those promises. He is the God who strengthens those who are weak and upholds them by his righteous right hand. He is the God who promises his presence will go with his people, saying, "fear not ... I am the one who helps you" (Isaiah 41:14 ESV)! And all that he does is for his glory—that the nations might know he is the Lord, the Holy One of Israel—and for our good (Romans 8:28).

"THE RIGHT
KIND OF KING"

Tuesday, December 5

Isaiah 41

Amy Hirsch

"A TALE OF TWO
SERVANTS"

Wednesday, December 6

Isaiah 42

Amy Hirsch

If you've read Isaiah before, you may recall that Isaiah includes prophecies about a servant (the most well-known can be found in Isaiah 52:13-53:12, the passage about the suffering servant). Isaiah 42 is our first introduction to this servant; however, the passage can be a bit confusing, because it seems like Isaiah is talking about two different kinds of servants.

In verses 1-4, the servant is a gentle leader, unlike other world leaders who oppress the downtrodden. He is meek and mild, but make no mistake—he also enacts justice on the earth. He won't rest until all is made right, the way God intended for it to be. But then there's the servant in verses 18-25—and note the contrast! This servant is blind and dumb—although he's witnessed the Lord's redeeming work, such events have had no impact on him. Even though the Lord wanted to make him glorious (Isaiah 42:21), this servant has been plundered and looted because of his own foolishness.

What is going on? Sometimes in Isaiah, "servant" refers to a singular figure—and often this servant is pointing us forward to the coming Messiah, Jesus. But sometimes in Isaiah, the term "servant" is used to refer to Israel, God's chosen people, a nation that was to be holy and set apart as his servants. Here, both servants appear in the same chapter, and where God's servant Israel failed, God's servant the Messiah will succeed. Israel can't live up to her identity as God's servant, and conditions have deteriorated so much that Israel has lost the Promised Land and faces exile because of her sins. But another servant will come who will obey perfectly and fulfill God's plans for his servant Israel. Because of this servant's work, the nations will come to know God's glory in a new way. In light of this good news, God's people must sing a song of praise to him (Isaiah 42:10-17), because he is doing something unlike never before. Not only will he save Israel, but he will call the Gentiles to himself, that they might know him!

These are words of comfort for those of us who realize that, on our own, we can never live up to God's standards. Like Israel we are prone to wander and to sin. But the gospel reminds us that where we fail, Christ has succeeded. Christ has come on our behalf to do what we could never do for ourselves, and because of Christ's coming, we as Gentiles are invited into the fold and into the family of faith. What good news of great joy for all people (Luke 2:10)!

One of the more common commands in Scripture from the Lord to his people is the command “Do not be afraid.” Sometimes this command came in the face of a larger-than-life enemy (Joshua 1:9) and sometimes it accompanied an angelic appearance (Luke 1:13).

Isaiah 43:1-44:5 reminds us that God’s people had plenty of reasons to fear as they faced exile in a land far from home. God tells them they will pass through the waters and the rivers, and they’ll even walk through the fires (Isaiah 43:2), yet God reassures them of his presence even in the midst of the hardship. After all, God reminds them that he has parted the seas before and has given them water in past deserts. And he is the God who will do it again, because he created his people and called them by his name for his glory. He will even redeem them from Babylon and bring them home, that they might declare his praise.

Yet the tone of the passage shifts at the end of Isaiah 43. Even in exile, God’s people have continued to neglect their relationship with him, relying on ritualism rather than on true repentance and burdening God by continuing to sin. They’ve followed in the paths of their ancestors, continuing to stray from God despite his faithfulness to them. As I think of all of the frightening things they must have lived through during this time—war, being taken to a foreign nation, and many forms of loss—sin is the most frightening of all. It was their sin that got them into this situation of exile after all—God chose Babylon as his instrument to punish his people for their unfaithfulness.

Yet the good news is that God is doing something new. Though God’s people have sinned and have no defense for their wrongdoing, God declares that he will blot out their sins for his sake (Isaiah 43:25). God promises a day will come when he will pour out his Spirit on his people (Isaiah 44:3) and give them hearts that recognize his lordship as King (Isaiah 44:5).

We are not promised that we will not walk through hardship and suffering, because the world is a broken place. Additionally, some of the hardship and suffering we will bring upon ourselves is because of our sin. Yet the good news of the gospel is that we have an Advocate in Jesus Christ, who will never leave and never forsake us. As the angels announced to the shepherds that first Christmas night, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11 ESV). He is a Savior who walks with us through the waters and through the fires, and because of his death on the cross, we have no reason to fear.

“DO NOT
BE AFRAID”

Thursday, December 7

Isaiah 43:1-44:5

Amy Hirsch

“INFERIOR
AND SUPERIOR”

Friday, December 8

Isaiah 44:6-20

Amy Hirsch

“Is there really a difference between these more expensive name-brand bagels and the store-brand ones?” I asked my husband recently as we were ordering our groceries. If you talk to my husband, you’ll learn that I like to save pennies here and there where we are able. Sometimes I’m willing to pay less for something that might also be lower quality, whereas my husband’s often-quoted mantra in our house is, “You get what you pay for.” Sometimes (and especially in the case of the bagels) he is right. The store-brand bagels we bought were really more like . . . bread. They lacked chewiness and flavor (and maybe had some mold on them). At the end of the day, they were just inferior to the name-brand bagels they attempted to imitate.

In today’s passage, we are reminded that idol worship will never satisfy us, and idols are always inferior to the Lord, the King of Israel. Isaiah 44:6-20 paints these striking contrasts between the God of Israel and the gods Israel has been choosing to serve. The Lord is the Redeemer. Not only is he the first and the last, but he knows the past (because he orchestrated it) and has intimate knowledge of the future. He holds time in his hands. He is the Rock. He is sure and certain and dependable. He is a God who speaks and reveals himself to his people.

These things are not true of the idols Israel has chosen to worship. They are made by humans, limited beings who grow tired, faint, and weary in the process of idol-making—in contrast to the God of Israel who made heaven and earth, and who rested not because of his exhaustion but as a sign of his work being complete. But it’s not just that idol worship is silly: it’s a danger to God’s people because it leads them astray from following after the one true God, the only one who can satisfy their desires and deliver them from their sins.

Unfortunately, we aren’t that far removed from the Israelites, are we? Even though we may not be creating idols made of wood and stone to physically bow down and worship, John Calvin was right when he said that the human heart is a constant idol-making factory. We take all kinds of things that are inferior to the power and majesty of our Lord, and we want them to be something they simply can’t be. We want them to save us, to give us meaning, to provide hope, to fulfill our longings, and to satisfy our desires. But they simply can’t, because they are inferior.

In this Advent season, where are you putting your trust? Ask the Lord to help you see ways that perhaps you have fallen into the same folly of idolatry that plagued the Israelites, and ask him to help you repent and trust in the One who is superior—in the Creator and Sustainer, in the only One who can save.

