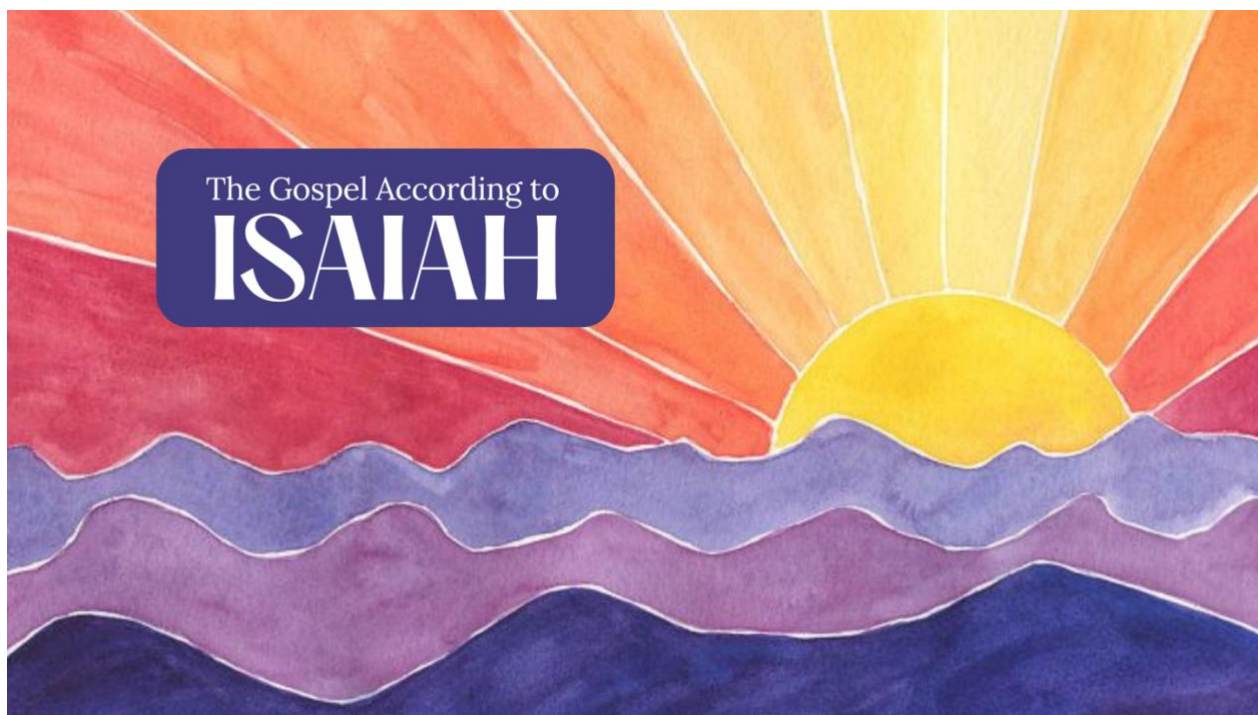




Growth Groups Material
(9 studies on Isaiah 40-66)
May-June 2025
LEADER MATERIAL

Teaching Schedule

<i>In our gatherings we</i>	<i>1-4 May</i>	Isaiah 40:1-31
<i>will work through a 9</i>	<i>8-11 May</i>	Isaiah 42:1-17
<i>part series:</i>	<i>15-18 May</i>	Isaiah 44:1-23
	<i>22-25 May</i>	Isaiah 44:24-45:25
	<i>29 May-1 Jun</i>	Isaiah 49:1-13
	<i>5-8 June</i>	Isaiah 52:13-53:12
	<i>12-15 June</i>	Isaiah 55:1-13
	<i>19-22 June</i>	Isaiah 61:1-11, 65:17-24
	<i>26-29 June</i>	Isaiah 66:1-24

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Additional Resources

We've put together some additional resources that might help you as you make your way through this series:

<https://jannalianglican.org.au/isaiah-40-66/>



Introduction

We've all heard of the book of Isaiah. It seems like one of those big and important books in the Old Testament, spanning 66 chapters. It's quoted many times in the New Testament, second only to the Psalms in frequency. But making sense of it feels like a daunting prospect. It's complex! Like lots of prophetic literature, there are strange images, and (to many minds) a frustrating lack of chronological, or even, logical order. Despite these hurdles, there is much to be gained from examining this part of God's Word.

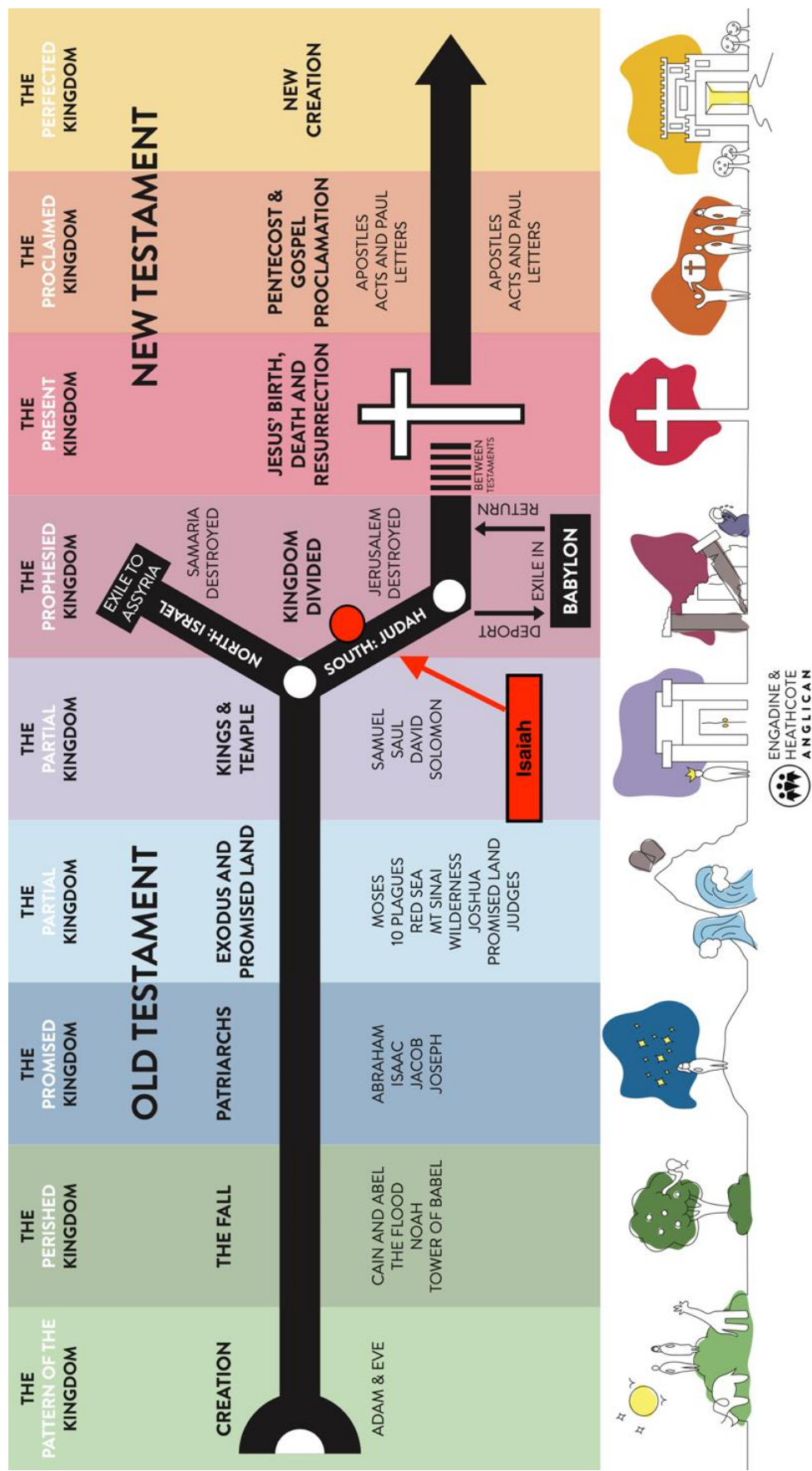
This term, we're focusing on the second part of the book, chapters 40-66. In a world weighed down by uncertainty, fear, and brokenness, Isaiah 40-66 delivers to us God's words of comfort, hope, and unstoppable promise. The images of salvation and relief from trouble that we will read are stunning, colourful, moving, and in many cases, very familiar to us, as readers of the New Testament. These chapters invite us into the heart of God's rescue plan — from the announcement of forgiveness to the unveiling of a Servant King, and the breathtaking vision of a new heaven and new earth. It's for these reasons that we've named the series *The Gospel According to Isaiah*.

