

in the presence of greatness

a guide to preaching Isaiah 1-39

Isaiah is a very big book, and it introduces us to a very big God! That explains why DAVID McDONALD'S preaching guide is very big too! Press on - it's worth reading.

Some tasks are just too big, aren't they? Things like repainting the house, or sorting out all those family photos, or getting the golf handicap into single figures, or preaching through the Book of Isaiah! I confess to having avoided Isaiah and some of the other 'biggs' for too long – and to my own and the congregation's loss. Isaiah is certainly big – big in size and big in ideas – but it is also big in importance. It has been described as the 'fifth gospel' and as the 'Romans' of the Old Testament. Outside the Psalms it is the most quoted book in the New Testament, with most apostolic writers drawing a wealth of material from its source. Isaiah takes us from history to eschatology, from creation to the new creation, introducing us to the Messiah whose road to glory will be paved with suffering and death.

One, Two or Three books?

Isaiah takes us from creation to the new creation, introducing us to the Messiah whose road to glory will be paved with suffering and death...

Over the last century or so, much scholarship on Isaiah has been preoccupied with questions of authorship and dating. The consensus has viewed the book as a two or three part work written by different authors over a couple of hundred years or more. The arguments for this have focussed upon the different historical situations on view in 1-39, 40-55, and 56-66. The early section refers to events related to the Assyrian crisis facing Judah around 740-701BC. The second half of the book details the return from exile in Babylon in 539BC and beyond, with 56-66 having particular reference to the period of restoration following the return. Add to this significant differences of style and detail, emphases of content, the precise references to Cyrus, and more, and you can see why many commentators have dealt with Isaiah as a composite work.

However, recent biblical scholarship has

renewed interest in looking at the final canonical form of the book. Strong arguments have emerged for seeing Isaiah as a unified whole to be attributed to Isaiah. These arguments are many and varied and are not simply a blinkered return to pre-critical scholarship. For example, the lack of historical particularity in 40-66 compared with the earlier section is easily explained if Isaiah is speaking to a future situation. Many of the themes introduced in the early chapters only find their significance and climax in the final chapters. Distinctively Isaianic vocabulary is distributed throughout all sections of the book. The shape of 36-39 only makes sense in the light of a unified Isaiah and a good argument can be made for this section being written prior to 2 Kings, thus reinforcing Isaianic authorship of the whole. Read the introductions to Oswalt, Motyer or Webb for some of the arguments.

Key themes

Isaiah weaves together many grand themes, each shedding light upon the others. God is introduced as the Holy One of Israel and both Isaiah and his people face the crisis of how God can look upon their sin. Jerusalem is the subject and recipient of this vision from God and Isaiah will describe how the city under judgment will be transformed into the heavenly Zion. The picture of judgment is tempered by the promise of a purified remnant who will enjoy a renewed creation. Out of the destruction God reaffirms his covenant promises to install his messianic king. However, in the latter part of the book the king takes a back seat to another figure - a servant who will lay down his life to purify the remnant. And a closer look reveals that the king and the servant are, in fact, one and the same person. Kingly glory for the servant, and for God's people, will come about through suffering.

This book has affected me in many ways, leaving me with a deeper appreciation of the grace of God. I felt often and personally the cry of Isaiah in chapter 6, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." I called this series, *In the presence of Greatness*, because the

overwhelming impact of this book is in meeting God, Himself.

Resources

I made use of the following helpful commentaries:

Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (BST)

J.N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, 2 vols* (NICOT)

J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (IVP)

Webb's commentary is brief but thorough, and gives an excellent overview of the whole work. It is well written, very easy to read and engaging throughout. More detailed exegesis is found in Oswalt and I would make this the complement to Webb. Some of the congregation used the Matthias Media study booklet, *Two Cities*, in bible studies. The studies intersect with the preaching series at a number of points.

How to preach Isaiah

I am sure there are many good ways to preach through this book. And most of them are probably untried! I certainly entertained a few options before deciding on the one that follows. My aim was to move progressively through the book, helping people to see its overall shape and development, while giving particular attention to key themes as they arise. Due to the intertwining of themes throughout Isaiah, some ideas are highlighted in some talks and overlooked in others. The upshot of this is that many fantastic chapters don't get an appearance, but hey, maybe that leaves room for another series in the future!

I decided to divide the preaching into two, eight-week series - one from 1-39 and the other from 39-66. The reason for including chapter 39 in the second series was to provide the context for the message in the latter part of the book. The key idea and a brief plan of each talk in the first series is outlined below. The second series will appear in a later edition of *Perspective*. Where Bible verses appear in brackets, it means that they are read aloud during the sermon.

In the presence of Greatness (Series 1)

Talk 1 The grand vision

Isaiah 1-2

Talk 2 This is not a love song Isaiah 5

Talk 3 Do you want to see God?

Isaiah 6

Talk 4 What's in a name?

Isaiah 7-9

Talk 5 A perfect world

Isaiah 11

Talk 6 Longing for that day

Isaiah 24-27

Talk 7 God's alien task

Isaiah 28:21

Talk 8 Who can you trust?

Isaiah 36-39

Talk Outlines

Talk 1 *The grand vision*

Isaiah 1:1-2:5

1 Good things come in big packages

I open with an illustration of how young children always want to open the biggest packages first, but as we grow older we learn that good things come in small packages. When it comes to the Bible I have tended to stay with the small books, thus missing out on some very good things.