In our house, we love books, and we love music. Drew Holcomb and the Neighbors is one of our favorite bands. Also, we've grown to love Ellie Holcomb, especially her children's albums. Her songs are full of truths from Scripture, and they are truths that I hope our kids will cling to and remember in the years to come. She also has several books based on her songs. In *Don't Forget to Remember*, Ellie explains how creation reminds us of God's love and presence with us, encouraging us with this chorus:

*Don't forget to remember you're never alone
No matter if you are up high or down low
And as sure as the sun will keep rising above
Don't forget to remember that you're dearly loved*

As I read today's passage, I kept hearing that song in my head, because in Isaiah 44:21-28, God calls his people to remember the One they serve. Rather than turning to idols (Isaiah 44:9-20), the Lord calls them to remember the One who created them (Isaiah 44:21, 24), forgave them (Isaiah 44:22), and redeemed them (Isaiah 44:22). This is a command we see over and over in Scripture. Why is that God calls us to remember? Because we are a people prone to forget, especially when we are living through tumultuous times like the Israelites would have experienced in exile. Yet in the face of difficulty, rather than dwelling in the "I don't know" of the future, God reminds us to reflect on what we do know to be true about his character and how we have seen him at work.

Yet ... we still forget, don't we? We are sinful, fallen people who are prone to wander, and sometimes it is hard for us to call the truths we know to mind when we are facing circumstances that seem impossible to overcome. Yet the reassurance Ellie Holcomb gives us in *Don't Forget to Remember* is the same we see in Isaiah 44:21: "Even on days you forget what is true, don't forget to remember, God won't forget you."

God didn't forget his people in exile, but sent a deliverer, Cyrus of Persia (Isaiah 44:28), to begin the process to release his people and bring them back home. But even more than that, God didn't forget us in our sin. Hundreds of years later, God would keep his promises and remember his people by showing us his glory and sending a Savior to us, his son Jesus Christ. As Mary sang after her visit with Gabriel, "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever" (Luke 1:54-55 ESV). In this Advent season, remember the truths of God's character and the ways you have seen his faithful hand at work in your life—and take heart, because even if you forget, God will not forget you.

"GOD
DOESN'T
FORGET"

Saturday, December 9

Isaiah 44:21-28

Amy Hirsch

"GOD'S
UNEXPECTED
WAYS"

Sunday, December 10

Isaiah 45

Amy Hirsch

Have you ever watched a movie or read a book with a plot twist that left you with your head shaking, thinking, "Now, I didn't see that coming!" Isaiah 45 features a real plot twist as Isaiah issues a proclamation about a man named Cyrus, whom he calls God's anointed. If you were living in the Ancient Near East at this time, you'd know about Cyrus because he was the leader of Persia, the next big superpower, a kingdom that seemed to be taking over the world—including Babylon, the kingdom that had exiled Judah.

God promised his people he would deliver them from exile in Babylon and return them to the land he promised Abraham and his descendants. But would God really do that through ... Cyrus? Through a pagan king who worships false gods? Wouldn't it be better for God to raise up someone from David's line to lead the people back home? Would God really use someone who doesn't know him (a fact mentioned twice in verses 4 and 5!) to deliver his people?

Well, it turns out that God can—and will—use whomever he wills, for his glory and for the good of his people. As Creator and Sustainer of the world, he can—and will—use even pagan kings and nations for his purposes. He bends their inclinations to his purposes. His plans always come to pass, even with our objections. He is the Potter (Isaiah 45:9-11) and he commands us, not the other way around.

This theme, one of God working in unexpected ways through unexpected people, is one that we find throughout the Bible, isn't it? And even Isaiah 45 hints at a bigger "plot twist" to come for the people of Israel—that through this redemptive work initiated by Cyrus, God will call the nations to himself, that the ends of the earth might be saved (Isaiah 45:22).

And so eventually this prophecy about Cyrus would come to pass, and the people would head home under his leadership, to rebuild the temple under his financial assistance. The temple would be further expanded and renovated under Herod the Great. Then one day, a baby boy would be brought to that temple on his eighth day of life for circumcision (Luke 2:21). And at the sight of this child, a righteous man named Simeon, who had been waiting to see God's deliverance, would exclaim, "My eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32 ESV).

At Advent, we celebrate God's unexpected work in the world for his glory and for our good, made most clear to us through the birth of his son Jesus. This message of salvation would be extended to us Gentiles, that we might be called children of God! He works in unexpected ways, so that we might come to know his glory and goodness.

“AND THEN
THERE WAS
ONE...”

Monday, December 11

Isaiah 46

Ethan McVay

An idol is a physical representation of something we are putting our hope in. If a child believes that their only chance to escape poverty is to make it on to a Major League Baseball team, then he worships the game, but his idols are his glove and bat.

As Israel is taken away into exile, their idols have failed to save them. As they are carried into exile, the idols are carried away too (Isaiah 46:1-2). As the idols are carried off, it proves that these are not gods but are only objects made by men that are now the spoils of war. Idols have failed Israel, and they will fail us. What are you putting your hope in? It could be a job, a status, a possession, or something else. Our idols look different today, but we should listen to God as he asks us, “With whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?” (Isaiah 46:5 NIV). Consider today what you might be idolizing and if it can compare to God.

However, there is hope for Israel because God is not carried off. Instead of being carried into exile, God says that he carries Israel like a father holding their baby (Isaiah 46:3). Even though we are stubborn, God is compassionate towards us. Even when we run from him, he pursues us and works to save us from our situation (Isaiah 46:12-13)!

Holiness means to be separate or different. God is truly holy because there is no one like him (Isaiah 46:8-9). We celebrate his holiness because he is compassionate and kind towards us. During Advent, we look forward to the coming of Jesus, who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6 NIV). Who can compare to him? He is the Holy One who is God and is able to save us from our sin.

CLOSING PRAYER

God, we take time now to admit our hopes and desires that have turned us toward idols and not toward you.

God, thank you for your love for us and your holiness. You alone are able to save us from our sin and redeem us to a loving relationship with you and with all of creation. Create in us celebratory hearts which rejoice in your holiness.

I don't know about you, but I really don't like being cold. Winter is hard for me, because I dread being outside or having to bundle up to go anywhere. I'd much rather pretend that it was spring than face the reality of winter.

Israel had forgotten God and had acted sinfully for generations. They had brought the exile upon themselves. The opening verses of this passage may seem intense, but it is a vivid picture of the pain and disgrace that we can bring on ourselves when we continually follow our own path instead of following the Lord. Like me pretending winter isn't real, Israel had pretended their disobedience wasn't real. However, even in these hurting times, there is hope for Israel to be renewed. Israel can experience blessing in the midst of their winter.

Although the Lord allowed Babylon to defeat Israel, they have been prideful. Babylon assumed their victory was because of their own strength and cunning. Babylon hasn't respected God. Isaiah speaks directly to Babylon in verse 5 and tells them about the destruction their pride will bring on them. Babylon is ignoring their pride like I try to ignore winter.

In the winter, one of my favorite family activities is building a fire. I like to share stories, laugh, and enjoy the warmth. To truly enjoy a fire, I must first face the reality of the cold winter weather. To experience the goodness of Christ at Christmas, we must first face the cold reality of our sin.

Both God's own people and the nation of Babylon are experiencing the consequences of their sin. Like Israel, where is the pattern of disobedience in your life? How can you turn towards the Lord in that area instead? Like a fire during winter, exposing your sin to God will allow him to warm and comfort you. Like Babylon, how have you become prideful? What achievements or duties are you putting your worth in? What would it look like to turn your pride into thankfulness to God?

ACT OF CONFESSION

Listen to the song "Take My Heart with Altar Fire" by Advent Birmingham. Pay attention to the lyrics, consider looking them up and reading through them.

CLOSING PRAYER

God, we take time now to face our sin that we would rather ignore, and we confess it to you. Oh Lord, take away our love of sinning; straighten every bent desire. Fix our soul upon your promise; warm our hearts with altar fire.