It will be crucial, to understand something of the historical context surrounding what we read. Although written many years prior, Isaiah 40-66 appears to be addressed to the generation of Jews experiencing the

Babylonian exile. By way of reminder, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was wiped out by the Assyrians in 722BC. This was around the time of Isaiah's ministry. But the Southern Kingdom of Judah was to be conquered by the next big empire – the Babylonians. History tells us that this happened around 605-586BC. The exile generation has seen Jerusalem, God's chosen city, destroyed. They've seen God's temple looted and raised to the ground. They have been taken from their promised land; their kings have been killed or are kept in prisons. Meanwhile the Babylonians boast that Marduk (their chief god) has defeated the God of Israel. At this time, God's people were asking questions like:

- Has God abandoned us?
- When will this suffering finally end?
- Can God really be trusted to deliver on his promises?

We all ask similar questions, don't we? Whilst our relationship to God and our exposure to God's revelation is significantly different after Jesus, we also find ourselves exiled from our true home, heaven. We're surrounded by people of different faiths, or none. We wonder if we'll ever experience all the incredible blessings that we've been promised. Rest assured, in Isaiah, God assures us that we can trust him to deliver, and He will do it in a stunning, glorious manner! As we work through some of the key passages in these chapters you will find some of the richest, heart-warming parts of the Bible. We're praying that God's Spirit will both, help us to understand what we're reading, and use His Word to shape us into the likeness of Jesus.



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Note for leaders:

- Leaders' notes look like this (dot point, grey shading)
- Please refer group members to the QR code on page 2, if they would like to explore further resources.
- As usual, please don't feel compelled to do every question. I encourage you to tailor the study to suit your group.

Study 1 | Isaiah 40:1-31 (members booklet page 8)

Introduction

1. Have you ever felt totally abandoned by God? If not, what kind of circumstances do you think might lead to that feeling?

- As noted in the introduction, Isaiah 40-66 is written with the Jewish exiles in Babylon in mind. This was the low point of Israel's history where the people would have certainly felt abandoned by God. They had been kicked out of the promised land (which had always been a tangible sign of God's blessing). It's in this context of utter despair that the rich salvation promises of Isaiah 40-66 are delivered.
- This question is designed to help identify with the situation of the original audience Isaiah is writing for. If members of your group haven't felt abandoned by God, I'm sure it's easy to think of what might lead to that feeling. Any genuine hardship (serious illness, relationship breakdown, etc.) will have people questioning where God is.

2. **Read Psalm 137.** How were God's people feeling during their exile in Babylon?

- Psalm 137 is written by exiles in Babylon and gives us an insight into their state of mind. Some of the images are undeniably confronting. It might help to recall that for the Israelites, their shame and separation from God was intrinsically bound up in their defeat/bullying/oppression at the hand of neighbouring nations (like Edom and Babylon).

Read and Discuss

3. **Read Isaiah 40:1-11.** How would you summarize the message of comfort being delivered?

- This is a message that the time of exile would come to an end and God would come to save his people and judge their oppressors. The comfort offered is, of course, not about a life of ease, but the relief of God coming to rescue and

restore his defeated people. God's word of promise can be trusted (v6-8). As such, this is really, really good news (v9).

- Note: the imagery of travel (e.g. highway, mountains being levelled, valleys lifted, a way through the desert) comes up frequently in Isaiah 40-66. They might seem odd to us, but to worldview of the original readers, geographical location corresponded much more closely to spiritual realities than we would think. God's 'home' was Jerusalem (because of the temple). That's where people can enjoy his presence. Babylon was, therefore, far away from God's home and therefore synonymous with being far away from God in relationship.
- As such, to speak of God coming (and even journeying on highways) arouses images of God coming from Jerusalem to Babylon to rescue his people. Images of that journey of God being swift, direct, even destructive perhaps, convey God's urgency and power to rescue his people.
- Conversely, in later chapters when the opposite journey is spoken of, back to Jerusalem (e.g. 61:4), that same geo-spiritual mindset is in the background. Jerusalem is the place where God is known, and where nations will one day go to find him.

4. If you were an Israelite exiled in Babylon, how might you respond to these words?

- This is more of a reflective question. Clearly, there would be a sense of joy and relief that God has not forgotten his people, and he will restore them to much better circumstances.

5. **Read Isaiah 40:12-31.** What is the picture of God being presented in these verses? Can you think of 1-2 adjectives to describe God based on these verses?

- These verses present a huge picture of God as absolutely sovereign over creation, human history, all things! His power is unlimited. He is completely incomparable.
- Invite your group members to settle on 1-2 adjectives. Some thoughts: incomparable, supreme, ruler, powerful, unmatched, peerless, strong.

6. Why would such a picture of God be necessary to accompany the promises of verses 1-11?

- Given their circumstances, it might have been difficult for the exiles to truly believe that God would bring an end to their hardship and bless them again. Indeed, verse 27 indicates that this was the prevailing attitude. People truly felt like God had given up on them.
- Such a big view of God, as presented in verses 12-31, answer the question, “Does God really have the will, and the power, to carry out what he’s promised?”. The answer, of course, is yet. Isaiah’s use of tone and questions in this section almost suggests that it’s a silly question to be asking in the first place.

Reflect and Apply

7. Read Luke 3:1-6. How does Luke see Isaiah 40 being fulfilled?

- Israel did return from exile, but the historical reality did not live up to the great expectation set in this and other passages in Isaiah.
- According to Luke, the voice of one crying in the wilderness is John the Baptist, and the coming of God in Isaiah 40 is seen in the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth at the commencement of his public ministry.
- See also Matt 3:3, Mark 1:3, John 1:23 (the same point is made)

8. The Israelites in exile were lamenting, “God doesn’t see us, our claim is ignored” (Isaiah 40:27). After Jesus, could a Christian ever say something like that?

