

Chapter 36: The Rabshakeh Speaks

Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

The events in this chapter occur in 701 B.C., when Sennacherib besieges Jerusalem. It is the 14th year of King Hezekiah's reign, which began in 715 B.C.

B.C.	750	740	730	720	710	700	690	680
Isaiah's Ministry	[Timeline bar from 750 to 680 B.C.]							
Hezekiah	[Timeline bar from 715 to 701 B.C.]				[Timeline bar from 701 to 680 B.C.]			

Key verses:

Isa. 36:18-20 – “[Beware] that Hezekiah does not mislead you by saying, ‘The LORD will deliver us.’ Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria from my hand? Who of all the gods of these lands [ever] delivered his land from my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem?”

Quick summary:

Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, reports in his royal annals that he has captured 46 walled cities and countless villages in his conquest of Judah. Among the more important cities is Lachish, from which he sends his personal representative, the Rabshakeh, and a large army to surround Jerusalem and demand its surrender. The Rabshakeh, a high-ranking Assyrian official and the king's cupbearer, mocks Judah's king Hezekiah and the king's trust in the Holy One of Israel. Hezekiah's representatives – Eliakim, who is in charge of the palace; Shebna, the scribe; and Joah, the record keeper – receive the Rabshakeh's call to surrender and deliver it to the king. They have torn their clothes as a sign of mourning and deep distress.

Take note:

Isaiah notes that the Rabshakeh delivers his message “near the conduit of the upper pool, by the road to the Fuller's Field” (v. 2). This place is significant for geographical and theological reasons. Thirty years earlier, the Lord tells Isaiah to take his son Shear-jashub and meet King

Ahaz at this location (Isa. 7:3). The prophet assures Ahaz that the allied forces of Aram and Israel will not defeat Judah. But Ahaz trembles and refuses to trust the Lord, turning instead to an alliance with Assyria (2 Kings 16:5-9). Now King Hezekiah faces a more ominous threat from Judah's former ally, the Assyrians, whose messenger stands on the same spot, blaspheming the Lord and belittling His people. Will Hezekiah listen to the Rabshakeh or remember the message of deliverance from Isaiah? Will the king, unlike his predecessor, stand firm in his faith?

The Men Sent by Kings (Isa. 36:1-3)

Sennacherib, who rules Assyria from 705-681 B.C., has boasted of conquering 46 walled villages in Judah and numerous unprotected communities, as well as taking more than 200,000 people captive. His invasion begins in the north as his army moves along the coast, defeating such towns as Aphek, Timnah, Ekron and Lachish. Lachish, about 30 miles southwest of Jerusalem, then becomes the staging area for his attack on other towns and the place from which he sends his spokesman and a massive army.

According to 2 Kings 18:17, Sennacherib sends three of his most important officers to arrange for Hezekiah's surrender of the capital city: Tartan (supreme commander), Rabсарis (chief officer) and Rabshakeh (field commander). These are military titles, not personal names. Judah's representatives are Eliakim, who is in charge of the king's palace; Shebna, the scribe who has been demoted and replaced by Eliakim as the king's cupbearer; and Joah, the record keeper.

The Message for Hezekiah (Isa. 36:4-20)

The Rabshakeh directs his message to Hezekiah, speaking loudly in Hebrew so that even the common citizens on Jerusalem's wall may hear his taunting words. "The field commander's speech is one of the most insolent and blasphemous found anywhere in Scripture, for he reproached the God of Israel," according to Warren W. Wiersbe. "His speech is a masterful piece of psychological warfare in which he discredits everything that the Jews held dear" (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 36:1).

Interestingly, the Rabshakeh begins by echoing one of Isaiah's messages, reminding the Jews that their trust in Egypt is misplaced. "Now who are you trusting in that you have rebelled against me?" he shouts. "Look, you are trusting in Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff" (vv. 5b-6a; compare with Isaiah's words in 30:1-7; 31:1-3).

Next, he mischaracterizes Hezekiah's religious reforms in Judah to accuse God's people of having no help in heaven or on earth (v. 7). "The Assyrian mistakes Hezekiah's religious reforms whereby he took away the high places (2Ki 18:4) as directed *against Jehovah*. Some of the high places may have been dedicated to Jehovah, but worshipped under the form of an *image* in violation of the second commandment.... Hence the Assyrian's allegation has a specious color: you cannot look for help from Jehovah, for your king has 'taken away His altars'" (Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, S. Is 36:7).

For the Jews, the only reasonable response to their hopeless condition is to surrender, according to the Rabshakeh, who mockingly offers to give them 2,000 horses if they can only find a matching number of riders. But even 2,000 Jewish soldiers on horses are no match for the lowest ranking Assyrian officer. Why should God's people continue to barricade themselves behind Jerusalem's walls when the Lord Himself has commanded the Assyrians to take the city? "Have I attacked this land to destroy it without the Lord's approval?" asks the Rabshakeh. "The Lord said to me, 'Attack this land and destroy it'" (v. 10). These words are meant to terrorize the people by making them think the Lord has abandoned them, when in fact Isaiah has told them to trust God, who will not permit the Assyrians to take the city. While the Lord of Hosts has indeed used the Assyrians as His rod of judgment against both Israel and Judah, He has spoken no word to Assyria's leaders assuring them of their conquest of Judah's capital city. The Rabshakeh falsely invokes the name of Israel's God. As he will soon learn, no nation can use God's name with impunity.

God calls us to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). The Rabshakeh's call to surrender may sound reasonable to the unbelieving Jews who saw their city surrounded and their allies crushed by the brutal Assyrian hoards. But God has promised to deliver His people and He remains true to His word.

Judah's messengers respond to the Rabshakeh's opening volley by making the reasonable request that matters of state be discussed privately rather than "within earshot of the people who are on the wall" (v. 11). Aramaic is a major diplomatic language in Isaiah's day, similar to Hebrew but different enough so the common people have difficulty understanding it. The concern of Judah's representatives is that panic will spread throughout the city. The Assyrian's response – denigrating the Jews and speaking loudly in Hebrew – reveals his character. "Proud and haughty scorers, the fairer they are spoken to, commonly speak the fouler," writes Matthew Henry. "Nothing could be said more mildly and respectfully than that which Hezekiah's agents said to Rabshakeh.... To give rough answers to those who give us soft answers is one way of rendering evil for good; and those are wicked indeed, and it is to be feared incurable, with whom that which usually turns away wrath does but make bad worse" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 36:11).

Calling out to the people in Hebrew, the Rabshakeh urges them not to let Hezekiah deceive them into thinking the Lord will deliver them from the Assyrians (vv. 13-15). Rather, the people are exhorted to lay down their weapons and surrender without a fight. If they do, even though they will be taken captive, Sennacherib will ensure their prosperity in another land. Pressing his persuasion further, the Rabshakeh asks the Jews, "Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim?" (vv. 18-19). Hamath and Arpad are cities in Aram. The location of Sepharvaim is unknown but possibly near the other two. People are brought from these cities to repopulate Samaria after its fall (2 Kings 17:24). The commander also boasts that since Samaria's god failed to rescue the northern kingdom 21 years earlier (722 B.C.), the people of the southern kingdom have no reason to hope in deliverance at the hand of the Lord of Hosts.

The Misery of the Messengers (Isa. 36:21-22)

The Rabshakeh's words no doubt terrorize Hezekiah's men who, in obedience to the king, say nothing in reply. In fact God's Word instructs us about a proper response to arrogant and foolish people like the Assyrian commander: "Don't answer a fool according to his foolishness, or you'll be like him yourself" (Prov. 26:4). Eliakim, Shebna and Joah return to Hezekiah and, with clothes torn as a sign of distress, mourning or grief over the blasphemy they have just heard, report the Rabshakeh's words.

It's possible that Hezekiah has instructed his men to receive the Assyrian commander's message in silence so they would not be guilty of engaging a blasphemer in a war of words. In Exodus 14, for example, as the Jews are trapped between the Red Sea and the Egyptian army, and as they begin to question God and His chosen leader, Moses rebukes them, shouting, "The LORD will fight for you; you must be quiet" (Ex. 14:14). And in Jude 1:9, the writer reminds Christians to trust God to deal with blasphemers and apostates: "Yet Michael the archangel, when he was disputing with the Devil in a debate about Moses' body, did not dare bring an abusive condemnation against him, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'"

Closing Thought

Warren W. Wiersbe comments: "Crises often come when circumstances seem to be at their best. Hezekiah had led the nation in a great reformation, and the people were united in the fear of the Lord. They had put away their idols, restored the temple services, and sought the blessing of their God. But instead of receiving *blessing*, they found themselves facing *battles!* 'After all that Hezekiah had so faithfully done, Sennacherib king of Assyria came and invaded Judah' (2 Chron. 32:1, NIV). Had God turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to all that Hezekiah and his people had done? Of course not! The Assyrian invasion was a part of God's discipline to teach His people to trust Him alone. Even Hezekiah had at first put his trust in treaties and treasures (2 Kings 18:13-16), only to learn that the enemy will keep the wealth but not keep his word. Judah had negotiated to get help from Egypt, an act of unbelief that Isaiah severely rebuked (Isa. 30:1-7; 31:1-3). *God's great purpose in the life of faith is to build godly character.* Hezekiah and his people needed to learn that faith is living without scheming" (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 36:1).

Chapter 37: My Hook in Your Nose

Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

The events in this chapter occur in 701 B.C., when Sennacherib besieges Jerusalem.

B.C.	750	740	730	720	710	700	690	680
Isaiah's Ministry	[Shaded area]							
Hezekiah	[Shaded area]				[Shaded area]			

Key verses:

Isa. 37:28-29 – But I know your sitting down, your going out and your coming in, and your raging against Me. Because your raging against Me and your arrogance has reached My ears, I will put My hook in your nose and My bit in your mouth; I will make you go back the way you came.

Quick summary:

When Hezekiah hears of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem and the Assyrian's blasphemous boasts, the king of Judah asks Isaiah to seek the Lord on the people's behalf. Isaiah delivers three messages from the Lord, according to *Willmington's Bible Handbook* (S. 368):

- Message 1: "Don't worry, he's doomed" (vv. 5-20).
- Message 2: Sennacherib's rise and ruin (vv. 21-29).
- Message 3: "Neither army nor arrows will enter the city" (vv. 30-35).

These messages are fulfilled (vv. 36-38). The angel of the Lord miraculously destroys the Assyrian army. Sennacherib returns home and, some time later, is assassinated.

Take note:

"The Angel of the Lord," who strikes 185,000 Assyrians dead on the hills surrounding Jerusalem, is a "theophany," an appearance or manifestation of God to people. Many commentators believe the Angel of the Lord (distinct from "an angel of the Lord" or "an angel sent by the Lord") is the pre-incarnate Messiah, who appears in numerous places to

different people throughout the Old Testament: to Hagar in the wilderness (Gen. 16:7-11); to Moses in the burning bush (Ex. 3); to Balaam as he rode his donkey (Num. 22:22-35); to Gideon beneath the oak of Ophrah (Judges 6:11-24); to David in Jerusalem (2 Sam. 24:11-17); and elsewhere.