"FACING THE REALITY OF WINTER"

Tuesday, December 12

Isaiah 47

Ethan McVay

“GLORY
FROM
PROPHECY”

Wednesday, December

13 Isaiah 48:1-11

Ethan McVay

Have you ever predicted how a movie or book will end? One of my favorite genres is mystery. I delight in whodunits, cunning detectives, red herring clues, and a grand reveal! It is common for a mystery to end and for someone to claim, “I knew it was the butler!” Among my friends, we’ve decided that it isn’t impressive and it doesn’t matter if you make your claim at the end of the mystery. If you want credit for predicting the mystery, you must make your claim as early as possible!

Prophecy works in a similar way. God reveals what will happen in advance, so that when it happens, he will get the credit and the glory (Isaiah 48:3-6). Let’s look at three prophecies God made and how he fulfilled them, and then respond by praising him for both his accurate prediction and his power to make it happen.

God revealed his nature to Israel and predicted their path of disobedience before it even happened. God even predicted this disobedience would lead them to ultimately be exiled from the land he had given them (Deuteronomy 28:36-37).

This is not where the story ends. God has also predicted renewal for Israel. Even after their generations of disobedience, they will be restored to their land. God knew a portion of his people would turn back to him and begin to worship him again, and he promised to restore these people and heal them (Deuteronomy 30:1-4). Fulfilled prophecies provide proof that God is who he says he is.

But now, Isaiah says that God is declaring something new, he is making a new prediction (Isaiah 48:6b-7). In the coming chapters, Isaiah will declare God’s prophecies about the coming Messiah. During Advent we often read these prophecies about the coming of Jesus. When we celebrate Christ’s coming we will declare glory and wisdom and power and salvation belong to God because he foretold, and has now delivered our savior.

I challenge you to listen for prophecies as we continue towards Christmas. When you hear them respond by remembering God’s power and wisdom and praising him for his strength and salvation.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, we take time now to anticipate your coming during this Advent season. Help us Lord, to remember your promises and words to us. Focus our minds and hearts on your character. Lead us to rejoice and give you praise for your prophecies and your fulfillment.

During high school, I remember my favorite football team had made it to the national championship game. I went to my next door neighbor's house and we watched the game while eating buffalo chicken dip and drinking Sprite. In the last minute, our team was ahead and the room fell silent as we watched the clock slowly tick down to zero. The silence was shattered as we roared and yelled. The house couldn't contain us as we burst out into the night air and continued our shouts for the whole neighborhood to hear. We were excited, and we wanted everyone to know: our team had won the national championship!

God hopes that his people will roar and holler at the statement he has made: they are free from Babylon (Isaiah 48:20). Can you imagine being given your life back after 70 years of slavery? Can you imagine returning home after 60 years of exile? The celebration would be bigger than any national championship we've seen!

Believe it or not, God wasn't only giving them this incredible freedom from Babylon, he gave them a deeper and better freedom as well. God reminds his people of the commandments he had given them and the covenant relationship that they share with him (Isaiah 48:17-19). Their freedom from Babylon is the first step in restoring them to a healthy relationship with God where they follow his commandments and enjoy the full benefits of his blessing.

Now this is a freedom worth celebrating, for the Israelites and for us. Sin takes away our ability to be in relationship with God and it gives us hurt and brokenness instead of blessing. After our sin and rebellion, God has freed us from our sinful and broken state to allow us to be in relationship with him again and experience the full life which he offers us. Take time to celebrate.

As the beloved carol puts it, "Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere. Go, tell it on the mountain: that Jesus Christ is born."²

CLOSING PRAYER

God, we take time to celebrate you today.

It is for freedom that you have set us free. Help us to celebrate your freedom and to avoid taking on the yoke of slavery again.

"A FREEDOM WORTH CELEBRATING"

Thursday, December 14

Isaiah 48:12-22

Ethan McVay

² John Wesley Work Jr., "Go Tell It on the Mountain"

"THE SERVANT
OF THE LORD"

Friday, December 15

Isaiah 49:1-7

Ethan McVay

Although the people of Israel are still suffering in exile, God speaks a word of comfort to them by announcing the coming of his servant who will bring salvation to Israel and to the world. The people of Israel can look forward to the arrival of this servant and be comforted that the Lord is sending someone who is both strong and compassionate to save them.

The servant of the Lord is a key figure in Isaiah and is worth further study. Although the title is used throughout the book to reference Israel as a people, in specific sections Isaiah begins to identify a servant of the Lord who is unique. Like Isaiah 42, today's passage is a servant song, where the servant of the Lord is an individual within Israel who is distinct from the larger nation. This servant is a messianic figure who represents and embodies Israel in the way a king does and will expand his rule to the whole world.

It is through this servant that the nation of Israel will be saved and "gather Israel back" to God himself (Isaiah 49:5). However, it is too small of a task for this servant to only save Israel—he will offer salvation to the whole world (Isaiah 49:6)! This is good news for Israel and good news for us. This servant will fulfill Israel's purpose to be a light to the nations and teach them to have relationship with God. How will this servant bring this salvation? How can a servant defeat the armies that have overpowered and exiled Israel? God has made his servant into both a sword and an arrow, equipping him to defeat enemies both near and far. His weapon is the truth which he proclaims from his mouth. Surprisingly, the servant will bring salvation and victory through suffering (Isaiah 52:14-15).

We can find great comfort in the coming of Jesus and in the faithfulness of God. Like Israel waited for the Servant of the Lord to appear, we anticipate the celebration of Jesus' birth during the

Advent season. We long for a savior who will defeat the enemies, sin and death, who have taken our freedom and our joy. This passage also reminds us of God's great faithfulness to his people. He is steadfast in his compassion towards us. He is constant and upholds all his good promises to us.

CLOSING PRAYER

In prayer, we praise God and give him glory. Celebrate God's faithfulness today by prayerfully reading aloud (or singing!) these words from the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness."

*Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow:
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!
Great is thy faithfulness!
Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed thy hand hath provided:
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!³*

³ Thomas Chisolm, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"

“GOD WILL
NEVER FORGET
YOU”

Saturday, December 16

Isaiah 49:8-26

Mary Splawn

Where are you, God? Have you forgotten me? Are you asleep? Why are you hiding from me? These are all phrases spoken by God's people in the Bible. They are provocative questions. Questions we wonder if we should even be asking. But, they are honest prayers of God's people in seasons of doubt when circumstances seem to indicate that God is not in control or that he is not there.

These are questions the exiles in Babylon posed to the Lord, having been taken from their homes, their families, and their beloved nation as a punishment for the nation's abandonment of the law of the Lord.

And, yet, in this passage, the Lord speaks words of hope over those who feel forgotten. Our God compares his unforgetting love to that of a mother for her child. He says, “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast?” (Isaiah 49:15 NIV). While he admits that even the relationship between mother and child can fail by saying “though she may forget,” he states emphatically, “I will never forget you!” (Isaiah 49:15 NIV).

The Lord's never-forgetting love transcends even earth's purest form of love, a mother for her hungry child. His is a love that never gives up, never runs dry, is always pursuing, and is constantly at work. This love is most clearly seen in Jesus, who gave his life and has nail-scarred hands that remind us all of his devotion. (See a hint of this in verse 16.) It is a love that will be fully consummated when Jesus returns to make all things new!

Until that time, God's people will see glimpses of his remembering love. God takes desolate, barren lands and makes them fruitful again. God takes those who have been enslaved to their passions and addictions and restores them. He redeems and saves. This Advent season, let us hold fast to the truth that God's love is forever, and he will never forget his children!