- Strictly speaking, there is no right or wrong answer to this question. The aim is to stimulate debate amongst the group, so that they will wrestle with the question of how much our circumstances are similar, or dissimilar to the Israelites in exile.
- On the one hand, a Christian going through hard times may well feel that God is ignoring them.

- On the other hand, compared to the Old Testament people of God we have much more categorical, unequivocal evidence of God's commitment to us. We see that in the cross. See Romans 8:31-39 – nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

9. It's easy to evaluate God's kindness towards us according to our present circumstances (both good and bad). How does Isaiah 40 encourage us to adopt a different approach?

- This question is similar to question 8, so you may prefer to discuss one or the other. In short, the message of Isaiah 40 is to trust God's promise because his word is powerful. It may seem impossible to us that God can change things, but his power is so absolute, that he is worthy of our trust.

10. In some ways, we inhabit a similar space to the Israelites being addressed in Isaiah 40. Peter describes God's chosen people as exiles (1 Peter 1:1). Similarly, Paul writes that our true home is not here on earth, but in heaven (Phil 3:2). How can we go about fixing our hopes on our future salvation, as opposed to the things of here and now?

- The purpose of this question is to focus on what we have in common with the Jewish exiles. Notwithstanding the major differences between our time and theirs, and the privileges of living after Jesus, we can still find common ground.
- In particular, we recognize that we're not yet fully at home with God. Just as Babylon wasn't 'home' for the Israelites, this world is not 'home' for us. Just as the exiles we're called to look forward in hope, we too are called to look forward in hope.
- Share amongst yourselves how you can train your hearts/minds to be less attached to this world, and more attached to the world to come. Paul's suggestion in Col 3:1-4 is a good passage to consider.

Study 2 | Isaiah 42:1-17 (members booklet page 11)

Introduction

1. From your existing knowledge of the Bible, would you say God's Old Testament people, that is the Israelites, had a job to do? What was it?

- The purpose of this question is to get people thinking about the role of Israel in God's purposes. More of this will be discussed under question 2, below. The concept of Israel's divine calling is important background to the strand of teaching in Isaiah surrounding the 'Servant' figure.

The Servant of the Lord

- Chapter 42 contains the first of four so-called "servant songs" in Isaiah 40-55 (42:1-9, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12). Some also see Isaiah 61:1-3 as a fifth "servant song". Clearly in these passages an exalted figure of special importance is described under the title "the LORD's Servant," yet the nation of Israel itself is also described using this title in other places (e.g. 41:8).
- Who is this figure? There is scholarly debate, but the New Testament clearly identifies him as an individual: Jesus Christ. In the context of Isaiah, the special or "Super Servant" will be and do for weak and failing Israel what Israel was meant to be and do for the world.

Read and Discuss

2. Let's think for a moment about the role God originally intended for his chosen people, Israel. **Read Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 19:4-6, Deuteronomy 4:5-8.** From these verses how would you summarize:

- a. The relationship between God and Israel; and
- b. The role of Israel in representing God to the nations

- The promises to Abraham in Genesis 12 speak of his descendants being the means through which he will bless the whole world. This crucial passage sets the program for the entire biblical storyline. How is that peace, and access to God's presence be restored, between a Holy God, and a sinful humanity.
- Exodus 19 refers to the Israelites as God's special possession and a kingdom of priests. The concept of the nation as a priesthood, speaks of their role to represent God to the nations and vice versa.
- Deuteronomy 4 teaches that the righteous living of the Israelites was to draw the nations to God.
- Together, these verses remind us that the Israelites had a very special role to play in God's purposes for saving the world. Their knowledge of God, and their righteous living was to be a beacon, drawing the nations to God.

3. One of the big features in Isaiah 40-66 is the introduction of a figure known as God's 'servant'. **Read Isaiah 41:8-10.** Who is the Lord's servant in this passage?

- See comments under question 1 above. According to these verses, it's the corporate Israel who is God's servant. This is consistent with what we've seen elsewhere from the Bible.
- C.f. Isaiah 44:1-8. Again, Israel is described as God's servant, and in verse 8 are referred to as God's witnesses.
- This can lead to confusion when it comes to the servant song passages which refer to the servant in the singular – e.g. just one person.

4. From your knowledge of the Old Testament, how would you assess Israel's job in performing the role God had given to them? **Read Isaiah 42:18-25.** How is Israel's failure to perform their God-given mission described?

- We know that Israel failed in their role. They continually transgressed the laws God had given them and we're led astray by corrupt kings into worshipping false Gods. 2 Kings 17:7-20, which refers to the downfall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, offers a good summary of the downward trajectory of Israel's history. The same could be said of the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

- In these verses Isaiah's words are commenting on the disobedience and waywardness of the Israelites. They are described as deaf and blind. The passage also explains that the exile in terms of God's decision to hand over his people to judgment.

5. Isaiah 42:1-9 stands in contrast to 42:18-25 and speak more positively about the 'servant' figure. **Read Isaiah 42:1-9.** What do we learn about the 'servant' figure:

- a. What is the character of the servant?
- b. What is the mission of the servant?
- c. What is God's relationship to the servant?

- Character: The servant is someone who is meek and gentle. They are strong and endure despite discouragement.
- Mission: Bring justice to the nations to the earth. This idea is repeated three times in verses 1-4, so lies at the heart of the servant's mission. The idea of the 'justice' word is more than merely passing judgment on evil but rather carries the sense of bringing God's truth to light, or putting things right.
- In verse 6 the mission is described as bringing light to the nations and liberating people from captivity/darkness. This draws in the theme of salvation but remains undeveloped at this point.
- God's relationship: The servant is chosen by God and enabled for ministry through the Holy Spirit. God is with the servant and will ensure the success of his mission.

Reflect and Apply

6. **Read Matt 12:9-21.** How does Matthew see Jesus fulfilling the servant role of Isaiah 42?

- The context of this passage is Jesus' clash with the Pharisees over healing a man on the Sabbath, his subsequent withdrawal from public attention, and instruction to others not to make him known. Matthew sees in this the kind of humility and meekness that characterized Isaiah's servant.
- We could also point to Jesus' baptism scenes when the Spirit descends on him (Matt 3:16, Mark 1:10, Luke 3:22, John 1:32-33), as allusions to Isaiah 42:1.

7. What can we learn from this servant figure about the best way to approach injustice? How is this different to the usual approach adopted by those with power in our world?

- Contrary to worldly values, justice (making things right) can be pursued through humble, gentle, patient service rather than violence or coercion. Jesus models this approach perfectly as the Matthew passage above indicates to us.

8. Some theologians see an 'hourglass' shape to the big storyline of the Bible, especially as it relates to the identity of 'God's people'. To generalise this idea, we could say that the scope of God's relationship with humanity was initially the entire creation, then focuses on Israel and, then ultimately Jesus, the true human/Israelite. After Jesus God's people extends out again to all nations through the church. See the graphic below for a visual representation of this concept. How can a theme like this help us understand the identity of the servant in Isaiah?

