

Isaiah 66: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 66. Thus says the Lord, Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look, he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word. He who slaughters an ox is like one who kills a man, he who sacrifices a lamb like one who breaks a dog's neck, he who presents a grain offering like one who offers pig's blood, he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations. I also will choose harsh treatment for them, and bring their fears upon them. Because when I called, no one answered. When I spoke, they did not listen. But they did what was evil in my eyes, and chose that in which I did not delight. Hear the word of the Lord, you who tremble at his word. Your brothers who hate you, and cast you out for my namesake, have said,

Let the Lord be glorified, that we may see your joy. But it is they who shall be put to shame. The sound of an uproar from the city, a sound from the temple, the sound of the Lord, rendering recompense to his enemies. Before she was in labor, she gave birth. Before her pain came upon her, she delivered a son. Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment? For as soon as Zion was in labor, she brought forth her children. Shall I bring to the point of birth, and not cause to bring forth, says the Lord? Shall I, who calls to bring forth, shut the womb, says your God? Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her. Rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her, that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast, that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious abundance. For thus says the Lord, Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream. And you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip, and bounced upon her knees. As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you. You shall be comforted in Jerusalem. You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice. Your bones shall flourish like the grass, and the hand of the Lord shall be known to his servants. And he shall show his indignation against his enemies. For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.

For by fire will the Lord enter into judgment, and by his sword with all flesh, and those slain by the Lord shall be many. Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following one in the midst, eating pig's flesh, and the abomination and mice, shall come to an end together, declares the Lord. For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues, and they shall come and shall see my glory. And I will set a sign among them, and from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal, and Javan, to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations, and they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, on horses and in chariots and in litters, and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord. And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the Lord. For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from

Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the Lord. And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worms shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

You know, as our chapter 66, the final chapter of the book, there are several reminders of where the book first began. Anthony Tomasino and Brevard Charles both list several of the themes and details that connect the final chapters with the opening two chapters. Both chapters 1 and 66 begin with a reference to the heavens and the earth. Both chapters have a polemic against sacrifice performed by the unrighteous. Both personify Zion, speak of its salvation and judgment, and the gathering of all nations to her. Perhaps most notably, these themes are tackled in the same order in both chapters.

[4 : 45] Chapter 66 also continues from chapter 65, the Lord's response to the community lament of the people and prophet, which we heard in chapter 63 and 64. Throughout the book of Isaiah, perhaps especially in chapters 40 to 55, the uniqueness of the Lord, his sovereignty over all earthly powers, and his transcendence as the eternal creator and God of all, is a pervasive and dominant theme. Back in 1 Kings chapter 8 verses 27 to 30, when Solomon built the temple, he recognized the utter incapacity of such a building to contain God. Yet he prayed that the Lord would place his name in the house and attend to people's prayers when they directed their petitions towards it. But will God indeed dwell on the earth?

Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you. How much less this house that I have built. Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, My name shall be there, that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place, and listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place, and listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive. At the beginning of this chapter the Lord himself expresses the same truth, the insufficiency of any human house to contain him. The temple was symbolically connected with the throne of the Lord, upon the cherubim in the holy of holies. However, the throne of the temple was but a symbolic representation of the throne of the one who fills both heaven and earth. Israel was in constant danger of forgetting this fact and trusting in the temple itself, rather than looking to the one whose gracious presence in their midst it symbolized. In his famous temple sermon in Jeremiah chapter 7, the prophet Jeremiah spoke out against the people's presumptuous confidence in the temple.

Their belief that their mere possession of the temple served as a guarantee of the Lord's favor, perhaps even that the temple gave them some sort of leverage with God. As the Lord created all things, however, there is nothing that we can give to him that he has not first given to us.

What the Lord looks for, though, is not grand and beautiful edifices, but humble hearts devoted to him. Back in chapter 57 verse 15 we read, For thus says the Lord who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy, I dwell in the high and holy place, but also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

The Lord's true dwelling place is not only in the highest heavens, but with the humble and contrite believer, the person who treats his word with awe and reverence. A contrast is drawn between such contrite persons who fear the Lord, and a different class of persons who pervert the worship of the Lord.

[7 : 41] Some translators and commentators on verse 3 believe that it presents the performance of richly correct sacrifices in some instances as tantamount to cultic abominations, presumably on account of the rebellious hearts of those performing the sacrifices. However, it seems more likely that this is a reference to people who both offered established and licit sacrifices in the temple, while also participating in the idolatrous sacrifices characteristic of Canaanite religion.

The Lord called for the exclusive devotion of his people, forbidding all syncretism, polytheism, and idolatry. Yet many of the people believed that they could hedge their bets, serving both the Lord and the idols of the nations. Exacerbating the wickedness of their syncretistic and idolatrous practices, the people were proud and stubbornly delighted in their infidelity to the Lord.

Consequently, the Lord marked them out for harsh judgment. They had rejected and forsaken him, not heeded any of his overtures, and had shut their ears to his word, and stubbornly pursued paths that the Lord condemned as evil. Addressing those who feared him, the Lord encourages them in a situation where they faced ridicule and social exclusion on account of their faithfulness.

Verse 5 presents some challenges for the interpreter. Are the idolatrous Jews presenting themselves as faithful, regarding themselves as acting in the name of the Lord as they ridicule and cast out their righteous brethren? Or does, for my name's sake, relate to the faithfulness of the righteous that leads to their exclusion by the wicked? I lean towards the latter and understand the statement, let the Lord be glorified that we may see your joy, a scornful ridicule of the faithful people's trust in the Lord. However, despite the wicked people's confidence, it is they who will be put to shame. In verse 6, mighty sounds are heard as the Lord begins his judgment upon his foes.