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, be near to the broken-hearted, confused, and doubtful. Help us to trust in your unfailing love, even when we cannot understand our circumstances. Thank you for becoming one of us, understanding our experience, and loving us so much that you died in our place. We give you praise for you never forget us. Come quickly Lord Jesus. Amen.

My aunt tells the story of my grandma often waking her up early on Saturday mornings to the tune of “Rise and shine and give God the glory!” And, let me just tell you, my grandma was tone-deaf but very passionate about the Lord!

What is the first thing you hear each morning? Maybe you hear the alarm clock, the dogs barking, or the pitter patter of little feet coming down the hallway.

In today’s passage, which is named the third Servant Song (Isaiah 50:4-9), we see that what the Messiah hears first is the voice of the Lord. Look back at verse 4. The servant says, “He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed” (Isaiah 50:4 NIV). As he hears the voice of God, the passage says that then he can speak with a “well-instructed tongue.”

The passage goes on to hint about what Jesus hears—a message that he will suffer at the hand of his accusers. Sit with me for a minute and think about the gravity of that message. It’s not one I would want to hear, and yet our Savior willingly obeys the voice of the Father and proclaims the truth that God will be his help whatever comes.

In this busy season, this passage challenges us to emulate our Savior and seek to listen to God. What is he proclaiming over you? How is he instructing you from his word? What comfort is he providing in the midst of suffering? How is he calling you to follow him regardless of the cost? And then, when we listen to God, we can be like Jesus, rising and shining to the glory of God the Father.

CLOSING PRAYER

Today Lord, we ask you to put a song in our hearts. Help us to seek you throughout the day and learn to walk in the way of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

“RISE
AND SHINE”

Sunday, December 17

Isaiah 50

Mary Splawn

"SUN'S OUT,
GUNS OUT"

Monday, December 18

Isaiah 51

Mary *Splawn*

When our son was little, he loved to wear cut-off sleeves in his t-shirts. He thought it made him look cool. When he'd flex his muscles, we'd say, "Sun's out, guns out!" meaning his powerful arms could be used as weapons.

As silly as that is, Isaiah says something very similar about God. Look at the middle of verse 9: Clothe yourself with strength! Flex your mighty right arm!

In this verse, the exiles remind God of a time long ago when he flexed his muscles against the Pharaoh in Egypt, and they ask God to wake up to the situation at hand!

We read this and cringe a bit, feeling the tension between respectful language and raw emotion. The people in exile found it hard to be comforted. They wanted to see God wrestle down the enemies. And, as they waited, they found it hard to remain hopeful.

That's why God sent them a prophet to encourage them along. He reminded them of God's character as merciful and strong and his position as Creator and Sustainer. He implored them to wait in hope for the strong arm of the Lord to be revealed (Isaiah 51:5).

Perhaps you or someone you know needs that same kind of encouragement this Advent season ... the encouragement to remember the power and unfailing love of the Lord.

As we await the Savior's birthday, may we also wait in hope for God to win the victory in areas where we don't see his power on display just yet. May the words of this passage encourage us: "The LORD will comfort Israel again and have pity on her ruins. Her desert will blossom like Eden, her barren wilderness like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found there. Songs of thanksgiving will fill the air" (Isaiah 51:3 NLT).

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, you call us to listen to the hopeful message in this passage. Help us to hear your voice, head your instruction, and encourage others in faith. We know you are in the work of redemption and restoration. Please make our desert lands into lush gardens for your glory and our good. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray, Amen.

Have you ever been so overwhelmed by hurt or grief that you found it difficult to receive any comfort? In Isaiah 52:1-12, God's people are in the midst of oppression, suffering, and humiliation. While in their pain, they have lost sight of God's comfort and power. Have you ever found yourself there? Left feeling discouraged and alone in your suffering? Even during the joyous holiday season this may be our current experience. Understandably, in those moments it is hard to find comfort, but we must remind ourselves of God's promises.

This is exactly what the speaker is doing for God's people in this passage. He exhorts them to wake up to the reality of God's comfort. They are not alone in their pain. God himself is their strength and their protector, and his salvation is promised because he reigns! He encourages them, "Shake [themselves] from the dust and arise [...] loose the bonds from [their] neck" (Isaiah 52:2 ESV). Their oppressors do not have victory over them. God is in control. He both promises and accomplishes victory over all. He "will go before [them]," and he "will be [their] rear guard" (Isaiah 52:12 ESV).

This truth is what should turn God's people to their true source of comfort in the midst of suffering. And this same truth applies to us today. God is always with us, even in the midst of our hurt and pain. And he has promised that he will never leave us, even if it feels like he has. Our greatest comfort is God's very presence, which is neither abstract nor far from us. God's presence, and therefore his comfort, are an accessible reality for us as his people—we need only remind ourselves of that reality and turn to him. He is there to give us strength, peace, and remind us of his promises. God offers us hope and assurance that he will deliver us from our suffering. And one day, God "will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore" (Revelation 21:4 ESV). This is God's promise and our ultimate hope, which we will soon read that he achieves through Christ. So, "awake, awake" to God's ever-present comfort and our everlasting hope!

"AWAKE,
AWAKE!"

Tuesday, December 19

Isaiah 52:1-12

Fallen Farley

“GLORY IN
SUFFERING”

Wednesday, December 20

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Fallon Farley

In today’s passage, Isaiah announces how God plans to bring about his salvation. And it is not what his people expect. On the heels of the passage that we read yesterday, where the people were encouraged and comforted by God’s strength and protection, comes this messianic prophecy of a suffering servant. The Lord’s servant will be exalted, but not before he is marred, despised, rejected, pierced, and crushed.

How could that at all reflect God’s glory and honor?... Because it was for you and for me. The glory and honor of the servant’s suffering is found in its very purpose: he did it for our transgressions, for our iniquities, to heal us and to account us as righteous. While Isaiah’s audience did not understand this prophecy at the time, we who know Jesus Christ today have come to understand its fulfillment. Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross was, in the words of Dr. Allen Ross, “vicarious in a way that no other has or ever could be—he took our sins on himself and made full atonement for them.”⁴ While perfectly innocent and undeserving of death, Jesus took on the punishment that we deserve. His death was not only unjust, but it was one of horrible bloodshed, agonizing pain, and utter humiliation. And he endured all of it without opening his mouth—“like a lamb that is led to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7 ESV). Jesus knew full well the purpose of his suffering, and he willingly submitted himself to it for our sake, so that we might have salvation through him. He knew that this was the only way, therefore he endured—nothing else would suffice. There is no reconciliation with God apart from Jesus’ suffering on the cross. Our souls are not healed, our sins are not removed, and we are not justified before the Lord without Christ crucified. God’s glory and honor is most revealed in the self-sacrificial love of his Son.

Through Jesus’ work on the cross, we have been given eternal life. This is the hope we can cling to as believers! Jesus came to achieve for us what we never could. So, as we celebrate the coming of our Savior this Advent season, remind yourself of why he came, and ask the Lord to help you give him all the glory and honor that he is due. May our hearts be further moved to humility and gratitude in light of his love for us.

⁴ Allen Ross, “19. The Triumph of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 52:13—53:12),” Bible.org, accessed October 15, 2023. <https://bible.org/seriespage/19-triumph-suffering-servant-isaiah-5213-5312>.