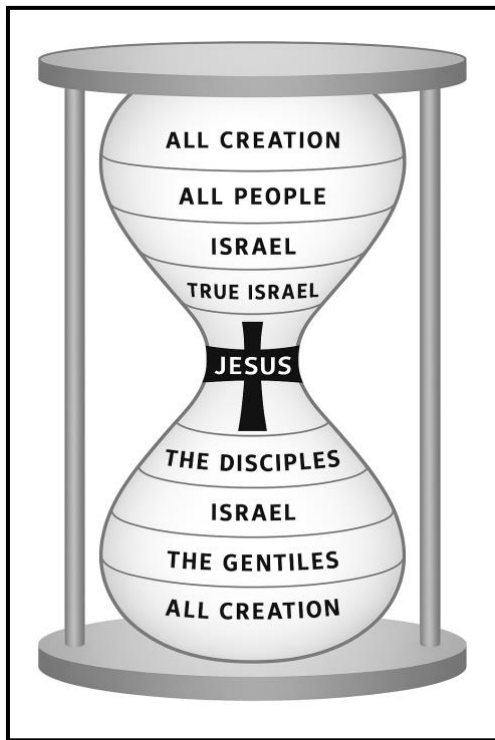


Image Credit: *Two Cities (9 Interactive Bible Studies on Isaiah)*, Matthias Media, 2009

- God's saving purposes, initially focused on the Israelites, became focused on the one true Israelite, Jesus, who served God faithfully. It's through him that the grace and a true knowledge of God can be extended to all people.
- For some group members, this concept and image will feel quite abstract and confusing. Encourage them to dwell on it, as it can be a really handy way of comprehending the different stages of salvation history recorded in the Bible. It's also a really helpful image when it comes to reading prophetic literature that anticipates the person and work of Jesus. That is, some Old Testament passages refer, on one level, to the historical nation of Israel, but in the fullness of time, we can see how they are also apply to Jesus.
- As the Old Testament progresses, God's revelation of how he will save people becomes more and more specific and indeed focused on Jesus. The image reminds us how God's purposes center on Jesus – he is the 'lynchpin' of God's saving work.

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Study 3 | Isaiah 44:1-23 (members booklet page 15)

Introduction

1. How would you define an idol? Which culture do you think is more prone to idol worship: ancient cultures like what we read about in the Bible, or modern cultures like 21st Century Australia?

- Try to avoid looking ahead to question 5. This is an open question, inviting group members to put forward their own understanding of what an idol is. A common, but narrow definition is that idols are those statuette type things that might see in a Thai or Indian restaurant – a relic from ancient times or other cultures. A better view of idols is to see them as those things (including people, circumstances, hopes) that take the place of God in our hearts and minds.
- The second part of the question is related to the first part (defining an idol). Hopefully it will stimulate discussion. Ultimately, we want people to realize that we're all prone to idolatry, irrespective of our time or culture.

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Isaiah 44:1-8.** What is the promise, and the assurance that God is giving his people in these verses?

- In these verses God's promise to bless his exiled people (a continuation of the comfort announced in chapter 40). The assurance of verses 6-8, which follows the promise is a statement of God's trustworthiness to deliver on his promise. God is God! He can declare the future, because it is he himself who dictates the future!

3. **Read 44:9-20.** What tone do you sense being used in this section? What is being critiqued?

- Isaiah here is making a mockery of pagan idolatry. He's showing the absurdity of someone who uses the same wood to burn and cook his food and also shape an idol statue to worship. Idols are powerless, because they are not God.

- Idolatrous practices would have been commonplace for Israel's neighbours, including in Babylon. They might have been tempted to follow the ways of the people around them. But to do that would be stupid because idols offer nothing.
- The point being made is one of comparison. The real, true and living God can be trusted. It's a bit like in the first half of the book when Isaiah encouraged the people not to trust in the surrounding nations and their political/military alliances. Now, in the context of false religion, he encourages them to trust only in the living God.

4. **Read Isaiah 44:21-23.** God's people are called to 'remember' what's conveyed in the preceding verses. Why must God's people keep remembering the folly of idolatry?

- God wants his people to avoid idolatry and to trust him instead. He is worthy of our trust, whereas idols aren't.
- Idolatry had been the chief, and perhaps root sin that had caused his people to rebel against him.
- God's people must also be on guard because we are weak and tempted to follow the ways of the world, even if they are irrational. Sometimes we're drawn to idols (whatever they may be) because like the ancient statuettes, we can see and touch them. Other times, we're tempted because it's the normal practice of the people around us.

Reflect and Apply

5. Our idols could be defined as the things we love, trust and serve. We can discern them by asking questions like, (1) *"Where does your mind wander when you are daydreaming?"*, (2) *"What do I spend all my spare money on?"*, (3) *"What's that one thing, that if I get it, will finally make me happy"*, or (4) *"What's that one thing, that if I lose, will make life unbearable?"* Can you think of other questions like this that might help identify our idols. Choose one or two of the questions and answer them for yourself.

- It's hard to provide leaders notes for a question like this. Perhaps have a brainstorming session about the kinds of questions you could ask to help discern idols.
- This might call for vulnerability but try to push group members to identify their idols.
- Be sure to read the Tim Keller book excerpt on the series resource webpage (accessible at URL and QR code on page 2, and through Church Hub)

6. Why do you think the crafting and worship of idols was (and remains) so infuriating to God?

- This question invites discussion. If we put ourselves in God's shoes, how would we feel if our creatures began worshipping and placing their trust in their own man-made objects. The vast difference between, on the one hand, the non-existent power of idols to do anything and hence their absolute unworthiness to be worshipped, and God on the other hand, who is all-powerfully and totally worthy of worship, says it all.
- Elsewhere in the Bible, idolatry is likened to adultery. To worship an idol is not merely an intellectual error or spiritual stupidity, it's to breach trust with our God who loves and provides for us.

7. Imagine you are in Isaiah's shoes, and you are tasked with writing a mockery of modern Australian idolatry? What kinds of things might you say?

- This question calls for creativity but will be a great way to embed the lessons of the chapter. What are our modern Australian idols? How would we expose the silliness of putting our hope in them.

8. Barry Webb writes: “Our eyes and ears are constantly bombarded with lies about God and attractive alternatives to serving him.” How can we guard ourselves against slipping into idolatrous ways of thinking?

- This is where the rubber hits the road for Christians. We might be aware of the dangers of idolatry but nevertheless succumb to serving them. What strategies can your group come up with to guard against this.
- Chief amongst the strategies would be to keep engaging with God in his Word so that our view of God is always getting bigger and bigger. The more we love and see the beauty and trustworthiness of God, the less inclined we are to turn to idols.

Study 4 | Isaiah 44:24-45:25 (members booklet page 18)

Introduction

1. “God does as he pleases!” Discuss the meaning of this sentence. Is this a good or a bad thing?

- For some members, this may confront them in their view of God. For others maybe not. It’s a deliberately provocative statement, which goes to the heart of the meaning of today’s passage.
- We’re not looking for an answer that leans one way or another (e.g. it’s a good thing vs a bad thing). It does teeter on the edge of the issue around God’s control over, and use of evil.

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Isaiah 44:24-45:8.** In these verses we hear of God’s plan to use Cyrus the Great, leader of the rising Persian empire, to conquer Babylon and release Israel to return to their land. We get a very big picture of God here. What lines stand out to you and why?