There have been various instances of mother and of birth imagery in the book of Isaiah to this point, imagery that has brought together themes of pain, of barrenness, struggle, futility, bereavement, but also of hope. In chapter 26, verses 17 to 19, for instance, like a pregnant woman who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near to giving birth, so were we because of you, O Lord. We were pregnant, we writhed, but we have given birth to wind. We have accomplished no deliverance in the earth, and the inhabitants of the world have not fallen. Your dead shall live, their bodies shall rise.

[10 : 07] You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy, for your Jew is a Jew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. Also in chapter 49, verses 19 to 21, surely your waste and your desolate places and your devastated land, surely now you will be too narrow for your inhabitants, and those who swallowed you up will be far away. The children of your bereavement will yet say in your ears, the place is too narrow for me, make room for me to dwell in. Then you will say in your heart, who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these?

Behold, I was left alone. From where have these come? Zion's struggle with barrenness and the Lord's reversal of that is a recurring theme in the book. In the scriptures more broadly, we see birth as a symbol of deliverance in places like the story of the Exodus, which itself is framed as a great birth narrative, as the Lord hears Israel in its pangs, opens the dark womb of Egypt, delivering his firstborn son in the Passover and the Red Sea crossing. Verses 7 and following describe another birth, a most remarkable form of reversal. Zion is suddenly going to give birth to a son, and Zion is going to give birth not merely to one child, but to an entire nation. We could see this in part as a fulfillment of the promise of Genesis chapter 3 verse 15, in the birth of the seed of the woman, destined to crush the serpent's head. We might also think about the way in which the servant, who is expected as the great deliverer of the people, will sum up the nation's destiny in himself. As he is restored after suffering his pangs, he will see his seed, and many servants of the Lord shall arise from his work. The Lord is going to be the one who brings about this new birth. He is the one who guarantees to Zion her fruitfulness. In verses 10 and 11, the Lord calls for people to share in Jerusalem's rejoicing. The city, once mourned over by those who loved her, would be made fruitful, no longer be barren, and would provide richly for all of her children. The elevation and blessing of Zion would occur through the Lord's work on her behalf.

Previously in the book of Isaiah, where we read of rivers overflowing their banks, the image was one of pagan nations threatening the land. Now, however, the Gentile waters overflowing their banks are bearing riches and treasure to Jerusalem. The Lord would provide his people with the comfort that they needed.

After all of their afflictions, the Lord would offer them comfort, as a mother would comfort her child, in the provision offered by Jerusalem. As they saw the restoration of Jerusalem, people who had languished and been dispirited would be restored and encouraged. Bones that had wasted away would flourish. People who had mourned would rejoice, and the Lord's hand of justice would be evident within the world, blessing the righteous and judging the wicked. In chapter 64 verses 1 to 2, the prophet had expressed his desire. Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence, as when fire kindles brushwood, and the fire causes water to boil, to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence.

What was expressed as a longing there is expressed as something that will be fulfilled here. The Lord will come in fire, his chariots like the whirlwind, the theophanic manifestation of the Lord's justice and glory that the people had yearned for, would now be seen by all. He would vindicate his people, and wreak vengeance upon his adversaries. As earlier chapters of the book had spoken about the gathering of the nations in judgment, so the Lord would gather them here. The Lord would bring their evil works and their thoughts into judgment, and idolaters would be decisively cut off. Among the remnant left after these judgments, the Lord would send out survivors among the nations, bearing the news of the glory of the Lord. In these concluding verses of the book, we find many of the themes that we encountered earlier on. The Lord entering into judgment against the nations and their false gods. The Lord displaying his glory to all of the nations, gathering into Jerusalem from all parts of the earth, her exiled children, but also foreigners who would be made full members of the people of the Lord. This should bring our mind back again to the very beginning of the book, in chapter 2 verses 2 to 4. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it. And many people shall come and say, Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

[14 : 47] He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. A similar expectation is expressed in chapter 60 verses 1 to 6. Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples. But the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. A nation shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around and see. They all gather together, they come to you. Your son shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant. Your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the seas shall be turned to you.

The wealth of the nation shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you. The young camels of Midian and Ephah, all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord. Just as in chapter 60, the Lord here expresses his acceptance of the sacrifice of these foreigners. In the opening verses of the first chapter of this section of the book, in chapter 56, we heard of the Lord's inclusion of the foreigner among his people. Here that inclusion goes even further. The Lord won't merely accept their offerings. He will even accept some of them as priests and Levites, as his servants, leading the people in their worship, and teaching the law.

This might be part of what is meant in chapter 2 of the law going out from Zion, the law being taught and administered, not just by Jewish priests and Levites, but by people from all nations.

The people so formed of faithful Jews and Gentiles brought together would endure before the Lord, their name being made great, much as in the promise made to Abraham at his call. In the new heavens and earth that would exist, a continual form of worship involving all flesh, Jews and Gentiles, would be established. The chapter and the book ends with a note of shadow. In the advent of the brilliant light of the Lord's promised future, there would also be those who would be cast into darkness. The ceaseless continuance of the worship of the people of the Lord has as its grim counterpart the ceaseless mean existence, fiery torment and disgrace of those who rebelled against the Lord. Elsewhere, in places like Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 32 and 33, we see dead bodies serving as a sobering reminder of the consequences of rejecting the Lord. Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter, for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere. And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and none will frighten them away. A question to consider, where else in the book of Isaiah, and elsewhere in the prophets and other parts of the Old Testament, do we find prophecies, visions and anticipations of the bringing in of the nations?