Isaiah 54 moves our focus from suffering to glimpses of future blessings. This chapter anticipates the salvation and restoration of God's people through the promises of the new covenant. God's plans for his people with the new covenant will far exceed that of the old. This new covenant will multiply God's people and spread to other nations outside of Israel (verses 1-3), it will restore God's people in peace and in sure security (verses 4-10), and it will renew them to their original purpose with the promise of divine protection and victory (verses 11-17).

In verse 10 we see the very nature of these blessings: God's loyal love and God's covenant of peace will remain with his people. "The mountains may depart and the hills be removed," but this new covenant will outlast them both (Isaiah 54:10 ESV). God's new covenant of peace is an eternal covenant that is based on him alone. Out of his merciful character and his love for us, God's people are able to receive and share in these promises.

As believers today, we know that this new covenant was inaugurated through the coming of Christ. Jesus was the grand fulfillment of God's "new" plans for his people. Being on this side of Christ, all the more are we able to take hold of and live into these promised blessings, which "[are] the heritage of the servants of the LORD" (Isaiah 54:17 ESV). As followers of Christ, part of our inheritance, even now, is peace, security, righteousness, protection, and victory!

At times, it may not feel like this rings true for our lives, but this is our shared reality in Christ. He has redeemed us and renewed us to himself, and we will not be put to shame. His love and covenant will not depart from us. These promises are our hope both now and for the future. Ultimately, these promises will come to their perfect manifestation when Christ returns in his full glory and establishes his kingdom completely. On that day, the whole world will know of the Lord's victory, and as his people, we will behold his glorious presence forever. But until then, we are to live as God's holy servants and be ever-growing in the evidence of these promises in our lives.

"ALREADY/NOT
YET PROMISES"

Thursday, December 21

Isaiah 54

Fallon Farley

“COME
TO HIM”

Friday, December 22

Isaiah 55

Sharon Howard

One of our memory verses for kids is Psalm 119:11: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (NIV).

When I read Isaiah 55, I am reminded of the gift that we have when we spend time with the Lord and know the hope that we have in Jesus.

Isaiah 55:1 begins with “Come.”

No matter what is happening in your world, come! There is a Savior waiting to fill you with what you need. We often are like the Israelites grumbling and searching when we have the peace that we need. We must step back and remember God’s faithfulness and how he has provided for us. No matter our sin, he is faithful. He never leaves us or forsakes us.

“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near” (Isaiah 55:6 NIV).

We need to constantly seek the Lord. Spend time with him. Allow him to direct our paths.

FOLLOW GOD’S PLAN

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.” (Isaiah 55:8 NIV)

We are much like the Israelites—out of sight, out of mind. We forget what God has done for us. We forget that when we have a relationship with Jesus, we have the peace and promise to live forever with him. We have who we need. Spending time with the Lord is a gift. Our prayer should be to strive to have the same thoughts as the Lord. We need to hide God’s word in our heart!

Come, seek, follow!

“You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.” (Isaiah 55:12 NIV)

When we seek the Lord, we will have the peace and joy that only our Savior can provide. We have hope, because God loved us so much that he sent Jesus to die for our sins. God kept his promise to his people to provide a way. When we trust Jesus as our Savior, we will live with him forever and ever. Be joyful this Advent season.

CLOSING PRAYER

Dear God, we want to come, seek, and follow you. Give us the joy and peace that only you can provide. Thank you for providing us a way to live forever with you by trusting Jesus as our Savior.

“NO CAVEATS
NEEDED”

Saturday, December 23

Isaiah 56

Mark Rector

One of life’s greatest cliché’s is “nothing is ever as good as it seems.” In many respects, this is true. I remember waking up one Christmas morning as a kid and receiving a nice, new basketball that I had asked for. After my family finished opening presents, I went down to shoot my new basketball in the goal in the driveway. Within a couple minutes, a fully pumped-up, brand new basketball had almost completely deflated. As I inspected the new ball, I noticed a small nail had lodged itself in the ball and torn enough of the cover in the process that the ball was beyond repair. Disappointed, I realized that this nice, new basketball was not as good as I thought it was.

As we turn our attention to our passage for today, I simply want to ask: who or what is good enough for you? While the book of Isaiah speaks to, and of, the wayward, sinful Israelites, it also speaks to the abounding hope we have in God. Our hope is based, not on a wish, but on the sure promises of God. So much of life seems to not go how you and I would ideally want it to go. Sometimes, life even disappoints us to the point that we lose hope and confidence in the people, places, and things around us. Isaiah 56 paints a picture of hope for all people. Such a picture is more than good enough for you, me, and all people who would call on the name of the Lord.

Amidst their sin, God continues to call the Israelites to justice, righteousness, the Sabbath (rest), and goodness (verses 1-2). “Blessed is the one who does this,” is the joyous promise we receive when we live in obedience to God (Isaiah 56:2 NIV). And here’s the point Isaiah wants us to hear loud and clear: such a joyous promise has no caveats. It is available for all; God gives himself fully and bestows a name to those “better than sons and daughters” (Isaiah 56:5 NIV). For Isaiah, God is in the business of always bringing people in and not casting them out (verse 8).

For God, this promise of gathering in all people is firm and steady. Such a firm and steady promise is good news in every way. It does not disappoint, and it is better than we could hope for or imagine. I encourage you today to hold onto this hope we have as you remember our Savior, Jesus, coming to make this hope as real as it gets in his coming to earth as a humble, lowly infant.

“PAYING
ATTENTION”

Sunday, December 24

Isaiah 57:1-13

Mark Rector

Through the words of the prophets, God often speaks harshly to his chosen people, the Israelites. Rebuke, judgment, and condemnation are typical in prophetic literature because, more than anything, God wants to get the Israelites' attention. As you think back, maybe there is (or was) a look a parent, teacher, or coach gave you that would grab your attention. My mom had a look that she would give to me as a kid that let me know she's not messing around!

In Isaiah 57, God grabs the Israelites' attention by exposing their spiritual unfaithfulness. They mock the Lord, stick out their tongues, and rebel (verse 4). The Israelites “burn with lust” and murder their children (verse 5). They have turned to false gods and idols (verses 9, 13). Isaiah reminds the Israelites over and over again how they continue to fall into the same patterns of sin of which they seemingly cannot escape.

It is easy to read this passage or others like it and either (1) skip ahead, knowing that God *does* relent, extend compassion, and offer forgiveness or (2) become overwhelmed to the point of despair. I believe God grabs the Israelites' and our attention by painting the reality of our situation. As the late Tim Keller said, “the gospel is this: we are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, but we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”⁵ When Christ entered our world in the form of a helpless babe, the reality of our situation changed forever. The great Christmas hymn “O Little Town of Bethlehem” says it best: “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”⁶

I pray that you will take heart this Christmas Eve, knowing and believing the Lord will continue to pursue us even in our sin as we behold the beauty and mystery of God coming to earth for us in Jesus Christ.

⁵ Matt Smethurst. “50 Quotes from Tim Keller,” thegospelcoalition.org, accessed October 18, 2023. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/50-quotes-tim-keller/>

⁶ Phillips Brooks, “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

"CHRISTMAS
CONTRITION"

Monday, December 25

Isaiah 57:14-21

Mark Rector

Merry Christmas! What a joy this day is as we remember and celebrate the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ. As joyous of a day as this might be for so many, I cannot also help but remember those that are having trouble experiencing joy this Christmas season. Perhaps it's the loss of a loved one or maybe it's an estranged or difficult relationship that weighs particularly heavy on you right now. It could be the pressure of work or performance that lead to fear and anxiety. Or, perhaps, with all of the busyness we associate with the Christmas season, you are burned out, exhausted, and ready to move into the new year and a relative sense of normalcy. Wherever you are spiritually, emotionally, and physically today, I pray Christ's coming and birth would give you peace, rest, and a renewed strength of purpose in the days ahead.