- It might be worth, after reading this section to notice, what God is actually saying about his plans. In short, these verses announce God’s plans to raise up, strengthen and give military success to Cyrus, the ruler of the Persians. God is answering the question of how it is that God’s people would be released from captivity in Babylon and rebuild Jerusalem. It would be as Cyrus and the Persians, conquer Babylonians. This is an amazing prophecy because it is written well before Cyrus was even born.
- Beyond this basic message, the text emphasizes God’s absolute sovereign authority over the affairs of history. Invite group members to identify the statements made about God himself. There are some incredibly succinct and powerful statements of God’s sovereignty. Discuss which ones stand out and why.

3. Read 45:9-13. What do you think is Israel's objection to God's plans? How does God respond to their objection?

- The troubling aspect of the whole scenario is that Cyrus is a pagan, idol-worshipping leader, who does not know God (45:4-5). How could God use someone like that to bring about his plans. God even calls him his 'shepherd' (44:28), and his 'anointed' (45:1).
- God's response is firm and conveys exasperation. He likens the Jews questioning of his approach (to use Cyrus) to the clay speaking back to the potter or the newborn child speaking to their parent. There is such a vast chasm of authority between God and his creatures. It's not our place to question his methods. God points to the evidence of *his* creation to reiterate his standing in this debate.
- These verses are alluded to by Paul in Romans 9:14-21 in the context of explaining God's freedom to choose some for salvation and not others (e.g. the doctrine of election). Again, note the sensitivity of these matters.
- Whilst the Bible never attributes moral evil to God, God's relationship with evil, and our sense of God's 'bigness' is being stretched here.
- Note question 7 returns to this idea.

4. Read Isaiah 45:14-25. How do these verses convey the great reversal of fortunes that God's exiled people will experience?

- The key verse here is in verse 14, which is addressed to the Jewish people. The image of riches and products of surrounding nations coming to the Jews is a sign of prosperity and supremacy. The acknowledgement of Yahweh as the only God (towards the end of verse 14) represents a major reversal, compared to the shame associated with the exile (and conquest by Babylon).
- The notion of God's hiddenness (in verse 15) seems odd but is easily understood. The people of Israel, during the exile would have looked so weak and insignificant. Therefore, knowledge of the reversal to come, means we can see now, that things aren't as they seem. To the naked eye, God has gone missing. But when the exiles return and Jerusalem is restored, those who opposed the Jews will be humiliated.

5. What is the invitation offered by God to all nations, on the back of revealing himself to be the only true God?

- The key verse here is verse 22. God has (or will) shown himself to be the only God, through his powerful saving of his people. Now the offer is extended to all people to turn back to him in submission.

Reflect and Apply

6. **Read Ezra 1:1-4.** These verses speak of the historical fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Cyrus led the Persians to defeat the Babylonians and then permitted the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. How do instances of prophecy so clearly fulfilled, such as this, strengthen our faith?

- This question invites personal reflection. This is just one of many instances in the Bible that we can see God's prophecies fulfilled in history. In this case, the specificity of the prophecy (to the point of naming Cyrus), and its fulfillment is compelling.
- These strengthen our faith by showing us that God can be trusted to keep his promises. God has made promises to us too – such as resurrection from the dead and entry into the new creation. Perhaps the fulfillment of these promises seems as unlikely as the return to Jerusalem felt for the exiles in Babylon. But God does what he says!

7. In Isaiah 45 we're taught that God uses evil people and awful events to bring about his purposes. How does this truth sit with you? What is your reaction to this concept?

- A sensitive question, inviting personal reflection. It's hard to avoid this theological truth, because we see it so clearly demonstrated in the death of Jesus. His awful, unjust punishment was God's ordained means of saving us (e.g. Acts 2:23).

8. Are there areas in your life where you've questioned God's way of doing things? What might this passage be teaching you?

- This question is inviting personal reflection.
- Isaiah's words push us toward humble acceptance of this reality. It's not our place to question God and his methods. That can be a bitter pill to swallow for people who have endured severe hardship.

9. Isaiah 45:23 is alluded to in Philippians 2:9-11. Is 'bending the knee' in submission to Jesus optional?

- Clearly, it's not optional. The language of *every* knee and *every* tongue is unambiguous. The missionary task we're all involved in is that as many people 'bend the knee' voluntarily and receive salvation, rather than 'bend the knee' by force, in judgment.

Study 5 | Isaiah 49:1-13 (members booklet page 21)

Introduction

1. Put yourself in the shoes of the Old Testament people of God. For most of their history they had been at war with the nations around them. Their national identity was built on God's choice of them to be his special people, distinct from other nations. How do you think they felt towards the nations around them?

- This is calling for us to recognize the different worldview of the Israelites, compared to our own. They would have felt set apart, and perhaps even hostile to the nations around them.
- The reason for asking this question is as a prelude to one of the big implications to emerge from this study – namely that God will extend salvation to the nations. Whilst we might feel comfortable with this concept, it would have been a revolutionary idea for the average Jew.

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Isaiah 49:1-13.** Can you identify the different speakers in this passage, and the verses which belong to them?

- Verses 1-6 we hear the voice of the 'Servant' figure we met in chapter 42. In verse 6, it is the servant, recounting what God has said to him.
- Verses 7-12 we hear the voice of the Lord, as introduced in verse 8. Verses 7-9a appear to be addressed to the servant. Verses 9b-12 speak of the people
- Verse 13 is the voice of Isaiah, responding to the good news of verses 1-12.

3. Focusing now on the first-person speaker (verses 1-6), form a list of all the things we learn about them? Consider their history, their objective, their future.

- This is a comprehension question. Some things we learn about the servant include:
 - a. Called and known by God before birth (verses 1,5)
 - b. Equipped by God for a word ministry (verse 2)
 - c. Experiences some measure of frustration (verse 4a)

- d. Rewarded/honoured by God (verses 4a, 5)
- e. Aim of bringing Jacob/Jews back to God (verse 5)
- f. Aim of making God's salvation known amongst nations/ends of the earth (verse 6)

4. What is unusual about verse 4? How does the mission of this figure evolve after this change?

- The picture of failure/labor in vain is not something we'd expect from such an important, divinely appointed figure. It's in this verse, though, we see the Servant's ultimate aim is not just to find success or popularity amongst God's people, but first and foremost to please God (see the second half of the verse).
- It appears that in light of this attitude the servant is honoured in God's sight (v5) and therefore the scope of the servant's mission and fame extends beyond Jacob (a.k.a Israel) to all nations (v6).

5. What is the picture being painted in verses 9-12? **Read Revelation 7:9-17.** Which verse draws upon Isaiah 49? How, then, might we understand the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah 49:9-13?