Don't be Afraid (Isa. 37:1-7)

Like the envoys sent to meet the Assyrian commander, King Hezekiah tears his clothes in anguish over the Rabshakeh's threats and in response to the pagan's blasphemy. The king also puts on sackcloth and enters the temple as a public declaration that the nation's destiny is fully in the hands of the God of Israel. He sends Eliakim, who is in charge of the palace, and Shebna the scribe to Isaiah, declaring this "a day of distress, rebuke, and disgrace" and seeking a word from the Lord through the prophet. Picking up the imagery from Isa. 26:17-18, they compare Judah to a woman so weakened in pregnancy that she is about to die in childbirth.

Although the Assyrian commander mocks the living God in hopes of driving Hezekiah to abandon his faith and agree to surrender, the king turns to the Lord for deliverance. Matthew Henry writes, "Rabshakeh intended to frighten Hezekiah from the Lord, but it proves that he frightens him to the Lord. The wind, instead of forcing the traveller's coat from him, makes him wrap it the closer about him. The more Rabshakeh reproaches God the more Hezekiah studies to honour him, by rending his clothes for the dishonour done to him and attending in his sanctuary to know his mind" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 37:1).

Isaiah tells the messengers to assure the king not to be afraid. The Lord has heard the Rabshakeh's boasting and blasphemy and will not permit them to go unpunished. He will put "a spirit" in King Sennacherib, influencing his judgment and causing him to return to his country, where he will die by the sword. This comes to pass as Sennacherib, who has turned to the southwest to face off against Judah's allies, hears of the death of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers and goes home to regroup, only to be assassinated.

Sennacherib's Letter (Isa. 37:8-13)

Sennacherib has left Lachish, the city from which he stages his assault on Jerusalem, in order to address a threat from Tirhakah, a Cushite army commander who later will become king of Egypt. Word has arrived that Tirhakah has come to the aid of Judah, and Sennacherib moves his forces five miles north of Lachish to meet the Cushite army. Not wanting to fight a war on two fronts, Sennacherib sends a threatening letter to Judah's King Hezekiah, urging him to surrender immediately. He reminds Hezekiah that other nations' gods were powerless to stop the advancing Assyrian war machine and that Judah's God will fare no better. Gozan, a city on the Habor River, fell to the Assyrians a century earlier. Haran, a city in Aram, is now an Assyrian stronghold. Rezep, also a city in Aram, had long ago been subdued. The arrogant king lists other places and their leaders that have fallen into Assyria's hands.

Matthew Henry comments: “Great successes often harden sinners’ hearts in their sinful ways and make them the more daring. Because the kings of Assyria have destroyed all lands (though, in fact, they were but a few that fell within their reach), therefore they doubt not but to destroy God’s land; because the gods of the nations were unable to help they conclude the God of Israel is so.... Thus is this proud man ripened for ruin by the sunshine of prosperity” (S. Is 37:8).

Hezekiah’s Prayer (Isa. 37:14-20)

Hezekiah takes Sennacherib’s taunting letter to the temple and lays it out before the Lord. What follows is a great prayer of faith. The king begins with praise, acknowledging the Lord of Hosts as the one true and living God, the Creator, exalted above all things and sovereign over the kingdoms of the world. Referring to Him as “God of Israel,” Hezekiah remembers (for God needs no reminding of) the special covenant relationship between the Lord and His people. The king’s reference to God being “enthroned above the cherubim” points to His presence, the Shekinah glory, in the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem’s temple (1 Kings 6:23; 8:10-13). The cherubim “are so inseparably associated with the manifestation of God’s glory, that whether the Lord is at rest or in motion, they always are mentioned with Him (Nu 7:89; Ps 18:10)” (Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, S. Is 37:16).

The king confesses God’s sovereignty over all the kingdoms of the world, including Assyria, which has demolished its enemies and run roughshod over their false gods, gods of wood and stone “made by human hands” (v. 19). But now Sennacherib has overstepped his bounds, mocking the living God and treating Him and His people with contempt. Hezekiah’s plea is simple, humble and direct: “Now, Lord our God, save us from his hand so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You are the Lord – You alone” (v. 20).

God’s Answer (Isa. 37:21-35)

The Lord’s reply to Hezekiah’s prayer provides a three-fold assurance: Jerusalem will not be taken; the Assyrians will not stay; and the Jews will not starve.

The “Daughter Zion,” like a young virgin, will not be ravaged by the barbarous Assyrians. She may look at the enemy and shake her head in scorn because he cannot touch her. The Lord will spare His remnant for a number of reasons. First, to glorify His name (vv. 23, 35). Sennacherib has mocked the God of Israel and the Assyrians have exalted themselves above all men and gods, but they will soon learn to fear the one true and living God. Second, the Lord will spare Jerusalem because of His covenant with David (v. 35; 2 Sam. 7). He promised that one of David’s descendents would reign on the throne forever. Ultimately this is fulfilled in Christ. It’s true that Jerusalem will fall and the temple will be destroyed a century later at the hands of the Babylonians, but God’s promise stands and His timing and purpose are unchallenged. A third reason the Lord will spare a remnant is because of His

promise to use Israel as the means by which the Abrahamic covenant would be fulfilled and all the world would be blessed through the Messiah (Gen. 12:1-3).

The Lord's second assurance to Hezekiah is that the Assyrians will not stay (vv. 23-29). God addresses Sennacherib directly in these verses, reminding the king that his empty and blasphemous boasts will not thwart the plan of God. Ultimately, the Lord will humble the king and his army and lead them like cattle away from Daughter Zion: "I will put My hook in your nose and My bit in your mouth; I will make you go back the way you came" (v. 29).

The Lord's final assurance is that the Jews will have enough to eat – comforting words to people under siege. Although normal agricultural pursuits would be interrupted momentarily, the cycle of planting and harvesting would return to normal within three years (v. 30). Warren Wiersbe observes that Psalm 126 may have been written to commemorate Jerusalem's deliverance from the Assyrians: "The harvest promise in verse 30 parallels Psalm 126:5-6. The seed would certainly be precious in those days! That grain could be used for making bread for the family, but the father must use it for seed; so it is no wonder he weeps. Yet God promised a harvest, and He kept His promise. The people did not starve" (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 36:1).

Sennacherib's Demise (Isa. 37:36-38)

As God promises, the Assyrians fail to take Jerusalem. The angel of the Lord, who some commentators say is the pre-incarnate Messiah, strikes down 185,000 enemy soldiers in a single night. The carnage the next morning is difficult to fathom: There are no signs of a struggle, no battle wounds on the fallen; just a massive army of soldiers lying dead on the hillsides. The Lord promised to chop down the Assyrians like a forest (Isa. 10:33-34), pummel them like a storm with fire, rain, a torrent and hailstones (Isa. 30:27-30), and destroy their leader (Isa. 30:31-33), and now He is true to His word. The work of God on this fateful night reminds the Jews of His sovereignty in bringing both deliverance and judgment (Ex. 12:12; 2 Sam. 24:15-17).

News of the Assyrian defeat prompts Sennacherib to leave Judah and return to his capital city of Ninevah. Twenty years later, as a result of a power struggle, he is assassinated by two of his sons while worshipping in the temple of his god Nisroch (or Asshur, the chief Assyrian god depicted as an eagle-headed human figure), thus fulfilling Isa. 37:7 (see also 2 Kings 19:7, 35-37). Although Sennacherib mocks the God of Israel, his own god is unable to save him.

Closing Thought

Matthew Henry summarizes: "God can quickly stop their breath who *breathe out threatenings and slaughter* against his people, and will do it when they have filled up the measure of their iniquity; and *the Lord is known by these judgments which he executes*, known to be a God that resists the proud. Many prophecies were fulfilled in this providence, which should encourage us, as far as they look further, and are designed as common and general assurances of the safety of the church and of all that trust in God ..." (S. Isa 37:21).

Chapter 38: To the Gates of Sheol


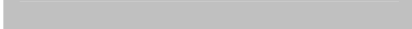
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
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When this takes place:

Hezekiah falls terminally ill, apparently in the days before or during Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C.

B.C.	750	740	730	720	710	700	690	680
Isaiah's Ministry								
Hezekiah								

Key verses:

Isa. 38:17 – Indeed, it was for [my own] welfare that I had such great bitterness; but Your love [has delivered] me from the Pit of destruction, for You have thrown all my sins behind Your back.

Quick summary:

Hezekiah is afflicted by a fatal illness and in desperation cries out to the Lord, who extends the king's life by 15 years. The shadow of the king's sundial moves back 10 degrees as a sign of God's promise. After being healed, Hezekiah recounts his depression and deliverance in a poem that praises the Lord for His forgiveness and faithfulness.

Take note:

The sign of God's promise to Hezekiah – the backwards movement of the sundial – is similar to an even more dramatic event in Joshua 10:12-14, when the Lord causes the sun to delay its setting for almost a full day so the Israelites may take their vengeance on the Amorites. Both miracles illustrate the Lord's power over creation and His sovereign right to suspend the orderly principles upon which the universe operates.

The King's Sickness and Supplication (Isa. 38:1-3)

Hezekiah's illness precedes Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem, recorded in chapters 36-37. Chapters 38-39 come before chapters 36-37 chronologically but are placed here perhaps because they prepare the way for the rest of Isaiah. The news of Hezekiah's illness affects the entire nation. Whenever a leader – especially a godly one like Hezekiah – falls ill, it impacts the economy, the military, the national mood and much more. Imagine, as well, how the news creates national panic when Jerusalem is on the cusp of an Assyrian siege. But there's more. Since Hezekiah does not have a son, he would have to appoint a near relative to the throne. Would God's promise to David hold true (2 Sam. 7:16)?

Upon learning of his terminal illness (2 Kings 20:1-6, 9-11; 2 Chron. 32:24) the king turns his face to the wall, not in a sulking manner as Ahab has done (1 Kings 21:4), but likely to afford himself privacy as he seeks the Lord's favor. While some commentators criticize Hezekiah for his "selfish" prayer, the king is praying only as most others would pray. Besides, as a godly king, he likely has his nation's future in mind at least as much as his own health. Interestingly, Hezekiah does not specifically pray that his life be spared, although it is implied. Rather, his concern seems to be for a godly leader at a time of national calamity.

Even though Hezekiah's illness is a crushing blow to the king and his subjects, God will use the circumstances of the king's life to teach us to rely totally on Him to be faithful to His promises.

The Lord's Salvation and Sign (Isa. 38:4-8)

The Lord replies to Hezekiah's prayer through Isaiah, who assures the king that Yahweh has heard his prayer and seen his tears. It should be comforting to the believer to know that the sovereign Lord of the universe is able to distinguish the singular cry of a righteous man among the "noise" of mankind's religious pleadings; that He observes, listens and responds graciously. More than 700 years later James will capture the same truth when he writes, "The intense prayer of the righteous is very powerful" (James 5:16b). Isaiah tells Hezekiah that the Lord will extend his life by 15 years. Since Hezekiah dies in 686 B.C., this prayer and its answer are set in 701 B.C., the year of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem. Yahweh's additional promise is that the Assyrians will not take the capital city, which must bring great comfort to the king's heart.

The Lord confirms His promise to Hezekiah by a sign. Evidently a unique sundial has been built, a stairway that tells time by casting shadows. Some commentators believe the sundial is a large pillar that casts shadows on a double set of stairs. Herodotus states that the sundial and the division of days into 12-hour segments is an invention of the Babylonians, from whom Ahaz no doubt models his sundial. It's interesting to note that years earlier, Ahaz rejects a sign from the Lord (Isa. 7:10-12). Now, on a stairway named for the late king, his son receives God's miraculous assurance. 2 Kings 20:9-11 tells us that Hezekiah is given the choice as to which direction the shadow should move – forward or back. "It's easy for the

shadow to lengthen 10 steps,” Hezekiah says. “No, let the shadow go back 10 steps.” Isaiah calls out to the Lord, who responds by reversing the sundial’s shadow. “How this miracle of the reversal of the sun’s shadow occurred is not known. Perhaps the earth’s rotation was reversed or perhaps the sun’s rays were somehow refracted” (John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1089).