2 Isaiah's vision (1:1)

The book is a vision, and this reveals that the ultimate author is God himself.

a. An historical vision

The vision addresses real historical situations. It is important to note when it occurs, to whom it is addressed, and what is going on in the background. Judah is facing internal crises of faithlessness and rebellion, and external crises with the onslaught of Assyrian destruction. God speaks into the chaos and gives his perspective on what is happening and how Judah must respond. This is a kind of divine editorial.

b A grand vision

The vision is big in size, but it is also big in ideas. It begins (1:2) with heaven and earth called to bear witness and finishes (66:22) with a new heaven and a new earth. The opening describes Jerusalem under judgment, and the closing chapters picture a new Jerusalem of paradisiacal proportions. It is a book of renewal on a cosmic scale. What we have is the whole Bible in

miniature.

c A structured vision

The vision is carefully structured. It can be divided into many different parts, but a simple handle is found by the division into 1-39 and 40-66. It falls open like the Bible as a whole with its Old Testament of 39 chapters followed by 27 in the New. Of course, this cute analogy cannot be pushed too far, but it aids memory. The former section deals with Judah and Jerusalem under the threat of judgment at the hands of the Assyrians, tempered by the hope of salvation with the coming of the Messiah. The latter part describes the redemption of God's people from Babylonian exile, achieved through the saving work of the servant.

d A united vision

I explain very briefly the challenges to the unity of Isaiah and affirm the strong evidence for treating it as one grand vision. The diversity of material throughout is woven together throughout to create an integrated whole.

e A focussed vision

The opening verse of the book spotlights Judah and Jerusalem as the focus of the vision. This is far more than a statement of geography. These places were the centre of promise for God's people and the promise now seems under threat by rebellion against God. However, God remains committed to his covenant and he promises to do a refining work to raise up a purified remnant. As we look closer, we discover the focus is sharper still with the promise of a royal Messiah who will arise from this remnant. This king appears in the early chapters only to appear again later in a different guise - this time as the servant who will create this remnant community to share in a renewed kingdom under his authority.

f A foundational vision

This book is foundational to the New Testament. It is quoted on 66 occasions, and alluded to throughout. Matthew's gospel rests upon Isaiah's shoulders - an ancient stained glass window in France has this picture. It can be described as the 'fifth gospel' and as the 'Romans' of the New Testament. As Jesus begins his public ministry he opens the scroll of Isaiah and says 'This is it!'. The climax of the New Testament echoes and completes the climax of Isaiah. All in all, the book of Isaiah is not one to be over-looked.

3 The prelude (1:1-31)

Due to the time spent on introductory themes, the next sections were deliberately brief.

a The problem

God's children had become rebels (2-4). His Daughter Zion had become a harlot (8,21). They thought that religious ceremony made them okay, while rejecting the matters of true religion (11-17). This is a pitiful and serious state of affairs. How will God respond?

b The answer

God will come in judgement on his enemies – and his enemies are now his children (24-25a). The writing is already on the wall (5-7) and God will bring this threat of judgement to completion (28-30). But we need to look a little more closely.

c A closer look at the answer

Yes. Judah is rebellious. Yes. God will bring judgment. But judgment is not an end in itself. God will purge his people (25b-27). Salvation will come through judgment. There will be cleansing of sin for all who turn to the Lord (18-20). And this presents the choice facing Judah and Jerusalem.

4 The conclusion (2:1-4)

Before Isaiah continues with his message of judgment, he gives us a glimpse of the end.

a A new world order

(1-4) Isaiah describes a new world order, where God reigns supreme. All nations will come to him and receive his blessing. God's word will be practised by all and there will be evermore only justice and peace among all peoples.

5 And now (2:5)

a The grand vision

This vision reaches its climax in Jesus. The purging work has been done. Heaven awaits all who turn to the Lord. But Hebrews 12 teaches us that if we belong to Jesus then we have already come to the heavenly mount Zion. How much more reason do we have then, to walk in the light of the Lord (5).

b Walk this way

The vision of Isaiah was intended to inspire the people of Judah to turn from rebellion to the Lord of heaven and earth. We now have the full picture. God has kept his promises. We have seen his power to accomplish his good purposes throughout history. He has demonstrated his patience in forgiving all who turn to his servant. And he

listens to all who humbly call on his name. Let us therefore, walk in his ways.

Talk 2 This is not a love song

Isaiah 5

1 Bad news – hard to give and hard to take

Bad news is hard to give and hard to take. Some people seem to have the job of passing on bad news. Olympic coaches who have to cut players to select their sides have an unenviable task. Very hard for someone who has trained hard for years to miss out at the last minute. Hard, also for police visiting the homes of accident victims, and hard to receive the news. Hard for a doctor to pass on the test results of a patient who has cancer. Today's sermon is bad news – not full of jokes and stories. Isaiah 5 is a bad news message. It is a hard message to give and a hard one to take. So let's pray.

2 This is not a love song (1-7)

The chapter begins with a song. It sounds like a love song, but something has gone seriously wrong. There are 3 parts: (1-2a) God's generosity, blessing and protection; (2b-4) Israel's response shows their short memories, selfishness and godlessness; and (5-6) God's response of judgment. This 'parable' is explained in (7). The basic picture of bad fruit and subsequent destruction is spelled out in 8-30.