- The picture in verses 9-12 is of God's saved people, now liberated by the servant, enjoying God's blessing. There is also a sense of these people journeying from one place to another. In the context, it's probably a journey of people from all nations journeying towards Jerusalem (where God's presence can be found).
- Revelation, in the same vein, envisions saved people from all nations coming to God. Revelation 7:16 quotes Isaiah 49:10.
- It's difficult to situate scenes in Revelation in a precise timetable of events. However, it's safe to say that the events of Revelation 6 and onwards all happen in the 'last days' after Jesus has died, risen and ascended (a key moment is in Rev 4-5 and when the lamb is qualified to open the scrolls which signify God's plans for the end of history). What the connection between Revelation and Isaiah teaches us is that the prophecies of Isaiah are ultimately connected to Jesus, and the culmination of human history that God is putting into effect through Him. As such, verses 9-13 begin to be fulfilled in the church, but will come to finality in eternity when God's people are led into the new creation.

Reflect and Apply

6. Read Acts 13:42-52. Who are Paul and Barnabas speaking to? How does Isaiah 49:6 shape their understanding of their mission?

- This takes place during Paul's first missionary journey. He and Barnabas are in Pisidian Antioch, a town in Asia Minor, in an area we know identify as the inland part of modern Turkey. They have spoken in the local synagogue to local Jews, urging the Jews to find salvation in Jesus, rather than the law of Moses.
- The following week, back amongst the Jews, the Jewish leaders become jealous towards Paul and oppose him. In response Paul and Barnabas acknowledge that the Jews have rejected Jesus, and so they will turn their attention to the Gentiles.
- In verse 47, Isaiah 49:6 is quoted.
- Paul and Barnabas understood from passages like Isaiah 49, that the mission of Jesus was not just for Jews, but was to go to all nations.

7. According to this chapter, God clearly has a heart for the nations. How can we demonstrate the same commitment to seeing God's salvation extend to 'the ends of the earth'?

- This is an important reflection question to consider what we ourselves are doing when it comes to God's mission to the lost.
- On the one hand, we could speak of our local efforts to reach unbelievers. Perhaps tonight would be a good night to share and pray through our Lifeboat lists?
- Alternatively, you could discuss different ways of supporting overseas mission work, through organizations like CMS (the Church Missionary Society). Our link missionaries (whilst already formally supported by our church) also value the prayers, contact and financial support of individuals.

8. Recall the 'hourglass' shape to the biblical storyline (see study 2). How does chapter 49 continue to fill out that image? Where are we situated on that hourglass today? What is our role?

- Whereas study 2 noticed how God's purposes narrow, and focus upon Jesus (the true human/Israelites), this study turns our mind to the expanding mission in the second part of the hourglass.
- Jesus, the 'Servant' has earned salvation and his salvation extends to the ends of the earth. The scope of God's interest in people is broadening out again, and extending to the whole world.
- We're in the phase of salvation history where the saving message of Jesus is still going to the nations. In fact, we ourselves are living evidence of that reality (we're along way from Jerusalem!).
- We have a role to play in spreading that message.

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Study 6 | Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (members booklet page 24)

Introduction

1. We've named the current teaching series 'the Gospel According to Isaiah. What do you like/dislike about this title? Are you persuaded that it's an appropriate title? Why or why not?

- This is an open question inviting reflection on the title of the series. There is no right or wrong answer per se.
- One of the themes which we have been learning, and will continue to see, particularly in this week's passage, is how much the prophecies of Isaiah point clearly to Jesus and the salvation that he offers.

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12.** What do we learn about:

- This passage is known as the fourth 'servant song' to go with Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, and 50:4-9.
- The aim of this question is to get people's noses into their bibles, reading the passage carefully and identifying what we learn about the servant.

a. The servant figure;

- Will be ultimately successful and exalted by God (52:13)
- Unimpressive, ordinary (53:2)

b. The way people treated the servant;

- Appalled (52:14)
- Despised, rejected, imposed suffering (53:3)
- Oppressed, afflicted (53:7)
- Treated unjustly – counted as a rebel (53:12)
- Sentenced, killed (53:8-9, 12)

c. The way the servant responded to their suffering;

- Without retaliation (53:7)
- No violence or deceit (53:9)
- Willingly submitted to death (53:12)

d. The reason for the servant's suffering;

- Our rebellion and iniquities (53:5)
- Punished for our iniquities by the Lord (53:5,6)
- To heal our wounds (53:5)
- The Lord's will was to crush him and accomplish his will (53:10)

e. The outcome of/the future after the servants suffering;

- Exalted , raised and lifted up, see light (52:13, 53:10)
- Sprinkle nations (52:15)...perhaps a reference to sprinkling of blood to atone for sin
- Lord's pleasure accomplished (53:10)
- Many justified (53:11)
- Given many as a portion, the might as spoil (53:12)...this is the language of rewards for a military victory.

3. List all the parts of this passage for which you can find fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus?

In some instances there are actual quotes from Isaiah 52-53:

- 53:1 -> John 12:38 and Rom 10:16. The idea that the Israelites could not believe that Jesus was the Christ.
- 53:4 -> Matt 8:17 referring to Jesus healing someone
- 53:9 -> 1 Peter 2:21-25 referring to Jesus' restraint in not retaliating to injustice
- 53:5 -> 1 Peter 2:21-25 referring to healing by Jesus wounds

In other instances there are allusions in events (especially around Jesus' death and resurrection) that echo the themes of Isaiah 52-53:

- Despised...rejected -> Jesus was rejected and crucified
- Pierced for our transgressions -> crucifixion, John 19:34 – soldier piercing Jesus side

- Counted among the rebels -> Jesus was treated as a criminal and crucified between to other criminals (Lk 23:22-23)
- With a rich man at his death (Is 53:9) -> Body taken and buried by Joseph or Arimathea, a rich man (Matt 27:57)
- Servant is raised up, exalted, see light -> Jesus' resurrection

Reflect and Apply

4. **Read Acts 8:26-35.** Pretend you are Phillip. What would you have told the eunuch after explaining that the passage was about Jesus?

- This question is asking us to put ourselves in the shoes of someone like Philip, who was tasked with using Isaiah 53 to tell the gospel message.
- In a way, this question is simply asking people to outline the gospel message, as if they were delivering it to someone who had no prior knowledge.
- Some essential elements to include would be (1) the existence of God and our accountability to him, (2) our sin and need for redemption, (3) how Jesus accomplished our redemption, (4) what we're to do in response to Jesus – repent and believe in Him

5. If you are feeling guilt and shame about your sin, what comfort can be drawn from this passage from Isaiah?

- Isaiah 53 is full of assertions that it was God plan and deliberate intention to lay our sins upon Jesus so that we could be forgiven/healed. We can be sure that because of Jesus our sins are dealt with.

6. **Read 1 Peter 2:18-25**, during which Peter quotes extensively from Isaiah 53. How are we called to follow the example of Jesus/the servant?

- This passage particularly relates to the situation of Christians suffering unjustly. We're to model ourselves on Jesus who did not retaliate. It's tempting to respond to evil with evil. But the way of Jesus is to entrust justice to God, who will judge justly in the end.

7. Reconsider question 1. Have your views changed/remain the same? What difference does Isaiah 52/53 make to your view?

- An open question to allow people to reflect on what they've learnt. There is no right or wrong answer here. Perhaps group members will come to appreciate the numerous, explicit prophecies about God's servant suffering for human sin, and see how clearly that points to Jesus and his death/resurrection.