Hezekiah’s Poem (Isa. 38:9-20)

Hezekiah is a writer of psalms (see v. 20) and apparently supervises a team of scholars who copy some of the Old Testament scriptures (Prov. 25:1). Here, in a beautiful poem, the king recounts his feelings throughout a season of illness and recovery. Like others who stand for a time at death’s door, Hezekiah develops a greater appreciation for life. He pictures death as the end of a journey (vv. 11-12), a tent taken down (v. 12a; see also 2 Cor. 5:1-8) and a weaving cut from the loom (v. 12b). The king also discovers a higher plane in his prayer life (vv. 13-14). He cries out to the Lord in the night, feeling like a feeble animal in the clutches of a lion, and in the day, feeling like a helpless bird. He acknowledges his sin and pleads forgiveness, which God grants, throwing the king’s sins behind His back (v. 17). Finally, the king is grateful for new opportunities for service (vv. 15-20). “There was a new humility in his walk, a deeper love for the Lord in his heart, and a new song of praise on his lips. He had a new determination to praise God all the days of his life, for now those days were very important to him. ‘So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom’ (Ps. 90:12)” (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Comforted*, S. Is 38:1).

Is Hezekiah wrong to ask God to spare his life? Some commentators argue yes, citing the fact that had Hezekiah’s life not been extended his son Manasseh would not have been born. Manasseh rules for 55 years and is one of the most wicked kings in Judah’s history. However, this evil king repents after God chastens him and he ends his life serving the Lord (2 Chron. 33:11-20). Further, his grandson is the godly king Josiah, who does much to turn the nation back to the Lord.

Some additional notes about Hezekiah’s poem may prove helpful:

- The king’s illness is not a result of age but of God’s chastening. Hezekiah notes that he is destined for the gates of Sheol “in the prime of my life” (v. 10).
- His lament, “I will never see the Lord” (v. 11) does not mean the king fears damnation. Rather, in the context of his poem, the king despairs that he will no longer enjoy the blessings of his earthly life.
- In the end, Hezekiah sees the benefit in his illness. He acknowledges the Lord’s right and power to give life – and to take it. He sees that he is treated, not as he deserves because of his sin, but according to God’s grace. Like Job, whose suffering is for entirely different purposes, he now sees the Lord in a new and wonderful light (Job 42:5-6).
- When Hezekiah says, “Death cannot praise You” (v. 18), he is not denying life after death; rather, he is noting that one’s earthly service to the Lord ends when his or her last breath is drawn, and he is grateful for 15 more years to serve the living God.

The Cure (Isa. 38:21-22)

In the parallel account in 2 Kings 20:7-9, these two verses recorded by Isaiah precede the giving of the sign of the shadow on Ahaz's stairway. This is not a contradiction but a different perspective from which the story is told. A poultice of dried figs is applied to Hezekiah's infected skin. This is a common remedy for boils and ulcers in these days and it demonstrates that prayer, medicine and the direct intervention of the Lord are all active in the king's healing.

Scripture teaches that God may heal with or without human supplication and with or without the use of medicine. The Creator of all things needs nothing from His creatures. But it pleases the Lord to answer prayer and He has provided healing elements in nature to help people counter the physical effects of the fall. When we are injured or fall ill, it is no contradiction for us to pray for healing *and* to avail ourselves of medical attention. The Lord does not always heal supernaturally and our best medical capabilities often fall short, resulting in continued illness and even death. These are reminders that the Lord's ways are higher than our ways (Isa. 55:8-9) and that even Christians live in a sinful and fallen world. However, we look forward to our future glorification in which our mortal bodies will be transformed into immortal bodies that the ravages of sin cannot touch (see 1 Cor. 15:51-58; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Rev. 21:4).

Closing Thought

Matthew Henry comments: "God's promises are intended not to supersede, but to quicken and encourage, the use of means. Hezekiah is sure to recover, and yet he must *take a lump of figs and lay it on the boil*, v. 21. We do not trust God, but tempt him, if, when we pray to him for help, we do not second our prayers with our endeavours. We must not put physicians ... in the place of God, but make use of them in subordination to God and to his providence ... the chief end we should aim at, in desiring life and health, is that we may glorify God, and do good, and improve ourselves in knowledge, and grace, and meetness for heaven" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 38:9).

Chapter 39: Nothing will be Left

Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

It appears the visit from Merodach-baladan of Babylon occurs in 701 B.C., after Hezekiah's illness and recovery but before the siege of Sennacherib, king of Assyria, on Jerusalem.

B.C.	750	740	730	720	710	700	690	680
Isaiah's Ministry	[Shaded bar from 750 to 700]							
Hezekiah					[Shaded bar from 710 to 680]			

Key verse:

Isa. 39:6 – “The time will certainly come when everything in your palace and all that your fathers have stored up until this day will be carried off to Babylon; nothing will be left,” says the LORD.

Quick summary:

The news of Hezekiah's illness and recovery has spread as far as distant Babylon, whose king sends congratulatory letters and a gift to Jerusalem, followed by a visit. While on the surface it appears that Merodach-baladan has come to rejoice with Hezekiah over his restored health, the real reason is to learn about Judah's economic resources, which may be needed to combat the Assyrians. No doubt Hezekiah is exploring an alliance with Babylon as well. But Hezekiah's disregard of God's promise to save Jerusalem will prove costly to the king's family and nation.

Take note:

This event also is recorded in 2 Kings 20:12-19 and a revealing commentary is placed at the end of a summary of Hezekiah's wealth and works in 2 Chron. 32:27-31: “When the ambassadors of Babylon's rulers were sent to him to inquire about the miraculous sign that happened in the land, God left him to test him and discover what was in his heart” (v. 31). The Lord already knows what's in Hezekiah's heart, principally pride, but He allows the king to discover this for himself.

Hezekiah's Folly (Isa. 39:1-8)

In all likelihood there is more than good will on the mind of Merodach-baladan, who is known as Marduk-apal-idinna, the invader. Twice he has tried to shake off the yoke of Assyria, succeeding for a time in taking the city of Babylon. After his second reign, in 703-702 B.C., he is deposed by Assyria's King Sennacherib and flees to Elam, where he tries to form alliances with other nations to fight against the Assyrians. "Undoubtedly his friendly visit after Hezekiah's illness was intended to persuade the king of Judah to join the rebel alliance in the fight against Assyria. This made Hezekiah's indiscretion all the worse in view of Isaiah's words that God was using Assyria to punish the whole region (chap. 10). The visit was also God's test of Hezekiah's heart (2 Chron. 32:31)" (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, 1:1090).

Matthew Henry notes that there may have been a noble element to the Babylonian king's visit besides seeking a military alliance: "It becomes us to give honour to those whom our God puts honour upon. The sun was the Babylonians' god; and when they understood that it was with a respect to Hezekiah that the sun, to their great surprise, went back ten degrees, on such a day, they thought themselves obliged to do Hezekiah all the honour they could. Will all people thus walk in the name of their God, and shall not we?" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 39:1).

Flattered by his Babylonian visitors, Hezekiah shows them "all his armory" and "everything ... in his treasuries." No doubt the king wants to impress the emissaries, but they are more interested in his ability to support a sustained military uprising against Assyria. When Isaiah gets wind of Hezekiah's hospitality, he asks the king several questions and discovers that Hezekiah has shown the Babylonians "everything in my palace" (v. 4).

Isaiah's response is prophetic. First, he tells the king that one day his family's immense wealth will be carried off to Babylon. This is astounding because the Assyrians, not the Babylonians, are threatening the region. The Babylonians are rebels on the run, and they have experienced numerous defeats at the hands of the Assyrians. Second, Isaiah tells Hezekiah that some of his descendents will be carried away into Babylon as captives and made eunuchs. This is fulfilled beginning in 605 B.C. when Daniel and other Hebrews are taken from Judah and pressed into service in Babylon. Hezekiah is not the lone cause of this judgment, or even a major cause of it, for subsequent rulers, priests and false prophets heaped up the nation's sins until God could take it no longer (2 Chron. 36:13-16).

Warren W. Wiersbe remarks: "It was certainly a mistake for Hezekiah to show his visitors all his wealth, but pride made him do it. After a time of severe suffering, sometimes it feels so good just to feel good that we get off guard and fail to watch and pray. The king was basking in fame and wealth and apparently neglecting his spiritual life. Hezekiah was safer as a sick

man in bed than as a healthy man on the throne. Had he consulted first with Isaiah, the king would have avoided blundering as he did” (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 39:1). D.A. Carson adds, “The faith of Hezekiah, proof against the heaviest blows, melts at the touch of flattery ... and the world claims another victim by its friendship” (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, S. Is 39:1).

The Lord’s punishment will not come in Hezekiah’s lifetime, as it did in the days of King David for his sin of numbering the troops (see 2 Sam. 24:13-15). Hezekiah’s response at first glance seems self centered. “The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good,” he says in verse 8. “There will be peace and security during my lifetime.” How cold hearted to rejoice in the escape from punishment that will be imposed on future generations. But on closer examination, the king’s reaction is more likely a humble acceptance of God’s decree, as 2 Chron. 32:26 bears out. The king repents and God forgives him. Still, the consequences of his foolish deeds are not removed; the Babylonians will return a century later – not as allies but as conquering foes.

Closing Thought

Wiersbe comments: “When Satan cannot defeat us as the ‘roaring lion’ (1 Peter 5:8–9), he comes as the deceiving serpent (2 Cor. 11:3). What Assyria could not do with weapons, Babylon did with gifts. God permitted the enemy to test Hezekiah so that the proud king might learn what was really in his heart (2 Chron. 32:31)” (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 39:1).

Chapter 40: On Wings like Eagles

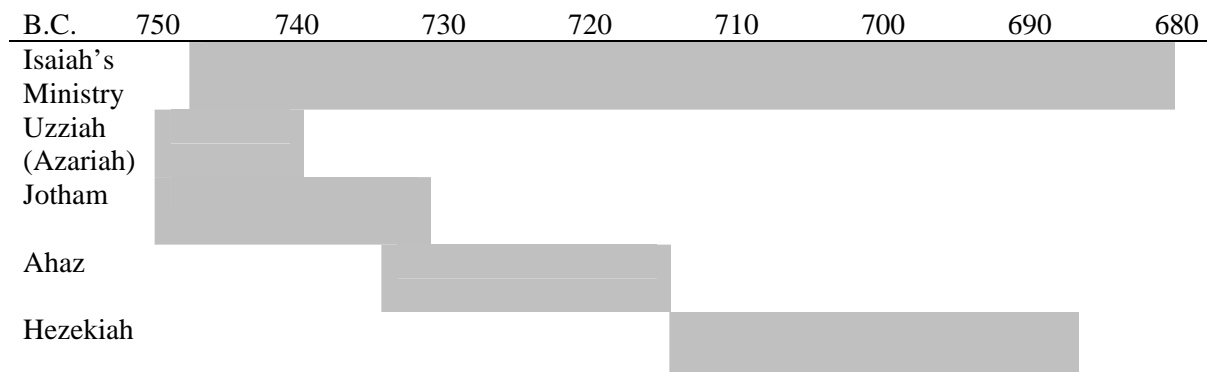
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 40 begins the second major section of Isaiah and its prophecies deal less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance and the worldwide impact on the coming of Messiah. This chapter likely is written late in the prophet's life. It features "greater mellowness of style and tone" and is "less fiery and more tender and gentle than the former part" (Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, S. Is 40:1).