Bad fruit (8-25)

a On the surface

The bad fruit is described by the six woes (8,11,18,20,21,22-23). The idea of woe includes warning and threat, together with deep pathos. There is a serious problem among God's people and this is what their bad fruit looks like: materialism (8-9) and hedonism (12). On the surface it can look like prosperity and blessing, but if we look more closely (11, 22-23) we see that it is not simply their wealth, but greed and corruption. They are preoccupied with their own security and pleasures. The real problem is not simply what you see on the surface, but underneath.

b On the inside

See their attitude: (12b) a brazen disregard; even contempt for God (18-19); amoral, warped and twisted (20); thinking they are so wise (21). The heart of the problem is that they have turned their backs on God (24b).

This is a picture of sin. On the outside it looks successful, glamorous, even wise. Yet

it is preoccupied with self. Inside there is coldness toward God, independence, defiance, redefining the rules, doing my thing in my way and leaving God out of the picture. This is the most serious problem our world has ever, and will ever, face. It was the problem at the beginning and it has affected every person, including you and me. Some would point to the problems of economic inequality, environmental concerns, or warfare and famine, but these things are only the symptoms of our rejection of God.

Destruction of the vineyard (8-30)

The destruction of the vineyard is also reflected in the verses that follow. In particular, the 'therefore' passages of (13,14,24,25)

a The Holy God in action

What is God like and how will he respond to the sin of his people? God is described in two key ways in this chapter, and throughout the book: Lord Almighty and the Holy One of Israel (16,19,24). The description of God in Isaiah is the powerful God, ruling over all, who is uncompromising in his standards, and still cares about his people and his world. Isaiah 5 tells us what this Almighty and Holy God will do in response to sin.

b More than poetic justice

We have a saying, 'poetic justice'. Eg. when the school bully gets picked on. There is certainly some of that here: mansions (8) to homeless (9-10); feasting (12) to starvation (13). But, the big issue is that the Holy God is angry – not flying off the handle – and things are serious (25). We see the *scope* of the judgment (13-15) is all peoples. The shape of the judgment involves the destruction of the nations, such as Assyria and Babylon (13a, 26-30).

This raises the issue of our view of God. God is generous, loving, patient and slow to anger. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished. We must take seriously his holiness, righteousness and justice. It should impact our thinking, speech, actions and prayers.

5 The bad news and the good news

When we look at any part of Scripture there are two questions we should ask:

What does the rest of the Bible make of this? And what should we do in response?

a The vineyard in the 1st century (Matthew 21:33-46)

Isaiah is the bedrock of the New Testament

and the ideas of chapter 5 find expression on the lips of Jesus. We see it in the parable of Matthew 21 and in the 'woes' to the hypocrites in Matthew 23. In (Mt 21:33-40) we discover that Israel continued to reject the word of the prophets, even killing them. This has climaxed in the rejection and murder of the Son of God. This is, in fact, where all sin leads. And yet it is out of the bad news that God brings good news. Through the death of Jesus comes salvation from the judgment of God. The Almighty Holy God can work through extreme bad to bring good. In the death of Christ God's justice and mercy converge. If you haven't already, then turn to Jesus and be saved from God's judgment. God doesn't ignore your sin - he has dealt with it in Jesus.

a Bad fruit in the 21st century

(1 Timothy 6:9-10; 17-19)

Let's also look a little more closely at one of the expressions of sin. Materialism and greed remained issues for God's people in the first century and continue to be so today in the 21st! Our preoccupation with self means we fail to see the needs of others and fail to keep our trust in God. Materialism poses a serious threat to our relationship with God (1 Timothy 6:9-10). The good news of Jesus moves us to dependence upon God and generosity toward others (1 Timothy 6:17-20).

Talk 3 Do you want to see God? Isaiah 6

1 What would you do if you saw God?

What would you expect if you came face to face with God? What would you expect God to be like? How would you expect to react? Roberts Liardon claims to have visited heaven and had a water fight with Jesus in *The River of Life*. He claims that Jesus interrupted him watching 'Laverne & Shirley' one day. These descriptions are a far cry from the Bible's accounts of people meeting God. Moses, Ezekiel, the Apostle John are all overwhelmed by the experience. God establishes the tabernacle and temple with the Most Holy Place to mediate his presence. In Isaiah 6:1 we read that King Uzziah died and his death was brought about by his arrogance in coming into the Divine presence (2 Chron 26:16-19). In this chapter Isaiah, himself, has this experience of meeting God.

2 The vision of God

a Holy, holy, holy (1-4)

(1) Isaiah sees God high and mighty, the

king on the throne. All that is described is the hem of his robe, and this fills the temple. This is an overwhelming, captivating experience. His whole experience is dominated by God. (2) The seraphs, or fiery ones, cover their eyes and feet, unable to look upon God. (3) They praise the complete holiness of God. This is THE God over all. His presence is not limited to the temple, but fills the earth. (4) This experience is overwhelming to the senses. Contrast the impact of an avalanche or tornado, compared with the Almighty God.

b Woe! (5)

What is Isaiah's response? (5) As he pronounced woes on his people on chapter 5, so now on himself. Face to face with God and Isaiah is overwhelmed by his sin and unworthiness. What can he do? Nothing. What has God done?

c Not guilty (6-7)

(6-7) Describe the Day of Atonement. The coal purifies, removing the dross. But it does more. Sin is atoned for, guilt is removed. God has provided a sacrifice for Isaiah. What happens to Isaiah is what must happen to Israel, and what must happen to us all if we are to enter into the presence of God.