Study 7 | Isaiah 55:1-13 (members booklet page 27)

Introduction

1. Have you ever been offered something that is too good to refuse? Tell the group about it.

- An open question that invites answers from all members. This introduces as to the big theme of the passage – which is God's incredible offer of salvation. As we read Isaiah 55 the offer God's makes to us does seem too good to be true!

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Isaiah 55:1-13.** God is making an incredible offer! Answer the following questions.

a. What is God offering (metaphorically, literally)?

- Literally, the offer is made in verse 1: the offer is of wine, milk & choice food.
- Metaphorically, the offer is of life (v3), compassion and sins forgiven (v7)

b. What does it cost?

- This offer is being made for free – without cost. This is astonishing and worth noting.

c. Why the offering is being made by God?

- Verse 3 tells us that the offer is of a permanent covenant, on the basis of the faithful kindness of David.
- In the background to this expression is God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:12-16, that his descendant will have an everlasting Kingdom. The expected Messiah figure is often likened, or even called 'David' in other parts of the OT, because of this promise.
- See also Psalm 89 for an extended reflection on God's promises to David, and how Israel's hopes rested in these promises.

d. How is the offer received?

- Seeking and calling upon the Lord (v6) and repenting (v7)

3. Imagine someone, after reading verses 1-7 doubts God's offer because it sounds too good to be true. How do verses 8-11 address that doubt?

- Perhaps the idea of being freely forgiven (v7) is impossible to comprehend for people who value fairness/justice. But verse 8-9 reminds us that God's ways and thoughts are different to ours.
- Verses 10-11 contain an assurance that what God says, he does. Images from the natural world familiar to the readers are used to convey this certainty.

4. **Read John 4:1-14.** Mount an argument that Jesus has Isaiah 55 in his mind during his conversation with the Samaritan woman? What themes do Isaiah 55 and John 4 have in common?

- John 4 contains the account of Jesus encounter with the Samaritan women at Jacob's well, near Samaria. There is no quotation of Isaiah 55 in this passage, but some details and themes are similar.
- In common include, the offer of salvation, the use of thirst/water as a metaphor for new life/salvation
- Also, the notion of searching for satisfaction (aka fulfillment/peace) is prominent in both passages
 - a. In Isaiah 55:2 the readers are exhorted not to waste money on things that don't satisfy. Instead, come to God and enjoy choice foods.
 - b. In John 4, the woman has had 5 husbands, and arguably (this is implicit, not explicit) she has been looking for satisfaction in the wrong place. But here, Jesus is offering water that quenches thirst forever.

Reflect and Apply

5. How does verse 2 describe the human sinful condition in a new and insightful way?

- Our sin isn't merely a matter of breaking rules and transgressing laws. It's also about looking to created things to provide what only God can provide. Romans 1:25 says *They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served what has been created instead of the Creator.*
- Augustine of Hippo famously wrote in his Confessions: *You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you*
- It's not wrong to longer for happiness, satisfaction etc. But the root of the human problem is looking in the wrong place.

6. If you have accepted this offer, are you finding satisfaction and delight in Jesus and salvation, or do you remain tempted to 'spend your money on lesser things?' What are these lesser things? Why are you tempted to seek satisfaction in them?

- This question is employing the language of verse 2 again, and asking us to consider whether that verse could apply to us?
- There's no right or wrong answer here, the aim is for honest reflection.
- Usually the reasons we tend to look for satisfaction in things other than God include:
 - a. It's more tangible – we can see and touch earthly things like money and possessions
 - b. It's often what everyone else around us is doing – we can see other people finding joy in frequent travel etc.
 - c. We can attain it more quickly, whereas the blessings God offers still await us in the next age.
- In some ways, this question returns us to the idolatry theme of the third study (Isaiah 44), so you may find it helpful to refresh your memory on what was shared back then, and/or the Tim Keller book excerpt (on the series webpage)

7. You're engaging with a friend who is convinced they are unworthy to be accepted by God. How could you use this passage to assure them?

- See question 3 for the reliability of God's promise.
- You might also like to highlight the language around salvation being offered without cost (v1), or free forgiveness (v7).

Further comments

- Beyond question 4, there are plenty of other ways that this passage points to Jesus. In particular, the free, gracious nature of salvation secured by the cross (see verses like Romans 3:24), or the identity of Jesus as the son of David.
- Another key point of application which is not addressed by the questions is the emphasis made in verses 6-7 about actually responding to God's offer. It's no good being aware of the Gospel, without responding. You may wish to discuss this focus of the passage instead of, or in addition to other questions.

Study 8 | Isaiah 61:1-11, 65:17-24 (members booklet page 29)

Introduction

1. Skim through the studies done so far. What have we learnt about the servant figure so far? In this study the same character emerges (although not described as the *servant*).

- The purpose of this question is to reflect on the term so far, and in particular recall the studies which focus on the 'Servant' figure. By way of reminder
 - a. Chapter 42 introduced us to the servant figure.
 - b. Chapter 49 continues our understanding of the servant and gives us a bit more detail about the servant mission
 - c. Chapter 52/53 focused on the servant's suffering
- Note: Chapter 61 is not explicitly classified as one of the 'Servant songs', but there are clear similarities.

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Isaiah 61:1-11.** What words are used to describe the recipients of the good news?

- The aim of this question is to carefully read verses 1-11. You might like to ask your group what else sticks out to them, after reading it, before/after asking the question.
- Broadly speaking, regarding the structure of the section:
 - a. Verses 1-3 come from the lips of God's Spirit-anointed preacher (i.e. the same figure as the servant).
 - b. Verses 4-7 describe the benefits that God's liberated people will enjoy.
 - c. Verses 8-9 are the words of God himself
 - d. Verses 10-11 are the joyful response of someone who has received salvation
- The recipients of the good news are described as the poor, brokenhearted, captive, prisoners, those who are mourning and in despair.

3. Which verses in this section portray God's people as being publicly honoured by the world at large? Have you ever imagined salvation to entail that kind of public honour? Why would this image have been especially helpful for the Israelites in exile?

- Verses 3 through 7 all convey this sense of God's people being transformed from a place of oppression to a place of prosperity and honour. The restoration of ruined cities (i.e. Jerusalem) would have been a clear sign of God's favour to the exile generation.
- Instead of being conquered by foreigners, God's people will now be served by them (verse 5), and benefit from their riches (v6b),
- In verse 6 the people are restored to their privileged position as God's priests (c.f. Exodus 19:4-6).
- For our context, we don't often associate salvation with public honour, or the reversal of fortunes. But for oppressed groups such as those in exile, or other victims of severe persecution, such a reversal would represent a tremendous outcome for them.

4. Consider verse 10. What is the model response to the salvation which God accomplishes and applies to his people?

- Joy in salvation is the model response.

5. **Read Luke 4:16–21.** What does Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 61:1–2 teach us about his identity and mission?

- Jesus is clearly identifying himself as the anointed preacher of Isaiah 61.
- This insight helps us read Isaiah 61, because the images of liberation in 61:1-2 apply to us. They may feel irrelevant, because perhaps we don't experience poverty, or captivity etc. However, according to Jesus they capture the essence of his mission. We are spiritually captive/blind and Jesus' salvation liberates us from this condition.
- Note: the Hebrew clause in Isaiah 61: 1 *to proclaim liberty to the captives* was (legitimately) translated differently into the Greek Old Testament as *recovery of sight to the blind*. Luke is quoting from the Greek Old Testament.
- Note: the Luke 4:18 reference to setting free the oppressed comes from Isaiah 58:6

6. Read Isaiah 65:17-24. These verses describe the new creation which will be enjoyed by God's saved people. What aspects of the new creation described here most surprise you? Most excite you?