Key verse:

Isa. 40:31 – [B]ut those who trust in the LORD will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not faint.

Quick summary:

Captivity in Babylon is inevitable (see Isa. 39:7) but so is God's graciousness to His people. Once He has judged the citizens of Judah for their idolatry and wickedness, He will restore them to their homeland and ultimately bring peace to the nations through the reign of the Messiah. When Isaiah writes these words, Judah still has a century of turmoil ahead and then 70 years of captivity in Babylon. Isaiah writes to encourage the people to live righteously in the present, confident in the sovereignty of God and comforted by the promise of future restoration.

Take note:

This chapter highlights eight attributes of God, according to H.L. Willmington: 1) His mercy (vv. 1-2); 2) His glory, which includes a prophecy of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Messiah (vv. 3-5); 3) His eternality (vv. 6-9); 4) His gentleness (v. 11); 5) His omnipotence (vv. 10, 12, 26); 6) His omniscience (vv. 13-14); 7) His sovereignty (vv. 15-17, 21-24); and 8) His uniqueness (vv. 18-20, 25) (*The Outline Bible*, S. Is 40:18-20).

God's Greatness, Man's Comfort (Isa. 40:1-26)

Deliverance is coming (vv. 1-11). No doubt a time of trial is upon the people of Judah, and harsher days are coming. The Mosaic covenant makes it clear that God will bless His people if they obey Him; however, if they are rebellious He will curse them and eventually cast them out of the land (Deut. 28:15-68). A century from now Jerusalem will be sacked, the temple destroyed and the people carried away into captivity. But Isaiah's message of comfort – the word “comfort” is used twice in verse one for emphasis – looks beyond this time of discipline to the day when the people's sins are pardoned and they return to their homeland. The term “double for all her sins” (v. 2) does not mean the people are being punished more harshly than they deserve; rather, they are experiencing the “full” or “sufficient” level of discipline to carry out God's purpose of purging them of idolatry (see, for example, how “double” is used in Isa. 61:7).

The “voice” in verse 3 is Isaiah's in the immediate context. The citizens of Judah are in a spiritual wilderness, and the Lord's prophetic voice through Isaiah calls them to repent and prepare for the coming of the Lord. In its fuller context, verses 3-5 speak of John the Baptist, as all the Gospel writers attest (Matt. 3:1-4; Mark 1:1-4; Luke 1:76-78; and John 1:23). In calling the people to “prepare the way of the Lord,” Isaiah draws on the custom of Eastern monarchs who “send men before them to prepare their way by removing stones, leveling rough places, filling up hollows, cleaning up trash and litter, and generally making the road pleasant and easy for the distinguished travelers and guests” (*Manners & Customs of the Bible*, Bridge-Logos Publishers, S. 361). Isaiah is not promoting works-based salvation. People are not saved from their sins by “cleaning up” their lives. Rather, their renewed faithfulness to the Lord is the result of His chastening work in His children's lives.

In verses 6-8 another voice is heard. This time it is the voice of the Lord, urging Isaiah to “cry out” a message of contrast between man's feebleness and God's faithfulness. People are like grass or wildflowers that shoot up in the spring but fade beneath the blazing summer sun. In the same way, even the strongest people wilt beneath the “breath” of the Lord, who is sovereign over His creation. This should be a word of comfort to God's people as they endure captivity in Babylon. God's promises will never fail. He will restore His people to their homeland once He has finished correcting them.

The redeemed of Judah are instructed to climb out of the valley and ascend to the heights of Jerusalem, declaring the Lord's victory. The defeat of the Babylonians will result in a restored homeland for God's people. Even more important, the day is coming when Messiah

will defeat Satan and sin, restore sinners to a right relationship with God and reign on the throne of David. The nations will flood to Mt. Zion and pay homage to the King. Just as God wins battles by His strength (v. 10), He comforts people by His gentleness. Isaiah compares the Lord to a shepherd, who protects His flock, gathers the lambs in His arms, carries them in the fold of His garment, and gently leads the nursing ones. The image of the Lord as a shepherd is a major theme of Scripture and is most appropriately applied to the Messiah (see, for example, Ps. 23; Jer. 31:10; Ez. 34:12-14, 23, 31; Micah 5:4; John 10:11, 14-16; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4).

God has no equal (vv. 12-26). This section of Isaiah's message is meant to comfort the Lord's people by reminding them that the God who created all things remains sovereign over His creation. The rhetorical questions Isaiah presents in verses 12-14 to encourage God's children are similar to the questions God poses to Job, leading him to repent "in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Isaiah makes several points in this passage. First, the created order belongs to the Lord. Figuratively speaking, He holds all the earth's waters in the palm of His hand and measures the starry heavens in the distance between His thumb and little finger (v. 12). Second, all wisdom and understanding belong to Him; He has no need of human or angelic counsel (v. 13). Third, the nations of the world are subject to Him. They are like "a drop in a bucket" or "a speck of dust on the scales" (v. 15).

Against this backdrop of God's creative power and unchallenged authority, Isaiah illustrates the foolishness of those who trust in idols made of the earth's elements, which God created, using skills that God gave them. "Who will you compare God with?" the prophet asks. "To an idol? To something that a smelter casts, and a metalworker plates with gold and makes silver welds for it? To one who shapes a pedestal, choosing wood that does not rot?" (vv. 19-20). Isaiah answers his own questions first, and then the Lord speaks. "Do you not know?" the prophet says. "Have you not heard? ... God is enthroned above the circle of the earth ... He stretches out the heavens like a thin cloth ... He reduces princes to nothing and makes the judges of the earth to be irrational" (vv. 21-23). Then the Lord thunders, "Who will you compare Me to, or who is My equal?" (v. 25).

Isaiah closes this section with a call to the people to look up in wonder at the night sky. The Lord created the countless starry host and has given names to each of the blazing orbs, as the Psalmist notes in Psalm 147:4. Equally amazing, and incredibly comforting, is the knowledge that "Because of His great power and strength, not one of them is missing" (v. 26). In the face of invading armies and beneath the heavy hand of cruel captors, the citizens of Judah should look up because God will yet deliver them. "And if you ever feel so small that you wonder if God really cares about you personally, remember that He knows the name of every star (Isa. 40:26) *and your name as well!* (See John 10:3, 27.) The same God who numbers and names the stars can heal your broken heart" (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Comforted*, S. Is 40:1).

Man's Weakness, God's Strength (Isa. 40:27-31)

This chapter ends with a problem and a promise. The problem is this: Having forgotten God's wondrous attributes, the Israelites conclude that He neither knows nor cares about them. The promise is that if God's people will only ask, He will restore their strength so that they soar like eagles and run like deer. D.A. Carson writes, "The wrong inference from God's transcendence is that he is too great to care; the right one is that he is too great to fail" (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, S. Is 40:27).

Isaiah calls the people by the familiar names "Jacob" and "Israel," reminding them not only of their ancestry but of the unique name the Lord gave Jacob (Gen. 32:28). If "the everlasting God, the Creator of the whole earth" can wrestle all night with Jacob, He can certainly sustain the Israelites in their time of need and keep His covenant promises to them. The prophet reminds them that the Lord "never grows faint or weary" and that "there is no limit to his understanding" (Isa. 40:28). Isaiah's testimony of God's faithfulness – "He gives strength to the weary and strengthens the powerless" (v. 29) – is echoed by the apostle Paul as he struggles with his "thorn in the flesh." Though he pleads with the Lord three times to remove the "messenger of Satan" tormenting him, the Lord replies, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Paul concludes, "Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weakness, so that Christ's power may reside in me. So because of Christ, I am pleased in weaknesses, in insults, in catastrophes, in persecutions, and in pressures. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Closing Thought

Warren Wiersbe notes: "I can plod," said William Carey, the father of modern missions. 'That is my only genius. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything.' The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. The greatest heroes of faith are not always those who seem to be soaring; often it is they who are patiently plodding. As we wait on the Lord, He enables us not only to fly higher and run faster, but also *to walk longer*. Blessed are the plodders, for they eventually arrive at their destination" (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 40:1).

Chapter 41: The Worm and the Threshing Machine

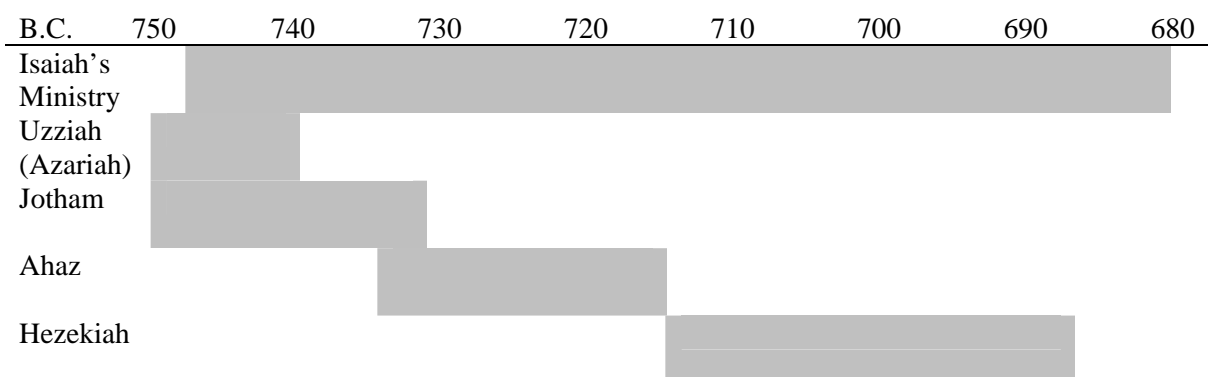
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 41 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance and the worldwide impact on the coming of Messiah. This chapter may have been written late in the prophet's life.



Key verses:

Isa. 41:11-13 –Be sure that all who are enraged against you will be ashamed and disgraced; those who contend with you will become as nothing and will perish. You will look for those who contend with you, but you will not find them. Those who war against you will become absolutely nothing. For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand and say to you: Do not fear, I will help you.

Quick summary:

Isaiah foretells the coming of the Persian king Cyrus as God's instrument of judgment against Babylon. He encourages God's people, who will be captives in Babylon when this prophecy is fulfilled, not to fear this warrior from the east because the Lord will use him to defeat Israel's enemies and restore the nation to its former glory.

Take note:

Throughout Isaiah, both the nation of Israel and the coming Messiah are called God's "servant." The context helps us determine which "servant" is intended. In Isa. 41:8-9, it is the nation of Israel (see also Isa. 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3). In other passages, the Messiah clearly is in view. For example, Isa. 42:1-9 announces the coming of the Lord's "Chosen One" who will bring justice to the nations. And in Isa. 52:13 – 53:12 we encounter the Suffering Servant who will be "pierced because of our transgressions" and ultimately exalted – a prophecy wonderfully fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, who died for our sins, rose from the grave and ascended into heaven, where today He is seated at the right hand of the Father awaiting His triumphant return to earth.