3 Whose glory?

Whose glory does Isaiah see? God. Yes, but who is this God?

a Jesus (John 12:23-41)

John quotes Isaiah 6 (John 12:40-41). Isaiah saw Jesus' glory. This is incredible. How can it be? (John 1:1) Jesus, the pre-incarnate Word, radiates God's glory. Jesus makes God known (Heb 1:3). See also the link drawn between Isaiah 6 and 53 (John 6:38-40). Where do we see Jesus' glory? (John 12:23, 27-28, 32-33). If you want to see the glory of God, then look to the cross. In the death of Jesus, God's glory is made manifest.

b More privileged than Isaiah

How could Isaiah have begun to grasp these things? You and I are more privileged. We may not be lifted up to heaven or see visions of the throne room of God, but we can see Jesus. By faith in the full and final revelation of God, we have access to the Lord of all. If we come to Jesus, recognising our unworthiness, depending on his mercy, honouring him as King, then he will reach out and touch our lips and make us clean. Jesus, himself, is our sacrifice of atonement.

If you are not a Christian, then turn to Jesus. If you are a Christian, then has your understanding of God lost some of its shine? Then return to the Word of God.

4 Isaiah's commissioning

What impact does this experience of God have on Isaiah? He responds to God's call to proclaim his message.

a Judgment – for a time (8-13a)

(8-10) What a message! He is to preach judgment, confirming his people in their rebellion. For how long? (11-13a) Until God has finished his work of judgment. Isaiah preaches this message until chapter 39. Aren't you glad you weren't called to preach this message?

b A glimmer of hope (13b; cf. 8:16)

Look more closely (13b). God will preserve a remnant. The seed will grow. Some will listen to Isaiah's message and repent (eg. 8:16).

c The message that divides

People are divided by this message. Many are confirmed in their sin and rebellion, and their judgment is sealed. But to those who repent, like Isaiah, they will receive forgiveness.

5 What message?

What do you and I make of this? If it was never mentioned again, then we could at least say that God's Word came true in the history of Israel. But the New Testament picks up these words and applies them to the ministry of the gospel.

a The words of Jesus (eg Mark 4:1-20)

Jesus' teaching in parables divides people on the basis of whether or not they follow him. Only those who follow Jesus are given the secret of the kingdom of God.

b The words of the apostles (Acts 28:23-31)

The preaching of the gospel continues to divide people.

c The words of Jesus & the apostles today

As people listen to the message of the gospel today, some will harden their hearts. So don't be discouraged, but persevere sharing the good news and praying for God to open people's eyes to the truth.

Talk 4 What's in a name?

Isaiah 7-9

1 What's in a name?

Parents choosing names.

- not too common, not too weird

- positive associations
- meaning... something important to you, hope for the future

2 Signs of the times

This is a large section, an important historical episode, with familiar ideas, but how does it hang together? Importance of children, *significant* names, signs of the time

a Shear-Jashub ... *A remnant will repent* (7:3)

(7:3) Two key ideas: remnant, repent (return). Why is Isaiah told to take his son to meet Ahaz? Ahaz is facing a crisis (7:1-2) and Isaiah calls him to trust God.

b Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz ... *quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil* (8:3)

(8:1-4) The name is given in advance, with important witnesses, and then Isaiah names his second child. This name signifies an immediate warning.

c Children of Isaiah ... *signs and symbols* (8:18)

(8:18) Isaiah and his children are signs and symbols, a visual word from God.

Isaiah's sons reveal the two options for God's people.

d Immanuel ... *God with us* (7:14; 8:8,10)

But we've skipped the most important sign (7:13) another child, another name, another sign. And what of the virgin birth? This is complicated further by the name appearing in (8:8,10). We will come back to this.

e Another child ... *Messianic Son* (9:6-7)
The climax of whole section comes in chapter 9, with another child (6-7) and again, the name is important. This is the King, the Messiah. More still, this is God, himself – a child? Piece together what is said about children, names and their significance and we will go a long way toward understanding what is going on here.

3 The Immanuel child holds the key

a *Matthew 1:23 and the importance of context*

Familiar with Matthew, Xmas story, proof text for divinity or virgin birth. How does it fit in context, the surrounding verses and chapters, the book of Isaiah? Isaiah's message to Ahaz is 'trust God'. He refuses, and therefore the sign of 'Immanuel' is given. This child seems to signify God's judgment upon Ahaz. This is confirmed by the remainder of following passages. It expresses well the hardening of hearts promised in chapter 6, followed by the judgment of God. But, how is 'God with us'

a statement of judgment?

b *God with whom?* (7:11-16)

The question to ask is 'Who is the *us*?' We automatically assume it is you and me, or the world, by reading Matthew. Look more closely (7:10-11) *your God* (12-13) *my God*. Ahaz has the opportunity to turn to God, even to ask for a sign, but he hardens his heart. Therefore, God is no longer with *you*, Ahaz. He is now with *us*, Isaiah & his disciples (8:16). Immanuel is a description of the faithful remnant. The mother is a description of Jerusalem or Zion, who is frequently described as a 'daughter' and even a woman giving birth to a new people (66:8, 37:22). Thus 'Immanuel' becomes a two edged sign which corresponds to fate of Israel, and to the names of Isaiah's children. A remnant people will return to God from Zion, and God will be with them.

This is worked out in the rest of this section with two responses to God, two outcomes, and two kinds of children.