- Although these verses aren't connected to chapter 61, they are too good to overlook. They fit with chapter 61 insofar as both passages are focused on describing the salvation which God's people can look forward to.
- Having said that, the restoration of Jerusalem and the promised land (Isaiah 61:3-7, and taken up in 65:18-19)) was a concept which the original readers would have rejoiced in. This theme reaches fulfillment in the new creation, when all of God's people (Jew and Gentile alike) will be restored to God's place and presence. The eternal joy of 61:7 points forward to our inhabiting of the perfect new world God will create.

Isaiah 65

- Invite group members to reflect on this passage and share what stands out to them.
- There are wonderful images of life in the new creation entailing peace, long lasting health, material and agricultural prosperity, satisfying work, ecological harmony.

Reflect and Apply

7. Isaiah 61 seems to be written for Israelites in exile who feel broken-hearted, captive, mourning, despairing etc. Can we apply these words of comfort to ourselves, who live in a different phase of salvation history? Why or why not?

- On the one hand, we're not in the same shoes as those of the original readers in exile. However, according to Jesus in Luke 4, the hope of Isaiah 61 is the hope offered to Jesus followers.
- Our experience also tells us that we experience the kinds of hardships referred to in Isaiah 61. Some of us mourn and despair over the state of the world, our own mistakes.

8. Which parts of Isaiah 61 do you consider already fulfilled in Christ?
Which parts are we still awaiting?

- It's hard to settle on a precise answer to this question. Like many salvation blessings, it's a case of 'already and not yet'. The main purpose of this question is for the group to recognize this tension – namely that Jesus has come and begun his kingdom. But we're still waiting for Jesus' kingdom to fully manifest.

Study 9 | Isaiah 66 (members booklet page 31)

Introduction

1. How would you summarize God's ultimate purposes for the world. In other words, what's is the main thing God is aiming for when he created/saved people?

- This is an open question – people should feel free to share their opinions. It affords the opportunity for people to reflect on what has stood out to them from the entire series thus far.
- It's also relevant to this study insofar as verses 18-24 gives us a clear picture of God's ultimate purposes: to make his own glory known and seen amongst all people. E.g. verse 18 – all nations will see my glory

Read and Discuss

2. **Read Isaiah 66:1-17.** The same phrase bookends this section. What is this phrase and what does it convey to the reader?

- The phrase in verse 2b and verse 17 it is "This is the Lord's declaration". Although everything in the Bible has come from God, this phrase convey a weightiness to what's included in verses 2-17. It's as if Isaiah is summing up everything that his prophecy has addressed and is now laying down the choice before his readers really clearly.

3. Who are the two groups of people discussed in this section? Write down all you can observe about what defines these people, and what God will do to/for them.

- This section puts a choice before the readers of two options. So the two groups represent the two alternatives.
- Group 1: on the one hand you have the people who think they can God can be confined to a man-made temple (v1), who do evil in God's sight (vs3-4), who did not listen to God (v4). These people will experience God's judgment (end of verse 5 – put to shame, verse 14 - wrath).
- Group 2: on the other hand are those who are humble and submissive in spirit and tremble at God's Word (v2, 5). These people are reassured of God's promise (v7-9) and can look forward to everlasting blessing. The image of the restored Jerusalem (v10) is used to describe these people.

4. Read Isaiah 66:18-24. What do these verses teach us about God's ultimate goal for human history?

- This picks up from the introductory question.
- The idea of God's glory being seen, is repeated in verses 18, 19.
- Of particular interest is how God's purposes extend beyond the Israelites to the nations (c.f. Rev 7:9). God's plan is for a return to his original intention in creation, that all humanity (v23) would see his glory. The setting, of course is not the original creation, but the new one (the new heavens and new earth of verse 22).

5. What do you consider to be the sign referred to in verse 19?

- This is probably a reference to Jesus – his death and resurrection.
- This idea recalls the introductory verses to Isaiah (see Isaiah 2:1-4) where God's mountains will be established and the word of the Lord going out to the world from Jerusalem.

Reflect and Apply

6. What would it look like today to 'tremble at God's word'?

- This invites reflection from the group members. You might come up with a range of answers.
- At a minimum you can imagine that the following would be good indicators of someone trembling at God's Word
 - a. Reading it
 - b. Trusting it
 - c. Obeying it
- From this chapter in particular, we could also add the importance of avoiding the hollow religion of verses 3-4. That is, being selective about which parts of God's word we do and don't follow. These verses describe people who do the right religious things, but in the end still pursue sin.

7. God's ultimate purposes (see questions above), comprise both salvation and judgment. Why are both of these things necessary for God to achieve his purposes?

- We see judgment and salvation intertwined in this chapter. In particular, verse 24 is a confronting way to end the book.
- The question being posed asks us to consider how both judgment and salvation ultimately bring glory to God. Our temptation, particularly in our age and society

is to correlate God's mercy and his glory. That is, God looks best when he is extending grace to people – and his wrath and judgment are bit of an awkward truth that diminish our view of God. However, the Bible's picture is different to that.

- Of course God is indeed shown to be wonderful in his grace and mercy towards sinners, but he also shows himself to be just, and opposed to evil when he exercises judgment.
- An interesting thought exercise is to ask what we would think of God if every human ever was saved, irrespective of how they've responded to the gospel.

8. Thinking back over the term, what has strengthened your faith that God really will deliver his promised blessings to us?

- This question is aimed at summing up the series. Invite the group to flick back through their booklet and share what has impacted. The big goal of Isaiah, for the original readers, as it has been for us, was that our trust in God's promises, despite appearances, would be boosted. Has that come about for your group members?

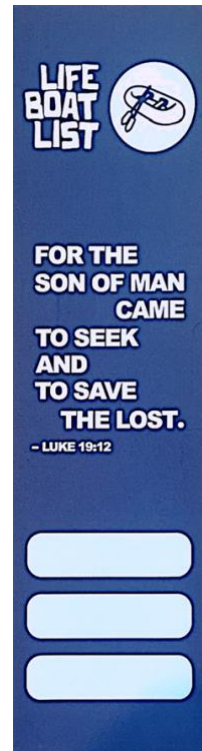
Praying for our *lifeboat lists*

We know that everyone's greatest need in life is to be reconciled with God through Jesus so that their sins can be forgiven. We want lost people to be saved, and know the eternal hope of salvation, rather than perish under God's judgment.

A tool we use to help us pray regularly is our *lifeboat list*. These are bookmarks upon which we can list three people that we're deliberately praying for and actively working towards sharing Jesus with.

In our groups, it would be excellent to share with each other who is on our lifeboat lists, and pray together for each of these people, and our efforts to reach them.

You might like to use the next page record the name of the people you are praying for.



Praying for our *lifeboat lists*

Group Member	Lifeboat list

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