The Source and Strength of Cyrus (Isa. 41:1-7)

This chapter opens with a courtroom scene. The Lord calls Israel and all the nations before Him to "come together for the trial" (v. 1). The Old Testament is replete with courtroom settings in which the Lord presents His case against the wicked and pronounces judgment. Here, the Lord announces the rise of the Persian king Cyrus, whom God will use to judge the Babylonians, and He calls the idols of the nations to testify (vv. 21-24).

This powerful Persian leader "subdues kings" ... "makes [them] like dust [with] his sword" and "like wind-driven stubble [with] his bow" (v. 2). However, it is clear that the Jews are not to fear this conquering king because the Lord has given him his strength and will use him to accomplish His purposes. "The Lord hands nations over to him," Isaiah declares (v. 2). And if there's any doubt about God's sovereignty over human affairs, the Lord challenges His listeners: "Who has performed and done [this], calling the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord ..." (v. 4). "A great truth is emphasized here. God controls the course of history and the rise and fall of nations. Even the pagan serves God's purposes, even though unwittingly. However, you and I have the greatest privilege of all. We can serve God knowingly and gladly" (Lawrence O. Richards, *The Bible Readers Companion*, electronic ed., S. 431).

If there is any doubt about the sovereignty of God, He assures His people in verse 4, "I, the Lord, am the first, and with the last – I am He." His declaration of eternal power and presence is repeated in Isa. 44:6 and Rev. 1:8 and is echoed by Jesus' claims to deity in Rev. 1:17 and 22:13. Those who argue that Jesus is a lesser god, a created being or only a man who existed for a scant three decades face strong opposition from the Son of God Himself in these and other New Testament passages. To cite but a few other examples, Jesus claims to be eternal and uncreated (John 8:58; 17:5); divine (Mark 14:61-62; John 8:24, 58); and co-equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 11:25-27; 12:28; Luke 4:18; 23:34, 46; John 8:16-19, 42; 15:26; 16:13-15).

Closing out this section, Isaiah mocks the nations that rush to one another for protection against Cyrus. They delve deeper into their idolatrous practices rather than turn to the Lord of Hosts who directs the Persian army for his own glorious purposes. The craftsman and metalworker who wield their tools, using solder and nails to fasten their idols, will not be able to keep them from falling beneath the mighty hand of God.

The Consolation of Israel (Isa. 41:8-24)

The Lord now turns His attention back to Israel, whom He calls “My servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham, My friend” (v. 8). Even though God is raising the rod of discipline against His chosen ones, He will not forget them or His covenant promises to them. Soon to be exiled in Babylon, they are assured nonetheless that the Lord has chosen them. Like a loving father disciplining an unruly child, He reminds them of His faithful love: “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will hold on to you with My righteous right hand” (v. 10).

From the endearing title of “servant,” Judah is then called a “worm” (v. 14). “My servant” is an honorable title given to great leaders like Moses (Num. 12:7), David (2 Sam. 3:18) and the Messiah (Isa. 42:1). So why would the Lord refer to His chosen people using such a degrading word as “worm?” Warren Wiersbe observes: “‘Servant’ defined what they were by God’s grace and calling, but ‘worm’ described what they were in themselves. Imagine a worm getting teeth and threshing mountains into dust like chaff! As the nation marched ahead by faith, every mountain and hill would be made low (40:4); and the Lord would turn mountains into molehills!” (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 41:1). “See,” the Lord says, “I will make you into a sharp threshing board, new, with many teeth. You will thresh mountains and pulverize [them], and make hills like chaff” (v. 15). And when that day comes, what will be the people’s response? “[Y]ou will rejoice in the Lord; you will boast in the Holy One of Israel” (v. 16).

In verses 17-20 the scene changes to a desert being transformed into a garden. This harkens back to the days of wandering in the wilderness and God’s provision for the people’s every need. Six times in these verses the Lord uses the personal pronoun “I” to assure His people that He will act on their behalf: “I, the LORD, will answer them; I, the God of Israel, do not forsake them. I will open rivers on the barren heights, and springs in the middle of the plains. I will turn the desert into a pool of water and dry land into springs of water. I will plant cedars in the desert, acacias, myrtles, and olive trees. I will put cypress trees in the desert, elms and box trees together . . .” (vv. 17-19). The reason for God’s action is clear: “so that all may see and know, consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it” (v. 20).

Now the scene changes once again, this time to a courtroom. God challenges the nations’ idols to plead their case before His holy bench. Have any of their predictions come true? What do they know about the future? Are they even able to do anything good or evil to prove their power? Of course not. “Look,” the Lord says, “you are nothing and your work is worthless. Anyone who chooses you is detestable” (v. 24).

The Conquests of Cyrus (Isa. 41:25-29)

Verses 25-29 go back over the ground of verses 2-4 but add detail. The north and east are mentioned together, defining Cyrus’ conquests, which will overarch the Babylonian Empire

from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian and Black Seas. North and east also describe Cyrus' lineage and leadership. His father is a Mede and his mother is a Persian. His army consists of Medes, whose country lay north, and Persians, whose country lay east, of Babylon. The one "who invokes My name" (v. 25) is Cyrus, who credits the God of heaven with his victories (Ezra 1:2-3). This does not necessarily prove that Cyrus is a true believer, for in other inscriptions he diplomatically credits the gods of conquered peoples for his triumphs, among them Marduk in Babylon and Sin (the moon god) in Ur.

In contrast with the idols of verses 21-24, God can and does predict the future. Besides describing Cyrus and his conquests long before his birth, the Lord informs the people that a messenger will come, heralding the news that the Jews will be released from captivity and returned to their homeland. The idols, however, "are a delusion; their works are nonexistent; their images are wind and emptiness" (v. 29).

Closing Thought

Matthew Henry comments: "When we are freed from that which hindered our joy, and are blessed with that which is the matter of it, we ought to remember that God is our exceeding joy and in him all our joys must terminate. When we rejoice over our enemies we must rejoice in the Lord, for to him alone we owe our liberties and victories" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 41:10).

Chapter 42: The Islands Will Wait

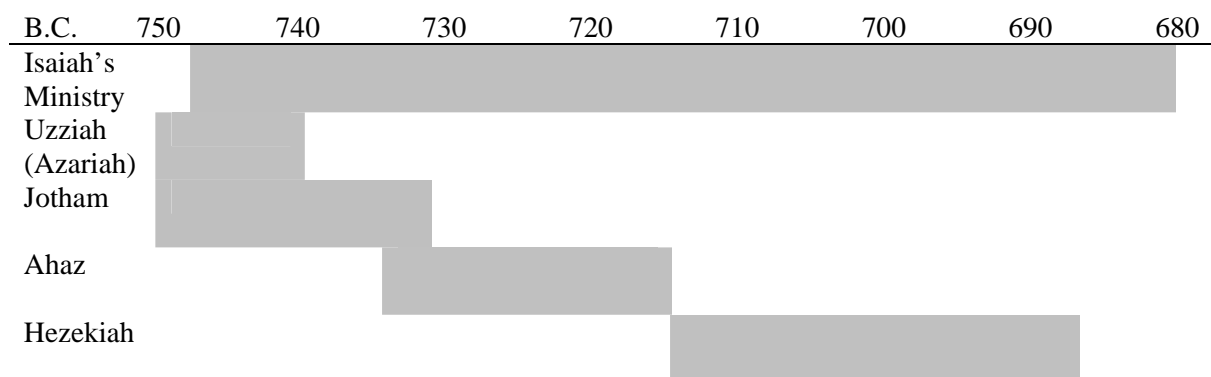
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 42 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance and the worldwide impact of the coming of Messiah.



Key verses:

Isa. 42:6-8 – “I, the LORD, have called you for a righteous [purpose], and I will hold you by your hand. I will keep you, and I make you a covenant for the people [and] a light to the nations, in order to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, [and] those sitting in darkness from the prison house. I am Yahweh, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, or My praise to idols.”

Quick summary:

Isaiah introduces the first of his “Servant Songs” referring to the Messiah (vv. 1-17). Israel is called the Lord’s servant a number of times (for example Isa. 41:8; 42:19; 43:10; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 48:20) and so is the Messiah (49:3, 5-7; 50:10; 52:13; 53:11). The context and the characteristics of the servant in these passages determine which one Isaiah intends. “Israel as God’s servant was supposed to help bring the world to a knowledge of God, but she failed. So the Messiah, the Lord’s Servant, who epitomizes the nation of Israel, will fulfill God’s will” (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1095). Israel, blind and deaf to God’s law, is unable to fulfill the servant’s role (vv. 18-25), and thus it will be left to the promised Messiah.

Take note:

The “Servant Songs” of Isaiah (42:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13ff; and 53:1-12) refer to different aspects of the Messiah’s ministry. The first depicts Him as the key that unlocks the captives’ chains. The second tells us His mission calls for suffering. The third points to His ultimate exaltation. And the fourth graphically portrays the Servant’s crucifixion.

“These servant songs not only display Christ in His essential beauty, but also serve to model the nature of all servanthood. Anyone who serves God must (a) have a desire to do so, (b) remain humble before others and dependent on the Lord, (c) be committed to winning others’ release from sin’s grip, (d) accept personal suffering, and (e) rely completely on God for guidance and strength (Lawrence O. Richards, *The Bible Readers Companion*, electronic ed., 1996, S. 432).

The Servant’s Mission (Isa. 42:1-9)

The opening verses of this chapter clearly identify “My Servant” as a person and not the nation of Israel. The Lord calls Him “My Chosen One” and declares, “I have put My Spirit on Him” (v. 1). Matt. 12:18-21 quotes Isa. 42:1-4 and relates this passage to Jesus and His ministry to Israel. As the Lord’s Servant, He does what Israel could never do: perfectly carry out the will of Yahweh so that people everywhere believe in the Holy One of Israel. “Servant” is the position assumed by Jesus during His earthly ministry. He is chosen from the foundation of the world for the redemption of mankind (1 Peter 1:20; Rev. 13:8). Salvation is in the mind of God from eternity past and stretches into eternity future; it should never be seen as Alpha and Omega’s “Plan B” or an afterthought by a Creator who finds Himself backed into a corner by one of His creatures.

Because the Lord created the heavens and the earth and gives breath to all people, He is sovereign over the universe and is able to assist His Servant. Yahweh assures Him of several promises: His calling for a righteous purpose; His help from the Lord; His fulfillment of God’s covenant promises to Israel; His role as light to the Gentiles; and His deliverance of people from spiritual darkness and bondage. Although Cyrus will release the Jewish people from captivity in Babylon, the Lord’s Servant will free mankind from captivity in Satan’s kingdom. As Jesus declares, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). Later, the apostle Paul writes, “He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son He loves” (Col. 1:13). The lost are spiritually blind and in darkness, but Jesus is sent to open their eyes and give them light (see John 8:12; 9:39-41).

Yahweh, Israel’s covenant-keeping God, makes these promises and refuses to let idols take the credit for their fulfillment. His people are called to remember all that the Lord has done for them and be assured that what He has promised will most certainly come to pass. Yahweh’s statement in verse 8 is especially important in the context of His relationship with His Servant, for if God will not give His glory to another, then Jesus’ claim to deity must either be true or blasphemy. Clearly it is true. Jesus not only claims to be God and demonstrates the authority of God by

casting out demons, healing illnesses, controlling the world's natural elements, raising the dead and forgiving sins; He also longs for the day when His work of redemption is complete and He returns to His glorified position at the Father's right hand (John. 17:5).