4 Children of darkness

To those who, like Ahaz, reject the Word of the LORD, Immanuel equals judgment. Note Isaiah's second son.

a *A sign of things to come* (8:3-4)

(8:3-4) He is a sign of things to come (732, 722BC). This is a dress rehearsal for God's judgment of Judah and Jerusalem (5-8).

b *Darkness and distress* (8:21-22)

Time of distress & darkness for God's people (8:21-22). We see the hardness of their hearts. If we will not put our trust in the Word of God, there is no hope.

5 Children of the light

a *The sign to follow* (7:3-4)

Isaiah's first son (7:3-4) symbolises the call to repentance. Hope does not lie in political alliances, independent resourcefulness, etc. Ahaz is called to a quiet, calm, trust in the Word of God.

b *The light of the kingdom of God* (9:1-7)

God will honour his promises; he is faithful (9:1-2). There will be a time with no more distress or darkness. The light will dawn with the birth of the child (6-7). This is truly God with his people.

6 God's children today

Great news, God has done this...

a *The light has dawned, the king has come, so repent* (Matthew 1-4)

As we open the first pages of NT... (Mt

1:20-23; 4:12-16, 17)... turn to Jesus, enter the kingdom of God, become a child of light. Do you see that God is a God who can be trusted? The promise of 735BC has been kept. When we are tempted not to trust God, and the circumstances seem overwhelming (as for Ahaz) turn to your one hope, God.

b *Children of light* (Ephesians 5:8-16; 1 Peter 2:8-10; Isaiah 8:14ff)

We have been brought from darkness to light, so let us live as children of the light.

c *It won't be easy* (1 Peter 3:14-16; Isaiah 8:12-13)

It won't always be easy (1 Peter 3:14-16) and it wasn't easy for Isaiah (8:12-13). We are going against the prevailing climate of our culture. We will have different attitudes to work, money, honesty, relationships, everything, and we will face opposition. Let us see things from God's perspective, set apart Christ as Lord, have one allegiance only. As Isaiah was to honour God in all things, so we are called to honour Christ in everything.

Talk 5 A perfect world

Isaiah 11

1 A perfect world

Ask the congregation how they would describe a perfect world. Summarise people's responses. The last 100 or so years have been characterised by an optimism that we can create a better world. This seems to have been replaced by a cynicism or apathy.

2 The Spiritual Ruler

The Bible speaks of a perfect world, and the key to a perfect world is a perfect ruler. We met this ruler last week (9:6-7) and we meet him again now.

a *Humble origins* (1)

(1) Last week we saw judgment upon the house of David, because of the unbelief of Ahaz. Yet from this stump a shoot will grow. Speaking of Jesse rather than David takes us beyond the pomp and arrogance of the kings, to the humble origins of the king; and beyond Jerusalem to the town of Bethlehem. We are reminded of 1 Samuel 16 and the anointing of David to the throne.

b *Spiritual endowment* (2)

Yet what is to stop this ruler turning bad like all the others? He is qualified and equipped to rule by the Spirit of God (2).

The description of the Spirit is seven-fold, perhaps emphasising his holiness and perfection. The emphases are upon wisdom and authority. The work of God's Spirit is essential to the perfection of this ruler. (See also 42:1 and 61:1).

c Fear of the LORD (2-3)

Notice, again, the focus on wisdom. The key to gaining wisdom is in the fear of the Lord. (3a) This perfect ruler will be wise because he is given the Spirit of the LORD and delights in the fear of the LORD. His close relationship with God is the source of his wisdom and authority. If the world is to have any hope then this is the ruler we need.

3 Spiritual rule

a Insight (2-3)

He will apply his God-given wisdom to his rule (3b). This is not like the three monkeys. It is applying judgments that go beyond the surface. One of the roles of being a parent is to be a referee. It is impossible to do this fairly, because even if we see the whole dispute take place we are still unable to judge the attitude and motivations. With the Spirit of wisdom, understanding and knowledge this ruler has the capacity to see things as they really are.

b Justice (4-5)

(4a,5) He will bring justice to the needy, poor and oppressed. This is an extraordinary ruler who brings justice, fairness and equality to those in need. Contrast so many of the kings of Israel and modern day oppressors.

c Power (4)

And he will bring judgment upon the wicked and oppressors (4b). His great might will bring an end to evil and injustice. The description is of more than a mere mortal. The power of his word and breath remind us of the work of creation. This same might which brought the world into existence will now bring it to judgment. Essential to a perfect world is the destruction of evil and the restoration of justice to the oppressed. This required a mighty ruler filled with the Spirit of the LORD.

4 A brave new world

Isaiah goes on to describe the impact or results of this rule. Here is truly a picture of a perfect world.

a Paradise (6-9; Genesis 1-2)

(6-9) Nature red in tooth and claw has been replaced with a picture of peace and tranquility. It is the Garden of Eden once more, with the most vulnerable dwelling

safely alongside the most violent and destructive.

b Children (6,8; Genesis 1-3)

Is there something more going on? The children and the snake remind us of the curse in Genesis 4. Here the child is pictured in authority (6) over the created order, including the snakes. The picture of the little child leading revisits the mandate given humanity to rule the creation. [For further reflection: Given the emphasis on the child in chapters 7-9, could the child described in 11:6 also be a picture of the Messiah?]

c Knowledge (9)

If it is to be a perfect world, then not only must the created order be in harmony, but people must be reunited with their God. In the perfect world every thing will focus upon God. Everyone will know God (9). What the Ruler has by the Spirit of God will be available to all.

d All peoples (10-16; Romans 15:12)

The emphasis to now has been upon the return of a Jewish remnant and this continues in verses 11 to 16. However, the scope of this new world order includes all nations (10). God's plan is to unite Jews and Gentiles, to include Slovaks and Americans and Malaysians and French and Australians and people from everywhere.