Contrition: It's not a word that is often used in our everyday vocabulary. And surprisingly enough, the Hebrew word for "contrite" here in Isaiah 57:15 is used only in two other places in Scripture: Psalms 34:18 and 90:3. If you were to read those two verses, you'd notice the idea of contrition has to do with a "crushed spirit" and "ground into dust" (NIV). Contrition is just that. It is our acknowledgement of our crushed spirits beaten into dust before God.

In Isaiah 57:14-21, God makes it clear through the prophet that there is indeed a way through the grip of sin, rebellion, and brokenness. The starting point is contrition—coming to the place where you see, feel, and believe there is no other place to go except to the Lord who does "not accuse them forever, nor will [he] always be angry" (Isaiah 57:16 NIV). He instead heals and guides them and "restores comfort to Israel's mourners," "creating praise on their lips" and "peace to those far and near" (Isaiah 57:18, 19 NIV).

Isaiah 57:14-21 makes clear our contrite hearts lead to ultimate, heavenly comfort. What a miracle it is that the "high and exalted One" took the form of an infant to make a way for his people (Isaiah 57:14, 15 NIV). Merry Christmas, and praise be to God!

Frequently in prophetic literature, we as readers walk into the middle of a conversation God has with his people. It's like walking up to a group and seeking to join the conversation. Generally, you have to listen for at least a couple minutes to figure out what the group is talking about, and then you have to do your best to discern what has and has not already been discussed should you engage in the conversation yourself. In Isaiah 58, we as readers are listening into a conversation the Lord is having with the Israelites about the true meaning of fasting. As you read Isaiah 58, you can almost picture the Israelites gathered around the Lord listening to the ways they have erred in their fasting.

The Lord makes it clear the Israelites' intentions were (mostly) good. They sought the Lord and were eager to know his ways. They even pursued justice, sought his presence, and went so far as to fast (verse 2). The problem was the Lord did not notice because of the way the Israelites were treating their workers and servants (verse 3). In effect, God tells the Israelites their practice of fasting means nothing without a truly repentant heart that seeks to serve and sacrifice for the sake of others.

God does not rebuke the Israelites' fast without giving them concrete instruction for what it should look like. Verses 6-10 catalog the ways the Israelites should serve and truly love others as God intended. The most fascinating part of this passage to me is the conclusion in verses 11-14. Once we realize true fasting is not about giving up something for the sake of our spiritual or personal growth, but about changing and realigning our ways in view of the Lord's holiness, then we will be the kind of people who experience strength, satisfaction, nourishment, and joy in the Lord.

The best part about the Christmas season is that we have the privilege of lifting one another up. Whether it's giving a gift, hosting a holiday gathering, or providing a meal for someone, we are called to lift each other up and bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). The world tells us it is all about us and what we can get, but I pray you will remember that God in Christ lifted us all up as he came to the lowly manger.

"TRUE
FASTING"

Tuesday, December 26

Isaiah 58

Mark Rector

"THE
SIN CYCLE"

Wednesday, December 27

Isaiah 59:1-13

Mark Rector

Isaiah 58-59 are closely connected. Through Isaiah, the Lord declares what will happen when the Israelites honor the Lord and keep the Sabbath: they will find joy (Isaiah 58:13-14). Sadly, we're right back to square one in Isaiah 59: "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. For your hands are stained with blood and your fingers with guilt" (Isaiah 59:2-3 NIV).

Furthermore, the Israelites have lied and spoken maliciously against others (verse 3) and still no one cares about true justice (verse 4). They multiply evil (verse 5), "rush into sin" (verse 7 NIV), and walk crooked roads (verse 8). Throughout Scripture, we as readers see the cycle of sin repeat itself. The Israelites (and we) sin, the consequences of sin surface, and restoration and forgiveness are offered. The question that faces us is this: will we repent, delight in the Lord, and commit to changing our ways, or will we remain stuck in the "sin cycle?"

The beginning of Isaiah 59 is tough reading; much of it is doom and gloom. Isaiah 59:1, though, is the key, I think. "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear (NIV)." In God, there is always potential for salvation, rescue, and redemption. It is this potential that should lift our hearts and minds even though we may be stuck in the "sin cycle." There is no place the Lord cannot reach you and bring you in; nowhere can the Lord not hear your voice. As the prophet Joel said, "and everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved" (Joel 2:32 NIV). Call on the name of the Lord, and believe in the gospel of Jesus, for he alone is the one that can release you from the "sin cycle."

Christmas is a truly joyous time, marked by reunions with family and friends, the receiving of thoughtful gifts, the resonance of nostalgic music, and the indulgence in some of the best food of the year. These experiences bring us such warmth and happiness. However, for many individuals, the Christmas season carries a tinge of sorrow. Amidst these particularly cheerful moments, we often find ourselves yearning for those we've lost, dwelling on regrets, or grappling with fractured relationships. The weight of these emotions can become overwhelming. Even when December 26 arrives, these sentiments may persist, allowing bitterness, loneliness, and depression to erode our sense of warmth. Consequently, the already chilly months become colder, and challenges appear even more arduous. This season, which is intended to usher in joy and hope, can sometimes leave us feeling despondent and hopeless.

This is where we find the people of God at the beginning of Isaiah 59. They battle with sorrow and a sense of lostness due to the separation from God caused by their own sin. Verse 11 says, "We all growl like bears; we moan mournfully like doves. We look for justice, but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away" (Isaiah 59:11 NIV). It is so easy to find ourselves in this state. Yet, our God is the God who sees. He sees us amidst our iniquity and extends compassion toward our brokenness. He is our comforter and the restorer of justice and peace. As the chapter unfolds, we witness God equipping himself for battle: "He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak" (Isaiah 59:17 NIV). He fights for the restoration of his people to himself, liberating them from their shame and guilt, and releasing them from the clutches of sorrow.

When our heavenly Father sent his Son to us, he bestowed upon us a wellspring of hope. As we celebrate the birth of our Savior, we can hold steadfast in the belief that, in his perfect timing and through his sovereign will, he will mend what is shattered. As this Christmas season comes to a close, let us entrust our burdens to the Lord, for he loves us deeply and sees us for who he has made us to be.

"EL ROI
(GOD WHO
SEES)"

Thursday, December 28

Isaiah 59:14-21

Micaiah Kelly

"THE LIGHTING
OF THE WAY"

Friday, December 29

Isaiah 60

Micaiah Kelly

What is the worst part of the Christmas season? As someone who loves the spirit of Christmas, I would have to say the end. As a kid, I always hated taking our Christmas tree down. I would always petition for it to stay, but the time would come when the needles would turn brown and the tree had to go. My job was putting the ornaments away. I would have to go down to the basement, get all of the boxes, and haul them back up the stairs, marking the symbolic conclusion of Christmastime. One year, the light bulbs in the basement died. In the pitch darkness, ignorant of a better solution, I clumsily navigated around, searching for the ornament boxes. I inadvertently bumped into nearly everything until my dad arrived and handed me a flashlight. That's when I saw that there was a clear path to the boxes.