A Song of Praise (Isa. 42:10-17)

Outbursts of singing are frequent in Isaiah, and the songs of praise recorded here, as well as in Isa. 44:23; 49:13; 52:9 and other places are similar to Psalms 93 and 95-100 in theme and language. People everywhere are urged to sing and shout the praises of the Lord, who is victorious over His enemies at Messiah's second coming. A "new song" (v. 10) is mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament (Ps. 33:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9) and twice in Revelation (5:9 and 14:3) – always in the context of worship and specifically in Revelation in worship of the exalted Messiah, who has redeemed people by His blood from every tribe, language, people and nation. This new song is "called for by a new manifestation of God's grace, to express which no hymn for former mercies would be appropriate" (Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, S. Is 42:10).

The mention of Kedar and Sela is noteworthy. Kedar is the second son of Ishmael (Gen. 25:13). He fathered a nomadic people in the northern Arabian Peninsula. Sela, or Petra, is in modern Jordan and defines people who carved their dwelling places out of rock. While the people of Kedar and Edom are at times Israel's enemies, they will join their Jewish neighbors in praising the King of kings. The references to Kedar and Sela also may symbolize the world's people who wander or remain in fixed locations. They, along with seafarers, desert dwellers and urbanites will join the chorus of nations to sing the Lord's praise "from the ends of the earth" (v. 10).

The Lord is praised as He "advances like a warrior" and "prevails over His enemies" (v. 13). Silent for so long that people question whether He will come at all (see 2 Peter 3:3-4), He now "shouts" and "roars" (v. 13), laying waste the nations that reject Him and rescuing those who have waited patiently for His justice. It is interesting to note that the Lord groans "like a woman in labor" (v. 14). Earlier in the writings of Isaiah, the prophet says the day is coming when the Babylonians will be "in anguish like a woman in labor" (Isa. 13:8). This is just a foretaste of rebellious sinners' plight in the coming Day of the Lord. So why, in this passage, does Messiah groan like a woman in labor? "Like a woman in parturition, who, after having restrained her breathing for a time, at last, overcome with labor pain, lets out her voice with a panting sigh; so Jehovah will give full vent to His long pent-up wrath" (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, Is 42:14).

Finally, those who trust in idols rather than the living God will be "turned back [and] utterly ashamed" (v. 17). Their confidence in "metal-plated images" will come to naught. They will be ashamed that they ever said to inanimate objects, "You are our gods!" As the psalmist writes, "All who serve carved images, those who boast in idols, will be put to shame" (Ps. 97:7).

Israel's Blindness and Deafness (Isa. 42:18-25)

Isaiah closes this chapter with a message about Israel's sin and the suffering that results from it. We need to understand that "My servant" in verse 19 is not the Messiah, as in verse 1, but the nation of Israel. The people will not listen to or see what God has done. In fact they *cannot* listen or see because in their persistent rebellion they have stopped up their ears and closed their eyes. More than 700 years later the hardness of Israel's heart is personified in the people's refusal to receive Messiah's message of the kingdom of heaven. Quoting from Isaiah 6, Jesus tells His followers that He uses parables, in part, to confound the self-righteous religionists: "For this reason I speak to them in parables, because looking they do not see, and hearing they do not listen or understand. Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says: You will listen and listen, yet never understand; and you will look and look, yet never perceive. For this people's heart has grown callous; their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn back—and I would cure them" (Matt. 13:13-15).

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is equally direct in his defense before the high priest: "You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit; as your forefathers did, so do you" (Acts 7:51). What was the people's response? "Then they screamed at the top of their voices, stopped their ears, and rushed together against him" (Acts 7:57). Later, the apostle Paul, quoting Isa. 29:10, notes that Israel's rebellion is so complete that God has sealed all but the believing remnant in their hardness: "[A]s it is written: God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that cannot see and ears that cannot hear, to this day" (Rom. 11:8).

Isaiah is clear that the fault lies, not with the Lord, but with His people: "The LORD was pleased, because of His righteousness, to magnify [His] instruction and make it glorious" (Isa. 42:21). But the people will not receive the Lord or His instruction. As a consequence, they are "plundered and looted," "trapped in holes or imprisoned in dungeons" (v. 22). Who gives Jacob to the robber and Israel to the plunderer? "Was it not the Lord? ... So He poured out on Jacob His furious anger and the power of war" (vv. 24-25). Even so, Israel is oblivious. "It surrounded him with fire, but he did not know [it]; it burned him, but he paid no attention" (v. 25).

Closing Thought

Judah's coming captivity in Babylon will turn the people's feet but not necessarily their hearts back to the Lord. They will cease their idolatry and return to their homeland yet fail to be fully transformed, waiting for God to grant them a "heart of flesh" in the last days (Ezek. 11:19). Lest we be too harsh in our judgment of the Jews, it's helpful to note the all-too-frequent impact of God's chastening on Christian lives today. His rod of discipline often succeeds in curbing sinful behavior but not reforming the heart. The fault is not the Lord's, who punishes His own as a loving Father (see Heb. 12:3-13). Rather, the fault lies with us when we choose to stubbornly endure rebuke rather than tenderly embrace our Savior.

Warren Wiersbe comments: "How sad it is when God disciplines us and we do not understand what He is doing or take it to heart (v. 25). Israel's captivity in Babylon cured the nation of their idolatry, but it did not create within them a desire to please God and glorify Him" (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 41:1).

Chapter 43: Walk Through the Fire

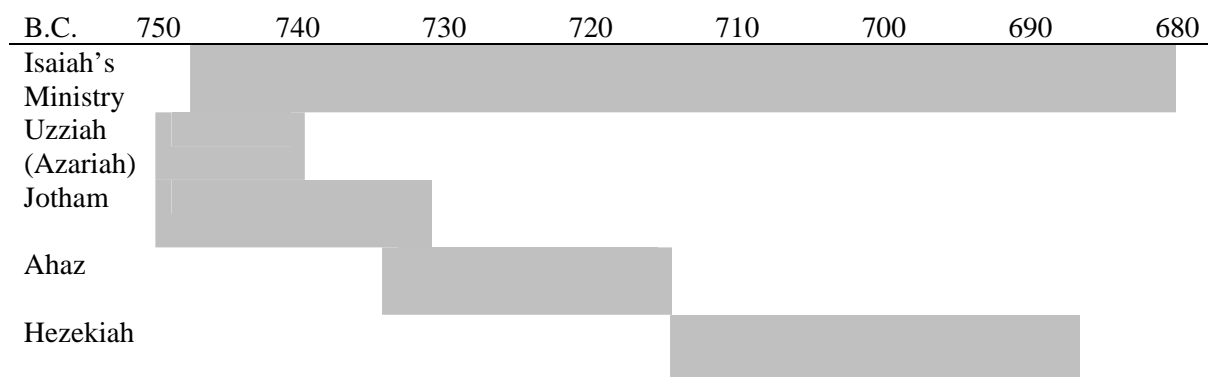
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 43 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance and the worldwide impact of the coming of Messiah.



Key verse:

Isa. 43:2 – I will be with you when you pass through the waters, and [when you pass] through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you. You will not be scorched when you walk through the fire, and the flame will not burn you.

Quick summary:

Despite Judah's unfaithfulness, God promises to restore the nation after the Babylonian captivity. The people are not to fear because the Lord created them, loves them and will carry out His promises to them. Just as God led the Israelites out of Egypt through the Red Sea, He will bring them out of Babylon, across the desert and safely back into their homeland. As a result, the people will witness to the world that He is the one true God and only Savior.

Take note:

The Lord repeatedly rehearses His uniqueness as the only true God. For the Jews, this is both a reminder and a prophetic prompt. The Babylonian captivity will finally cure the people of their idolatry, although it will take a spiritual revival in the last days to fully draw the redeemed of Israel into declaring worldwide the wonder of the Holy One of Israel and the salvation of the Messiah. Note how the Lord describes Himself to the people in this chapter:

- “I [am] the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, and your Savior” (v. 3).
- “I am He. No god was formed before Me, and there will be none after Me” (v. 10).
- “I, I am the Lord, and there is no other Savior but Me” (v. 11).
- “I alone declared, saved, and proclaimed ... I am God” (v. 12).
- “I am He [alone] ... I act, and who can reverse it?” (v. 13).
- “I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, Your King” (v. 15).
- “It is I who sweep away your transgressions for My own sake and remember your sins no more” (v. 25).

The Restoration of Israel (Isa. 43:1-7)

“These verses give Israel in eloquent detail the assurance Christ gives to his church, that the gates of Hades will not prevail against it,” writes D.A. Carson (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, S. Is 43:1). Raging waters, scorching fires, brutal enemies and great distances will not prevent the Lord’s people from obtaining their inheritance. For the Jews in Isaiah’s day, this means a return to Israel and a rebuilding of the temple following the Babylonian captivity, and ultimately the coming of the Messiah. For the church, it means an irrevocable citizenship in the kingdom of heaven based on the finished work of Christ and the promise of His glorious return one day. All of this is assured, not because of human righteousness, but because of the faithfulness of the covenant-keeping Holy One of Israel.

Isaiah reminds the Jews of some of the strands that bind them to God: creation, redemption and calling (verse 1); the Lord’s omnipresence (verse 2); love (verse 4); adoption (verse 6); and the honor of His name (verse 7). This unique relationship between God and His people is pictured in the bold image of a human ransom. Nations fall and people are displaced to make way for Israel (verses 3-4, 14). God is not unjust to act this way for all the world’s people have rejected Him and gone their own way. In choosing Israel, the Lord demonstrates His sovereignty and grace. Even more important, whatever the nations lose to Israel is more than compensated in the ransom Israel’s Messiah would pay for the sins of the world, bringing into the kingdom people of every “tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

The Response of Israel (Isa. 43:8-13)

The Lord invites Israel, still spiritually blind and deaf, to stand before the nations as a witness of His uniqueness as the one true and living God. He challenges the nations to present witnesses. Can they point to past prophecies, made by their seers, which came true? Can they predict the

future? Of course not (see Isa. 41:21-23). In contrast, Israel, as God's chosen servant, takes the stand and testifies that no god was formed before the Holy One of Israel, and there will be none after Him (v. 10). The Lord reminds His people, "I, I am the LORD, and there is no other Savior but Me. I alone declared, saved, and proclaimed – and not some foreign god among you. So you are My witnesses' – the LORD's declaration – 'and I am God'" (Isa. 43:11-12). The Lord's deliverance of Israel shows He is the true God. No one can successfully oppose Him or thwart His plans.

The name "Savior" is one God gives Himself in this passage and Isaiah uses frequently throughout his writings. For example, the Lord is "the God of your salvation" in Isa. 17:10; "God of Israel, Savior" in 45:15; "a righteous God and Savior" in 45:21; "Savior and Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob" in 60:16; and "your salvation" in 62:11. No foreign god can duplicate His wondrous works. No deity fashioned out of metal, wood or stone is able to save the people God created for His pleasure, purpose and glory.