5 Now, but not yet

The perfect world will have all creation in harmony, all people in relationship with God, and the perfect ruler in authority over all. How can we find such a ruler?

a Jesus (Revelation 5:5; 22:16)

Consider Jesus: Conceived by the Holy Spirit, baptised in the Spirit, led by the Spirit, and as he begins his ministry he quotes Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." In his ministry we see a taste of the perfect world as he calms the storm, heals the sick, feeds the hungry, rebukes the oppressors, raises the dead and forgives sin against God. After his death and resurrection he is raised to God's right hand and placed in authority over this universe. John's vision describes him as this promised perfect ruler (Revelation 5:5; 22:16). Let us then submit to him.

b Waiting (Romans 8:18-27)

But, if Jesus is the ruler, then why is the world still in such a disastrous mess? We live in the time which has been described as the now, but not yet. Jesus has finished

his work and sat down, but we await his return when the perfect world will be seen and experienced in all its magnificence. Many Aussies have purchased Olympic tickets. They are secure and kept for them. Now they wait in hope for their delivery and the experience of the games in all their glory – I missed mine this morning because I was at church! Romans 8 describes the creation itself waiting for this final revelation, and speaks of the Spirit of God helping us in our weakness as we look forward to that day. Let us push on, enduring this world, longing for the next, and proclaiming the Spiritual Ruler, Jesus, to all nations.

Talk 6 Longing for that day

Isaiah 24-27

1 Justice – a love/hate concern

Watching 'The Insider' you get a strong feeling of injustice as one righteous man battles the mighty forces of the cigarette empires, TV corporations and millionaire lawyers. This theme is common in Hollywood movies, and it works because it strikes a chord in each of us. We have, however imperfect, a desire for justice to be done. If you get burgled, if you get sacked unfairly, if someone is raped or murdered, we crave to see justice. And yet when the Bible or Christians speak of a day of 'judgment' we cringe. It is the most unpopular thing about Christianity. Perhaps we would do better to redescribe this as a day of 'justice' – ultimate justice.

2 The story so far

a Who will you trust? (Chs 1-12; 2:22)

The big issue has been: 'Who will God's people trust?' Ahaz, when threatened by other nations has turned his back on God and looked to others. The temptation is to trust in anything other than the promises of God (2:22).

b Oracles of judgment (Chs 13-23)

God turned away from the house of Ahaz. God is not with him. He promised to remove his protection and bring judgment on Judah. God offers further warnings as he brings oracle upon oracle of judgment upon the nations, including Judah (see introductory words in chs 13-23).

3 The big picture

Chapter 24 gathers up these ideas of judgment and presents a comprehensive picture.

a The reasons for judgment (24:5, 20)

If some one murders, rapes or steals and is then judged, then we'd say fair enough. But most people aren't like that. In these terms most people are basically good. So we have problems with God judging them. But this is not the heart of the problem. (5) We have broken the everlasting covenant – turned our backs upon relationship with God. (20) We have become rebels. Example of George Speight rejecting the Fijian government. Everyone has done this to God.

b The scope of judgment (24:1-3, 17-22)

Therefore God will call everyone, indeed the whole world, to account. (1-3) It doesn't matter who you are - Pol Pot or the Pope; you, me, everybody. If there is to be ultimate justice, then everyone and every situation must come under scrutiny. (18) No one will escape.

c The goal of judgment (24:14-16, 23)

There are a couple of interludes in this catalogue of judgment and they highlight the purpose of judgment. That is, to bring glory to God – that God may be shown to have done what is right (16). If we long for justice we will see it on that day and people will praise God. And God will be shown to be gracious as people are with him on that day declaring his praise.

4 Looking forward to that day

This part of the Bible is encouraging us to long for that day.

a Justice for all (25:4-5)

If we really want justice for all, then this will be a great day (4-5). The needy and distressed will find refuge and the ruthless will sing no longer.

b The ultimate party (25:6)

This day is pictured as a great feast – the best of food and wine. This is what God has in store for his followers (6). God's desire and plan is to put all things right so that people might enjoy him and all his blessings. If you want to enjoy the absolute best of God's creation, then this will be a great day.

c Lifting the cloud (25:7-8; 26:19)

If you want an end to pain and suffering and even death, then this will be a great day (7,8). Not only will people no longer die, but the dead will be raised (26:19). But why would you believe this? JESUS. If you are looking for hope beyond this mortal life, then this will be a great day.

d Make it a great day (25:1, 9)

But, there is a catch. The reality is that this will not be a great day for all. God will bring

an end to rebellion and if we continue to rebel against God, then this will be a day of dreadful judgment. But, if we will turn and place our trust in the God who offers to save (9), then this will be the very best of days. The outcome of that day all depends on the response we choose to make to God now.