Isaiah 60 opens with Isaiah proclaiming, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you" (Isaiah 60:1 NIV). He then describes what the light will reveal: God's divine plan. God reveals to Isaiah the plan with which he will renew the earth and restore humanity to himself. Similar to how my dad guided my way with a flashlight, our heavenly Father has provided us with a guiding light. He has bestowed upon us the light of the world—Jesus—who came to extend love, healing, and forgiveness.

In the wake of the celebration of Jesus' birth, we can now anticipate the unfolding of this plan, wherein every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. Every tear will be tenderly wiped away, and every voice will sing "holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." Through the sacrifice of Jesus, we are made righteous in the sight of God. Although the Christmas season will inevitably draw to a close, the radiance of Christ's light remains undiminished and shines on each of us to light our path in the way of righteousness.

“I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations” (Isaiah 61:10-11 NIV).

I encourage you to find somewhere private and quiet. Take five minutes to meditate and reflect on this year.

Where can you now see the hand of God guiding you where you could not see it in the moment?

Take another five to consider the coming year.

What burdens, frustrations, and brokenness can you give the Lord in 2024? As you pray this prayer, I embolden you to pray aloud.

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, I come to you filled with adoration. Your goodness and mercies are never ending. I will extol you, Lord, because you lift me up. I feel the warmth of your gaze and find comfort in your steadfastness. Though you are faithful, Lord, I am not. I seek after things that do not honor you. I have knowingly chosen to sin against you. I have put other things before you. What wondrous love and mercy you have for me! Although you know all of my wicked thoughts and evil deeds, you have turned them for your good and glory. I thank you, Lord, because though my sin is great, your love is greater. You have blessed me in ways I could never have asked for. Now, I ask that you would take my love of sin away and replace it with the desires of your own heart. Be the center of my life in 2024. Restore my soul to you, so that I may walk in your light. Take joy in the good deeds of your servant and redeem me from sin. I pray these things in the name of Jesus, Amen.

“RETURNING
TO THE SECRET
PLACE”

Saturday, December 30

Isaiah 61

Micaiah Kelly

"TRANSFORMATION"

Sunday, December 31

Isaiah 62

Joel Burks

As I was reading Isaiah 62, the image popped into my head of a proud father. I always loved experiencing my father's pride and receiving his affirmation following my school theater performances! I mean, that has got to be one of the best parts of parenthood, right? Getting to watch this growing human being, who is like a tiny version of you, accomplish something great. Of course, there is another side to the parenthood coin: the discipline side. I must have been punished more often than the average child because of my headstrong nature. My father, God bless him, often found himself coming home to a discontent mother and a son in need of discipline. To this day I can remember my father sitting down and comforting me after he was done punishing me. He would even encourage me saying that I could do better in the future. These moments of discipline were necessary, because they were the catalyst for my transformation. It was these moments that would help me become a man he could be proud of.

Isaiah 62 paints a picture for the reader that expresses God's delight in his people all the while not ignoring the transformation that has taken place. It is hard to miss God's joy in the beginning of the passage. We read about how God's people are like a beautiful scepter and a crown in his hand (verse 3). God even sings and rejoices over his people. Israel is new. They are something to behold!

God is not the only one, however, who notices Israel; they are also seen by the Gentiles. Other kings would see Jerusalem's glory. The drastic transformation will grab their attention: while Israel was once desolate, this will no longer be the case. In truth, part of the transformation was the rebuilding of a physical nation. Walls were rebuilt. Houses were erected. Even temples were reconstructed. But in another way, there was a deeper change that had taken place. God says that Israel would also have a new name. One can read those new names given to Israel in Isaiah 62:4 and 62:12. Isaiah connects this idea of a new name with the idea of marriage. Israel was becoming a new person inside and out. God was changing them and making them into something new!

During this season where we focus on Jesus and his coming to earth, I pray that we all remember the transformation that took place in our lives when we accepted him to be our Lord and Savior. Revelation 2:17 references a new name that all those who overcome will receive. This new name indicates our belonging to Christ and the ultimate transformation. Amen.

"JUDGMENT AND
HOLIDAY CHEER"

Monday, January 1

Isaiah 63:1-6

Joel Burks

Judgment is not something anyone wants to think about around the Christmas season. Whether we are talking about Santa leaving coal in your stocking, or Jesus returning to judge the living and the dead, judgment seems like a topic best saved for really serious Bible studies. The truth is, however, that judgment is going to happen and is a topic that we probably do not talk about enough. Why don't we talk about it a lot? Discussing judgment could come across as trying to scare someone into religion. Nobody wants to be a fear monger. We also might make the mistake of making light of judgment day. No matter what your opinion on the subject is, this is the topic of today's passage from the book of Isaiah.

To study Isaiah 63:1-6 we need just a bit of context. In this passage we see a moving figure coming from the capital city of Bozrah which was located in this ancient place called Edom. The moving figure identifies as the one who is "mighty to save" (Isaiah 63:1 NIV). Thus we gather that it is the Lord who is coming from the important city of Bozrah. Bozrah is singled out because its name means "grape-gathering," and in this chapter Isaiah begins to develop a detailed comparison between treading grapes and pouring out blood. God's act of judgment against Bozrah and Edom is clearly conceived to be a putting right of the wrongs done to Zion, especially since the Edomites had taken advantage of Judah's weakness after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians.

The prophet asks why the garment of the Lord is red, and the Lord answers, "I have trodden the winepress alone; [...]. their blood spattered my garments." (Isaiah 63:3 NIV) This is a promise that will be fulfilled when Jesus returns to the earth! This Isaiah passage is behind passages like Revelation 19:13, 15 which reference Jesus and the clothing that he is wearing in the last days. (I encourage you to flip back to Revelation and read these verses.)

Jesus' coming to earth is important for so many reasons, not the least of which is the fact that he is the one who will return to judge the world. Reading Isaiah with Christ in mind can remind us that this work of judgment belongs to Jesus Christ alone. Though we will be part of the heavenly armies that accompany Jesus (Revelation 19:14), the work of judgment belongs to him alone. Let us look forward to the day when he comes again. Amen.

"ENTERING
THE STORY"

Tuesday, January 2

Isaiah 63:7-14

Joel Burks

Christmas is by far my favorite holiday. I am the kind of person, to my wife's chagrin, who wakes up on November 1 playing Michael Bubl 's "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas." (I may have just lost a few readers, but please stay with me here.) Christmas is the time of the year when all of us live out some of our most beloved family traditions. Many of us eat the same food, go to our relatives' houses, host grand parties, and participate with our community of faith in remembering who Jesus is. Christmas is a way we connect deeply to the story of Jesus. It is a yearly invitation to enter into God's narrative remembering the babe born in the manger in Bethlehem.

This practice of entering God's greater story did not start with Christians and the celebration of Christmas. It started a little bit earlier with the Israelites in the Old Testament celebrating the Passover. The celebration of the Passover was a way for God's people to remember what he had done for them when he delivered them from Egypt. This deliverance became the fuel for Israel's worship. There are many references in the Bible to what God did for the Israelites at the Red Sea. The Passover and Exodus events truly impacted the way God's people worshiped and remembered him. It also gave them practices to point back to as signs of God's faithfulness. Generations would remember what God had done because of the yearly observance of the Passover festival. This in turn would remind them of who God was.

This brings me to how we remember who God is in our daily life. We don't just depend on Christmas to remind us. You know, we all have the opportunity to remember what God has done for us every week when we come to worship on Sunday. We remember him in the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, the Scriptures we read, and the words that are preached. The lyrics of the songs all point towards God and his miraculous works in the world. Remembering is, in fact, one of the reasons we gather together as the body. Just as the Israelites constantly pointed towards their salvation at the Red Sea, we can point back towards Christ and our salvation found at the cross.