Twice in this section the Lord calls the citizens of Judah "My witnesses." Warren Wiersbe writes, "[I]t is in the history of Israel that God has revealed Himself to the world. Frederick the Great asked the Marquis D'Argens, 'Can you give me one single irrefutable proof of God?' The Marquis replied, 'Yes, your majesty, the Jews'" (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 41:1). Matthew Henry notes that the Lord shows Himself as God by two proofs in this passage: "[1.] He has infinite and infallible knowledge, as is evident from *the predictions of his word* (v. 12) ... [2.] He has an infinite and irresistible power, as is evident from the performances of his providence.... The cause of God is not afraid to stand a fair trial; but it may reasonably be expected that those who cannot justify themselves in their irreligion should submit to the power of the truth and true religion" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 43:8).

The Routing of Babylon (Isa. 43:14-21)

By God's grace and for Israel's sake, the Lord promises to destroy Babylon and deliver the Jews from captivity. Even though Assyria is the threat in Isaiah's day, and Babylon is pursued as an ally, this powerful kingdom to the east will rise up and do to Judah what the Assyrians could not – conquer Jerusalem and destroy the temple. Even so, once God's use of the Babylonians as His rod of punishment is completed, He will defeat Judah's foes and bring His people home. This deliverance is the backdrop against which a greater work of God will be accomplished in the sending of Messiah and His redemption on the cross. As D.A. Carson writes, "For its real fulfillment we must look beyond the modest homecomings from Babylon of the sixth and fifth centuries BC, although these are certainly in view, to the exodus which the Son of God accomplished at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31; cf. 1 Cor. 10:4, 11), which alone justifies the language of this and kindred passages" (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, S. Is 43:1).

In verses 16-17, Isaiah alludes to God's deliverance of the Jews from Egyptian captivity and the destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. The exodus is a standing illustration of God's unchanging character toward His people and a reminder to the church today that the Lord is directing human history to its ultimate conclusion in the destruction of His enemies and the

deliverance of His people into “new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will dwell” (2 Peter 3:13). The works that God will yet do for His people are so wonderful, they will not remember the sins God already has forgotten or “the past events” such as the defeat of Sennacherib or the return from exile in Babylon (v. 18). The apostle Paul, quoting Isaiah 52 and 64, gives Christians a similar glimpse of the future when he writes, “What no eye has seen and no ear has heard, and what has never come into a man’s heart, is what God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

The Rebellion of Israel (Isa. 43:22-28)

With the temple destroyed and the nation exiled under Babylonian rule, the Jews in the coming days will not be able to offer atoning sacrifices. Nevertheless, their gracious God promises to forgive their mounting sins. “It is I who sweep away your transgressions for My own sake and remember your sins no more,” the Lord says in verse 25. At the same time, the people should not lose sight of why they’re going into captivity in the first place: “Jacob, you have not called on Me ... Israel, you have become weary of Me ... you have burdened Me with your sins; you have wearied Me with your iniquities” (vv. 22, 24).

Matthew Henry takes note of five sins of omission in this passage. The people have 1) “cast off prayer;” 2) “grown weary of their religion;” 3) “grudged the expense of their devotion;” 4) not honored God with their sacrifices, “and so they were, in effect, as no sacrifices;” and 5) “aggravated their neglect of sacrificing” because God had not made it a burden for them (*Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 43:22).

Even though the Lord will forgive Judah, He must discipline them. He invites the people to court and urges them to state their case. He then offers His evidence against them. Their “first father” sinned and their “mediators” rebelled against God. The “first father” is Adam (see Hosea 6:7), Abraham, or possibly Jacob. If Adam, then the point is that his sin nature was passed to all people (Rom. 5:12). If Abraham, then even the father of the Jewish race was in need of a Redeemer. If Jacob, then God is reminding the people that even their ancestors were sinful and fallen men. In addition, the “mediators” – the priests and prophets – have rebelled against God and failed to lead the people to live in a manner pleasing to Him. Therefore, God is going to punish the nation at the hands of Babylon.

Closing Thought

God’s chosen people should never presume upon His grace. While we are the recipients of the “richness of His grace” (Eph. 1:7), we also are the receivers of the full weight of His divine discipline when we fail to “walk worthy of God” (1 Thess. 2:12). D.A. Carson comments: “Israel’s devastating response to divine ardor is a yawn of apathy. No rebuff could be worse ... The final thrust [v. 28] is deadly, for *destruction* is the Hebrew term *herem*, reserved for such objects of judgment as Jericho or the Amalekites, with whom no compromise was to be endured. It is the strongest term in the language” (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, S. Is 43:22).

Chapter 44: The First and the Last

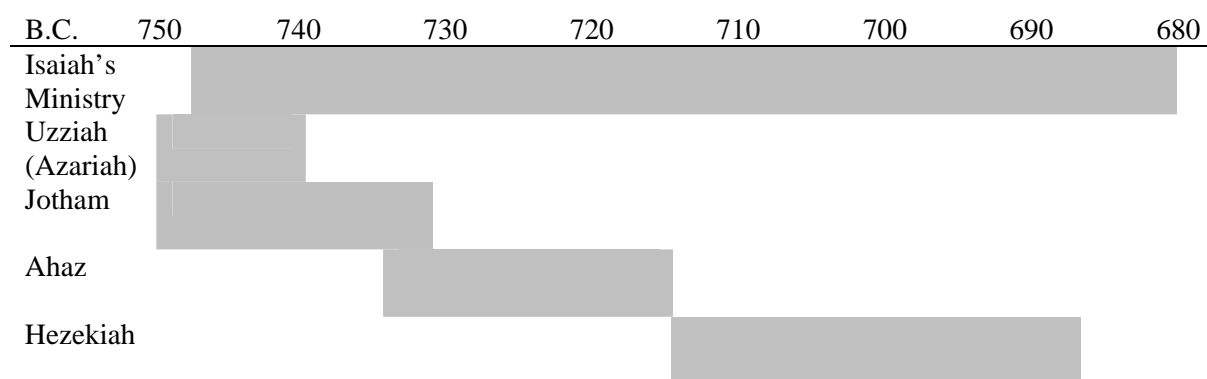
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 44 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance and the worldwide impact of the coming of Messiah.



Key verse:

Isa. 44:6 – This is what the LORD, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, the LORD of Hosts, says: I am the first and I am the last. There is no God but Me.

Quick summary:

God assures Israel that He has chosen the nation and will continue to bless it. He makes plans for His servants while they are yet in their mothers' wombs. Isaiah declares God's majesty and uniqueness, then contrasts it with an almost comical description of the man-made gods who depend completely on the people who worship them. He calls on Israel to return to the one true and living God, who will remain faithful to His promises. The chapter ends with an amazing prophecy in which the pagan king who will free the Jews from Babylonian captivity two centuries later is called by name.

Take note:

The Lord often refers to Himself as "The first and ... the last" or in similar ways in Scripture, reminding us of His eternal nature, creative and sustaining powers, and sovereignty. Isaiah and

the apostle John, in the Book of Revelation, record these words, used interchangeably by God the Father and His Son:

- “I, the LORD, am the first, and with the last – I am He” (Isa. 41:4)
- “... I am He. No god was formed before Me, and there will be none after Me” (Isa. 43:10).
- “Listen to Me, Jacob, and Israel, the one called by Me: I am He; I am the first, I am also the last” (Isa. 48:12).
- “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “the One who is, who was, and who is coming, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:8).
- “Don’t be afraid! I am the First and the Last, and the Living One. I was dead, but look – I am alive forever and ever, and I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Rev. 1:17-18).
- “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Rev. 22:13).

Spiritual Blessing (Isa. 44:1-5)

Because God has chosen Israel – a fact mentioned twice in verses 1-2 – the people are not to fear. The Lord will deliver the nation physically and spiritually. Twice He calls Jacob “My servant” and promises to pour out “My Spirit” and “My blessings” on coming generations. Continuing a theme from the previous chapter, He reminds the people that He has formed them. Like all of God’s creative acts, it is for a divine purpose. Although judgment is imminent, the nation’s restoration and spiritual revival are guaranteed. In verse 2 Israel is called “Jeshurun,” a poetic synonym meaning “the upright one” and used elsewhere only in Deuteronomy (see Deut. 32:15; 33:5, 26).

In the days to come, the Lord will “pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground,” making it fruitful (v. 3). Even more important, He will pour out the Holy Spirit, resulting in an unprecedented return to the Lord of Israel. But when will this occur? Nationally, the Jews return to their homeland after the Babylonian captivity, and again in 1948 after nearly 2,000 years without a state following the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The spiritual revival, however, is yet to come. “This outpouring of the Spirit will occur when the people have returned in belief to the land (cf. Ezek. 36:24, 27; Joel 2:25-29) just after the Messiah’s second coming to establish the Millennium. Redeemed Israel will prosper numerically like grass and poplar trees, and they will want to be known as righteous individuals (Isa. 44:5), unashamed of Him and their nation” (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1098).

No God but Me (Isa. 44:6-23)

The Lord reminds the Jews of several of His titles, thus punctuating His unique claim of sovereignty. He is “the Lord, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts ... the first and ... the last ... Rock” (vv. 6, 8). He makes a simple and profound declaration: “There is no God but Me” (v. 6), and He argues for His uniqueness by challenging anyone to predict the

future (v. 7). Since His knowledge of things to come may be traced to His existence in eternity past, His chosen people have no reason to fear. In fact, they are witnesses of His mighty deeds (v. 8).

The God of Israel then exposes the futility of idol makers, whom he describes as “nothing” (v. 9) and whom He says have brought spiritual blindness upon themselves. Idolatry dominates the world in Isaiah’s day. Some idol makers are superstitious, viewing their creations of wood, metal and stone as deities, while others fashion these magnificent statues as physical representations of unseen gods. In any case, their efforts are futile and their proud professions will only result in shame. Idolatry in any form is a denial of the Creator and invites His wrath. The apostle Paul makes this point in Romans 1, arguing that idolatry is the natural consequence of rejecting the one true and living God, who has revealed Himself to all people (Rom. 1:18ff). As a result, Paul writes, they are “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

In Isaiah, however, “the Lord’s scathing contempt for idolatry is expressed in mockery of the ‘wisdom’ of human beings who cut down a tree, burn some of it as fuel, make a few utensils for the home, fashion an idol from the leftovers, and then pray to that idol to deliver them. Only a God who lives, who is capable of action, and who cares, could possibly help anyone – then, or now” (Lawrence O. Richards, *The Bible Readers Companion*, electronic ed., S. 433). The people who craft these images for profit are mere humans, whom God will cause to “assemble and stand ... be startled and put to shame” (v. 11). They labor feverishly over their iron and wood, denying themselves food and water for the sake of their craft until they grow weak. But their work is in vain and their muscled arms cannot overcome their dulled minds. They take cedar, cypress or oak, cut it down and use some of it to warm themselves, some of it to bake their bread and some of it to fashion idols. While they are in complete control of the wood in every stage of its use, they blindly choose to worship what their own hands have made. “Save me, for you are my god,” they cry (v. 17).

Their failure to see the futility of their deeds is due first of all to their rejection of God and second to God’s response, which is to grant them what they desire – spiritual blindness. The word “detestable” in verse 19 is a strong Hebrew word (*siqqus*) that links idolatry to immoral practices. Isaiah makes the point that religious sins, which involve direct rebellion against God, are especially grievous and invite the wrath of the Almighty. In the end, the idolater “feeds on ashes” (v. 20), or delights in what is vain. This verse also might refer to the wood being used. The idol maker has reduced much of it to ashes to warm himself and prepare his food; it would have been better if the rest of the tree had been reduced to ashes as well.