5 How are you looking?

In the light of this day, there are two ways of looking at life now.

a Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die (22:13; 1 Cor 15:32)

God warned his people of this day, but they refused to listen. Instead they lived each day for its own pleasures. It makes sense really, and still does, if this life is all there is (1 Cor 15:32). If there is no resurrection, then make the most of life now. Live it up.

b Let us serve God for tomorrow we eat and drink (25:6-8; 1 Cor 15:3-8, 54-58)

But, if death is not the end, if there is resurrection and judgment, and a heavenly feast awaiting all who trust in God (6-7), then we had better take note. Jesus Christ has been raised (1 Cor 15:3ff) and it makes a massive difference to life now and in the future. (1 Cor 15:54-58) Resurrection makes sense of life now. Let us live for Jesus, serving him, labouring for him, knowing that this is what will truly matters.

Talk 7 God's alien task

Isaiah 28:21

(This talk is an interlude from the normal pattern. It is more a topical talk on the judgment and character of God, with special reference to Isaiah 28:21.)

1 What kind of a God?

Isaiah shows God as rich in grace, mercy, love and forgiveness. But we also see a God who is angry, who brings judgment. He raises up foreign rulers to bring his devastation about people - even his own people. What kind of a God is it who will bring judgment upon those whom he redeemed, his covenant people? People say "I can't believe in a God who..." They ignore or reject the Old Testament, in favour of the loving God of the New Testament. This is an important question, "What kind of a God does bring judgment?" What does the judgment of God tell us about his character?

2 A dreadful thing... (Heb 10:31)

The Bible says it is a dreadful thing to fall

into the hands of the Living God. Why is this so? Because, God does not ignore our rebellion and he does not leave the guilty unpunished. We can read of at least four kinds of judgments.

a Giving over (Rom 1:18, 24, 26, 28)

(Rom 1:18) Here is what it looks like... (24, 26, 28) We do things our way, and God lets us have our head. We become 'God-forsaken'. He gives us over, and we have to live with the consequences of our rebellion. Eg. breakdown of relationships, marriages, families; racial bigotry and hatred; corruption; wars; destruction of the environment; greed; theft; etc. God treats us responsibly, with justice. We get what we ask for and we are left with a meaningless void. Yet people prefer this to God.

b Intervening (Romans 13:2-4; 1 Peter 2:14; 1 Corinthians 11:28-31)

Secondly, God intervenes in history to bring judgment. He does this in a permanent way, say through governments (Rom 13:2-4; 1 Pet 2:14). He also does this in occasional ways, such as: the rise and fall of nations; punishing kings and rulers - such as Uzziah; punishing other individuals - such as Annas and Saphira; or through circumstances like sickness (1 Cor 11:28-31).

c Death (Genesis 3:22-24; Romans 6:23; 8:20-21)

Thirdly, death comes as the judgment of God. Life is a gift from God, and therefore can be taken away. The garden of Eden (Gen 3:22-24). Death is God's punishment for human rebellion. It is not a 'good' or 'natural' thing, but the result of sin (Rom 6:23). The whole world is captive under the dominion of death (Rom 8:20-21) – every living thing is dying. Why? Because of sin.

d And beyond (Hebrews 9:27; John 5:28-29; Mark 9:42-48; 2 Thess 1:8-9)

Yet, even death is not the final judgment. (Heb 9:27) There is no reincarnation, no second or third chance. No annihilation, rather resurrection to judgment (John 5:28-29). The Bible speaks of 'hell' and nearly every time it is Jesus speaking. (Mark 9:42-48) It is hard to overstate the significance of this. We must taken this final judgment with utmost seriousness, for it is permanent and irreversible (2 Thess 1:8-9). There is nothing good about it, no benefits, no compensation, no early release or parole. It is final, complete and permanent. It is what we ask for – God out of our lives.

It is very important, before we look more

closely at this, that we feel the full weight of what is being said. There is a judgment and it is very serious.

3 A closer look

There is more to be said. Look more closely at what is revealed about the character of this God who judges.

a Patience (Exodus 34:5-7; 2 Peter 3:7-9)

(Ex 34:5-7) Look at God's character – gracious, faithful, loving... *slow* to anger. God cannot allow injustice, evil and wickedness to go unpunished – but he is slow, controlled, just. Compare our corruption and temper. God is not temperamental, but in full control. His anger is not opposed to his love. The opposite of love is not anger, but indifference. God must punish the guilty, or else he would add another crime, himself. He will punish, but he is slow and measured. God's slowness can also be seen in him holding back judgment (2 Pet 3:7-9). He is delaying to give people time to repent, for he has no pleasure in people perishing.

b His alien task (Isaiah 28:21; Ezekiel 33:11)

In fact, God's first delight, his primary aim and goal, is *not* to punish or bring judgment. This is his alien task (Is 28:21; Ezek 33:11). God is not some nasty cosmic policeman... insert your own story of a vindictive character. It brings God great sadness that people are hell bent on their own destruction.

c Tears (Luke 19:41-44; Philippians 3:18)

See Jesus weeping over the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44). This was promised, even by the prophet Isaiah. Yet, Jesus is deeply moved with sadness. See this same attitude in the apostles (Phil 3:18).

d Self-sacrifice (Isaiah 53:4-6)

The place where we see this most clearly is in the cross of Christ. Here, he takes the judgment upon himself. God's anger is poured out, his condemnation and judgment, upon Jesus. In the self-sacrifice of God we see most clearly his attitude to judgment (Is 53:4-6). He is just and merciful at the same time. Sin must be punished, but he takes the punishment himself. The death of Jesus gives us the clearest possible window into the character of God. This is truly God's strange work,

his alien task.