As we begin this new year, I encourage you to think deeply about the meaning of Christ's birth. It can be easy to become swept up in the hustle and bustle of the season, but try to take some time to just remember what it means for all who believe that God sent his one and only son to earth. Enter into God's story! And don't just do this on your own but do it with your family as well. Find ways to point back to Jesus in every way that you celebrate together. Amen.

How do you respond when you find yourself in sin? Have you ever thought that you could fight sin by doing more spiritual things? If so, you are not alone. Every time I find myself battling some sort of sin problem I tend to lean towards a “works based” understanding of forgiveness and overcoming. In those times I’ll respond by reading my Bible a little bit more, or even being a little more faithful to my prayer life. My efforts, however, of fixing my sin problem falls short of being able to affect the change I want to see in my life. This is because, on their own, those spiritual actions have no power. It’s not just the Bible that is shaping my life, it is the power of the Holy Spirit within me. It is not only fasting that is causing me to change, but instead the act of fasting is putting me in front of the Father who is changing me.

In Isaiah 63–64 we read a prayer that is being said by a person referred to by some commentators as “The Praying One.” This person prays an elaborate prayer remembering how God saved Israel at the Red Sea, and then came down in glory at Mount Sinai. This prayer begs God to intervene and save God’s people from the calamity of exile that has come upon Israel. Then, in Isaiah 64:5, this person acknowledges the true problem. The problem is that Israel continues to sin. Israel has a sin problem! And this problem causes Israel not to be in a right relationship with God.

We are “like one who is unclean,” the Praying One admits in Isaiah 64:6 (NIV). Even Israel’s righteousness was like filthy rags before the Lord. Israel could try with all of their might to rid themselves of the sin via righteous acts, but these alone could not help them. In a sermon on this passage, Charles Spurgeon asks, “Brethren, if our righteousness is so bad, what must our unrighteousness be?”⁷ It is truly a frightening thing to realize that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves (even with our righteous acts). Instead, all we can do is put ourselves in the hands of the Potter. We are a lump of unmolded clay on the table waiting to be acted upon by the Creator God. Thus, even our righteous acts have no inherent power, but instead what they do is they move us into the presence of the one who has the power to shape us in the mold of his mercy and grace.

When you find yourself in sin, remember Jesus who died to make a way for you to be in an abundant relationship with God. Let us not lean on our own strength to save ourselves, but let us call out to God the Father to shape us into the image of Christ through the power of his Holy Spirit. Amen.

“I AM
THE CLAY”

Wednesday, January 3

Isaiah 63:15–64:12

Joel Burks

⁷ Charles Spurgeon. “A Sight of Self,” [spurgeon.org](https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/a-sight-of-self/#flipbook/), accessed October 18, 2023.

“WAITING
TO BE FOUND”

Thursday, January 4

Isaiah 65:1-16

Wayne Splawn

My youngest child, Mae, likes to play hide and seek. Well, it might be more accurate to say that Mae likes to be found. Soon after she runs off to a hiding place as I count to 10, Mae will make a noise to signal where she is hiding. Mae has no interest in remaining concealed in the darkness. Instead, she longs to be found by those who seek her.

In our reading for today, Isaiah writes that the Lord is ready to be found by those who did not seek him. This imagery speaks of God's desire to pursue his people and be found by them so they might experience abundant life in this world and forever. However, God's people by and large were not interested in listening to God's word and responding in obedience. They operated with the false belief that they would be satisfied by seeking pleasure and joy in the worship of false gods and the pursuit of sinful ways. But, Isaiah is clear that such an approach to life will only leave people empty (Isaiah 65:13-14). They will eat, but not be satisfied. They will drink, but their thirst will not be quenched. They will try to rejoice, but will eventually be put to shame. They may sing of gladness for a season, but eventually their joy will be turned to pain and wailing.

During the season of Christmas, we rejoice in the truth that God has spoken grace and truth to us through his Son, Jesus Christ, the Word that became incarnate for us and our salvation. When we were not seeking him, the Lord revealed himself to us. How will we respond to this great message of salvation? Will we listen and obey, trusting that in following Jesus we will experience abundant life? Or, will we stubbornly go our own way, seeking to be filled, satisfied, and content in the things of this world? My hope and prayer for you and for me during this Christmas season, is that we would rejoice in the truth that God has sought us in the darkness and walk in God's ways, confident that we will only experience true and lasting joy in Jesus Christ.

As you think about the future are you filled with hope or anxiety? Do you look expectantly to all the Lord might do in and through you, or do you question whether things will ever change for the better? If you are anything like me, you likely swing back and forth on the spectrum of hope and despair. At the beginning of a new year, many of us are hopeful that the coming year will be a good one. But often our optimism is extinguished when the first few months of the year do not turn out as we had hoped. A natural disaster strikes. We, or someone we love, receives a bad diagnosis. Our relationships are characterized by conflict. We soon wonder if there is a hope that is not dependent on the circumstances of life.

The message of Isaiah 65:17-25 reveals that the people of God have a solid, unshakeable reason for hope in the face of uncertain days. Isaiah foretells a day when the Lord will create a new heavens and a new earth and the former things of this fallen world will be no more. No more conflict. No more frustrated plans. No more weeping. The longings of our hearts will finally be fulfilled as we will live in a world where all wrongs have been made right.

Advent and Christmas point forward to this long-awaited day of peace. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. This threefold statement of faith captures the essence of our Christian hope so well. I do not know what this coming year will hold for you or for me. But, I am confident that one day Jesus will return to complete his work of making all things new, and the former things of this fallen world will be so distant that we will remember them no more.

“AN
UNSHAKEABLE
HOPE”

Friday, January 5

Isaiah 65:17-25

Wayne Splawn

"A HUMBLE
PEOPLE"

Saturday, January 6

Isaiah 66

Wayne Splawn

It is no secret that I am a baseball fan. My love for baseball is not something I have had my entire life. Instead, my love for baseball was birthed through my son, Webb. For as long as I can remember, Webb has loved the game and I am grateful for the sport, because it has been something that has given us many, many hours together.

In addition to helping me strengthen my relationship with Webb, baseball is also a game with many parallels to life. For example, I once read somewhere that there are two kinds of baseball players: those who are humble, and those who are about to be. You see, baseball is a game of failure, and you never completely master it. One day, you might be on a tear at the plate and hitting seems almost effortless. The next day you go 0-4 and feel as if you will never get another hit. According to the saying above, the key to baseball is to stay humble and realize that baseball rewards those who stick with it over the long haul.

Staying humble is also an important part of the Christian life. In these verses in Isaiah, we learn that the Lord looks on those who are humble and contrite in spirit and who tremble at his word (Isaiah 66:2). Our salvation is not something we can earn through our own acts of righteousness, and the Lord's forgiveness is not a thing we can purchase through a multitude of sacrifices no matter how extravagant. Instead, we are dependent on God's grace and mercy extended to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul writes that if we could save ourselves through our obedience, then Jesus Christ died for no purpose (Galatians 2:21).

Christmas is a powerful reminder that we are not able to save ourselves. No, we needed God to do something for us that we could never do for ourselves. The recognition of this truth should create humble and contrite hearts in us. As followers of Jesus, we ought to be the most humble people in the world. May the Lord give us humble hearts as we seek to faithfully follow him in the coming year.



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