4 Our 'alien' task

When we see how much sin matters to God, are we moved to change? Are we moved to tears? Compare Jesus, Paul. Spurgeon asked his young preacher who had preached on God's wrath, "And did you do it with tears?" When we see the compassion of God in taking the punishment for sin, are we moved to thankfulness? When we see how much God cares for a world in rebellion, are we moved to do the same? We carry a message of judgment, yes. But it is ultimately the message of the price having been paid. Let us share this great news with others. It is hard work. It doesn't come naturally to many of us. It is an 'alien' task. Let's pray for the character of God to be displayed in our hearts as we live and speak with others.

Talk 8 Who can you trust?

Isaiah 36-37

(A tip with this passage is to read chapters 36-37 with four readers: a narrator, the field commander, Isaiah and Hezekiah. This keeps people's interest with a long reading.)

1 It is as *simple* and as *hard* as trusting in God

The Christian faith is as simple and as hard as trusting in God. It's not about achievements, ceremonies, or keeping all the rules. It is refreshingly simple. All you have to do is trust, rely, depend. This is how you become a Christian – and stay a Christian. Yet it is often so hard. It's like an ultra marathon with all kinds of obstacles, distractions, detours... eg. Pilgrim's Progress.

2 Trust under pressure (36:1-5, 11-12)

Sometimes our capacity to trust is stretched to the limit... eg. loss of loved one; chronic illness; difficulties at work; doors closing as we seek to serve God, some major crisis. The people of God and their king were facing a major crisis: the might of the Assyrians, destruction of Judah and threat to Jerusalem. It was a grave disaster. They were trapped inside their own walls, like the submariners trapped at the bottom of the ocean. There was enormous pressure NOT to trust God.

3 Satan's strategies

A key weapon of Satan is to pressure God's people not to trust God (see Job). If we look closely and understand his strategies, we will be part way to dealing with them.

a Doubts – Focus on the circumstances (36:5-10)

The question (4-5) is 'Who or what are you trusting?'. The field commander points to their circumstances: (6) Egypt is weak; (7) how can God help when Hezekiah has destroyed the places of worship?; (8-9) they are taunted; (10) his closing argument. His claims are basically true. Yet he is bending the truth. He is focusing on the circumstances and directing attention away from God. 'Things look really bad, therefore God cannot be trusted.' This is how Satan works. To us: if unwell; not as rich as could be; not getting on with husband; children undisciplined; car accident etc. Do we think that God can only be trusted if he does what we want?

b Challenges – Question his promises and power (36:13-15, 18-20)

(13) NB arrogance. (14-15) Challenging God's promises. This is an old strategy – Genesis 3. The same today, yet often not so explicit. Also challenges God's power or ability to help (18-20). Again, what he says is true to a point, yet the conclusion is wrong. Satan's strategy is to question God's power. Thus we seek to do things ourselves, do not pray, give up, ie. lack trust.

c Alternatives – Seduce with counterfeits (36:16-17)

(16-17) He is offering a 'future'. Contrast the siege with their own block of land, produce, security, enjoyment. It sounds fantastic, but they ought to be suspicious for the promise involves dispersion from the land, and it mimics the promises of God. We need to be careful here because what is offered is so attractive that it is a real temptation. This is the 'lifestyle lure'. We live in the lifestyle capital of the world: home and garden, holiday and retirement, health and fitness, food and wine, etc. These are offered as substitutes for trusting in God. Why trust God for salvation when the alternatives sound so attractive?

4 The godly response – trust

Isaiah presents contrast between Ahaz who fails to trust God (7:1-4) and Hezekiah, who is a model to Judah, and us, of trusting God (36:1ff). The narrative shape of these passages highlights this contrast.

a Coming before God in humility (37:1)

God brings his people to the end of their resources so they WILL trust in him. (1) Hezekiah is humble and contrite. He turns

to God. This is so simple, yet so hard. It involves dropping our pride, saying 'I need charity, I can't do it on my own'.

b Turning to his Word (37:2)

(2) He sends a messenger to the prophet, Isaiah. He wants to hear the word of God (5-6). When we are tempted not to trust God, we should turn to his word, the Bible. It holds encouragement, strength, hope, compassion and understanding.

c Prayer (37:14-20)

Thirdly, Hezekiah prays (15-20). Prayer is an expression of trusting God. Look at his prayer. It begins and ends with God. The over-riding concern is that God will be glorified. This is not just a prayer for personal rescue, but for God's kingdom and honour. Compare the Lord's Prayer. He brings his needs and the needs of his people to God, and asks God to answer them, but for God's own glory. This is true humility and trust. Prayer is aimed to turn us 'inside-out' – to focus on God, which is to trust.

5 God can be trusted

a Then (37:33-37)

This part of God's word affirms that God can be trusted. God hears the prayer, makes a promise and keeps it. See his miraculous intervention (33-37). But, there are two things to say. (i) It is not that God did just what Hezekiah wanted, but that he did what he had promised – he kept his word. Trust without a promise is not trust. The trust is based upon the promise. (ii) It is not just good things that show God can be trusted. (39:5-7) The Babylonians exile also shows that God keeps his promises.

b Now

God's trustworthiness is shown well beyond the exile and return. All along God has been promising a faithful remnant to come from the house of Judah (37:31-32). The New Testament reveals Jesus as that remnant. He is the only one worthy (eg. Rev 5:1-5). When we see Jesus, we see emphatically that God can be trusted – so trust God.

*David McDonald leads the ministry team at
Crossroads Christian Church in Canberra*