Finally in this section, the Lord calls Judah to “remember these things” (v. 21). Jacob is God’s “servant,” whom he has formed, and He will not forget His people. He has swept away their sins, called them to return, and redeemed them. Now at last, He calls upon heaven and earth – even the elements that idol makers have reduced to graven images – to rejoice because the Lord “glorifies Himself through Israel” (v. 23).

Cyrus, the Lord's Shepherd (Isa. 44:24-28)

The Lord's repeated claim to control the course of human history, with special regard to Israel, is renewed in the closing verses of this chapter as He makes specific promises about the people, the temple and Jerusalem. After the Babylonian captivity, Jerusalem will be repopulated. The cities of Judah will be rebuilt. The temple will be restored. And, in dramatic fashion, the Lord names the Persian king whose edict makes it all possible – Cyrus, "My shepherd," who would not even be born for another 150 years (see Ezra 1:1-4). If the Jews have any doubts about God's command of time and events, He clears them up in this passage. Lawrence Richards notes: "Some commentators, who deny the possibility of such detailed predictive prophecy, have insisted the mention of Cyrus is evidence of postexilic authorship of the second part of Isa. But in the context the naming of Cyrus is evidence of something far different. It is proof of the power of Israel's living God and a guarantee that history itself moves toward His intended end" (*The Bible Readers Companion*, S. 433).

But why is a pagan king called the Lord's "shepherd," a name normally reserved for the Messiah or the nation of Israel? It appears this title is given to show the citizens of Judah that God uses even unbelievers like Cyrus to accomplish His purposes and that no one, no matter how powerful, operates independently of the One who created all things. "A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord determines his steps.... Many plans are in a man's heart, but the Lord's decree will prevail" (Prov. 16:9, 19:21).

Closing Thought

John Walvoord and Roy Zuck describe the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy: "In 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar and his forces broke through Jerusalem's walls, burned the houses and the temple, and carried many captives into exile. Cyrus, founder of the Persian Empire, first came to the throne of Anshan in Eastern Elam in 559. In 549 he conquered the Medes and became the ruler of the combined Persian and Median Empire. In 539 he conquered Babylon (Dan. 5:30) and the very next year issued a decree that the Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). In doing this Cyrus was serving God's purposes as if he were God's shepherd. Those returnees built the temple, completing it in 515 B.C., and years later (in 444 B.C.) Nehemiah went to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls" (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*), S. 1:1099).

Chapter 45: Not for Price or Bribe

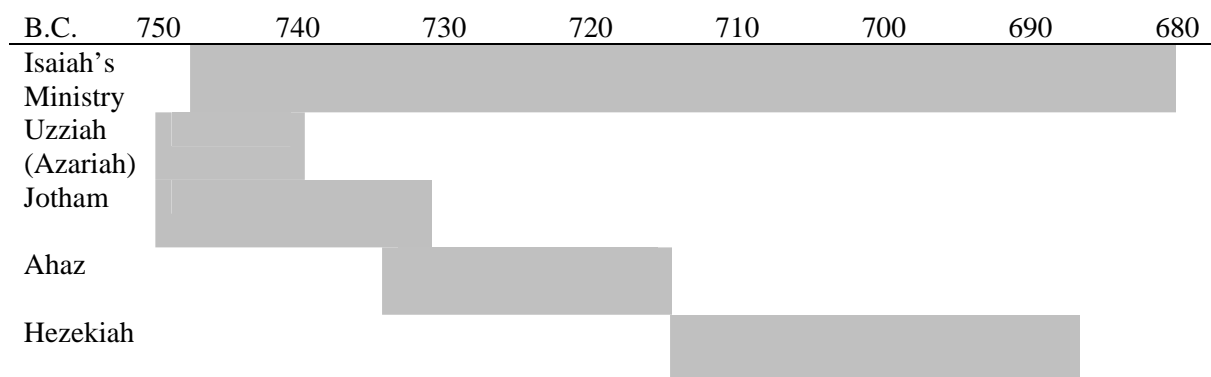
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 45 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile.



Key verses:

Isa. 45:12-13 – “I made the earth, and created man on it. It was My hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host. I have raised him [Cyrus] up in righteousness, and will level all roads for him. He will rebuild My city, and set My exiles free, not for a price or a bribe,” says the LORD of Hosts.

Quick summary:

Isaiah prophesies that Cyrus the Great, founder of the Persian Empire, will be God's chosen servant to free the Jewish exiles from Babylonian captivity and restore them to their homeland. The Lord, who “made the earth, and created man on it” (v. 12), will empower Cyrus to crush the Gentile nations for the benefit of Israel and the glory of God.

Take note:

That the Lord controls human history is evident from His many declarations in this chapter, among them:

- “I will go before you and level the uneven places” (v. 2).
- “I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches from secret places” (v.3).
- “I call you by your name” (v. 4).
- “I will strengthen you, though you do not know me” (v. 5).
- “I make success and create disaster” (v. 7).
- “Woe to the one who argues with his Maker” (v. 9).
- “It was My hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host” (v. 12).
- “Israel will be saved by the Lord” (v. 17).
- “Every knee will bow to Me, every tongue will swear allegiance” (v. 23).

So All May Know (Isa. 45:1-13)

In chapter 44, the Lord names the Persian king who will free the Jews from Babylonian captivity and return them to their homeland – 150 years before this king is born. Cyrus is called “My shepherd” in chapter 44 and now “His anointed” in chapter 45. The word “anointed” refers to the relationship between the Lord and Israel’s first two kings, Saul and David (1 Sam. 10:1, 16:6). Since Israel will have no king in exile, Cyrus will function in this role to bring about God’s blessings. “Like the Messiah (lit. ‘the Anointed One’) who would come after him, Cyrus would have a twofold mission: to free the people, and to bring God’s judgment on unbelievers” (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1099).

Cyrus will conquer other nations with God’s help and fill his coffers with their treasures. His defeat of Lydia and Babylon are two examples. All of this is for the sake of God’s people and despite the fact that Cyrus does not acknowledge the Lord as the true God. This is an important lesson in history and contemporary culture. The Lord is sovereign over His creatures and is moving human history to its climax in the “glorious appearing” of Messiah. If He can enable Sampson to use the jawbone of a donkey to smite the Philistines (Judges 15:14-16), empower a donkey to prophesy (Num. 22:22-31) and write with His invisible hand on the wall of a king’s palace (Dan. 5:5), He can use a pagan king to rescue His people and restore them to their homeland. Never think that the success of the wicked is due to a twisted sense of justice on God’s part or His lack of interest in the affairs of mankind. The Lord is omniscient and omnipresent; nothing escapes His attention.

Verses 5-7 emphasize the uniqueness of God, a theme repeated often in chapters 43-46. The Lord is not universally recognized in Cyrus’ day, but the day is coming when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord (Phil. 2:10-11). The words “light” and “darkness,” “success” and “disaster” in verse 7 are Hebrew expressions of opposites suggesting all that is. Every event in human history comes from the Lord – not that He is the author of evil (James 1:13), but that He is able to turn mankind’s wicked deeds into ultimate good (Gen. 50:20). No one may trick God, or thwart His purposes.

Verse 8 provides a graphic glimpse of the Lord's ministry during the millennium. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck write, "When the millennial kingdom is established on the earth the heavens, figuratively speaking, will rain down righteousness (God's standards will be followed). And salvation, like a great harvest, will spring up. That is, people everywhere will know the LORD (cf. v. 6; 11:9; Hab. 2:14)" (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1100)

In verses 9-13 it is clear that those who question the Lord's sovereignty invite His woes. A potsherd, a broken and discarded piece of pottery, has no right to question the potter. Neither does a child have the right to question why her parents brought her into the world. In the same way, Israel has no justification for challenging God's decision to raise up Cyrus as His "shepherd" and "anointed one" to deliver the Jews from Babylonian bondage. The people may inquire of God and seek to understand His ways, but they must never question His authority, as Maker, to direct human history. The Lord later reminds the Jews, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways.... For as heaven is higher than earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9).

Turn to Me and be Saved (Isa. 45:14-25)

In the millennium, the nations will realize that Israel's God is the only true God, and they will acknowledge Him. People from Egypt and Cush – and even the Sabeans, known as majestic men of stature – will be subservient to the Jews and declare "there is no other God" (v. 14). Although Isaiah admits that the Lord, at times, seems to hide Himself, He is without a doubt the Savior of Israel. While those who worship false gods will be ashamed because their gods cannot save them, the Jews will never be ashamed because they will enjoy God's presence throughout eternity. During their coming days in captivity in Babylon, God's people can count on Him to send Cyrus to deliver them. The Lord offers two proofs. First, He is the Creator of heaven and earth, in complete control of kings and kingdoms. Second, He is truth (see also John 14:6); whatever He speaks is right. God's people are assured of their redemption because God has determined it and has spoken truthfully that it will come to pass.

The Lord invites the Gentiles who will escape Cyrus' sword to present their case before Him. The futility of praying to hand-made wooden gods will be exposed, and any case the pagans can muster in favor of idol worship will fall on the deaf ears of gods who "cannot save" and "have no knowledge" (v. 20). Which of the idols can name the Jews' deliverer a century before his birth? And which of the carved wooden statues can save a nation from exile? Only the God who "announced it from ancient times." He declares, "There is no God but Me, a righteous God and Savior; there is no one except Me" (v. 21).

The final verses of this chapter mark God's gracious call to all the world's inhabitants to repent and be saved. The Lord affirms once again that He is the only true God and, as such, the only means of salvation. "Every knee will bow to Me, every tongue will swear allegiance," He states in verse 23. The New Testament boldly applies this passage to Christ, directly in Phil. 2:10-11 and indirectly in Rom. 14:9, 11:

- “... so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow – of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth – and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10-11).
- “Christ died and came to life for this: that He might rule over both the dead and the living. But you, why do you criticize your brother? Or you, why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written: As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to Me, and every tongue will give praise to God” (Rom. 14:9-11).

Even so, many people will continue to rebel against God. And while the Lord allows them to wallow in their sins for a while, ultimately they will be “put to shame” (v. 24). The apostle Paul warns unbelievers that one day they will stand before God “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). The apostle John provides more graphic details of the final judgment of the wicked: “And anyone not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:15).

However, the redeemed of Israel will rejoice in being justified, or made righteous in the Lord. While this passage is a message of hope to the Jews under siege by the Assyrians, and facing future exile at the hands of the Babylonians, we are not to conclude that all Jews will receive eternal life just because of their nationality. Rather, Isaiah is speaking of a nation of redeemed Jews who have turned from unbelief and embraced their Lord and Savior. By the same token, we are not to assume that only Jews will be saved, for the Lord invites all the nations to turn to Him, and the apostle Paul makes much of the fact that Jews and Gentiles alike are grafted together to make up the people of God (Rom. 11:11-24). John confirms this in Rev. 5:9: “You redeemed [people] for God by Your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation.”

Closing Thought

Matthew Henry writes: “All true Christians, that depend upon Christ for strength and righteousness, in him shall be justified and shall glory in that. Observe, *First*, All believers are the seed of Israel, an upright praying seed. *Secondly*, The great privilege they enjoy by Jesus Christ is that in him, and for his sake, they are justified before God, Christ being made of God to them righteousness.... *Thirdly*, The great duty believers owe to Christ is to glory in him, and to make their boast of him” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 45:20).

Chapter 46: The Gods Cower

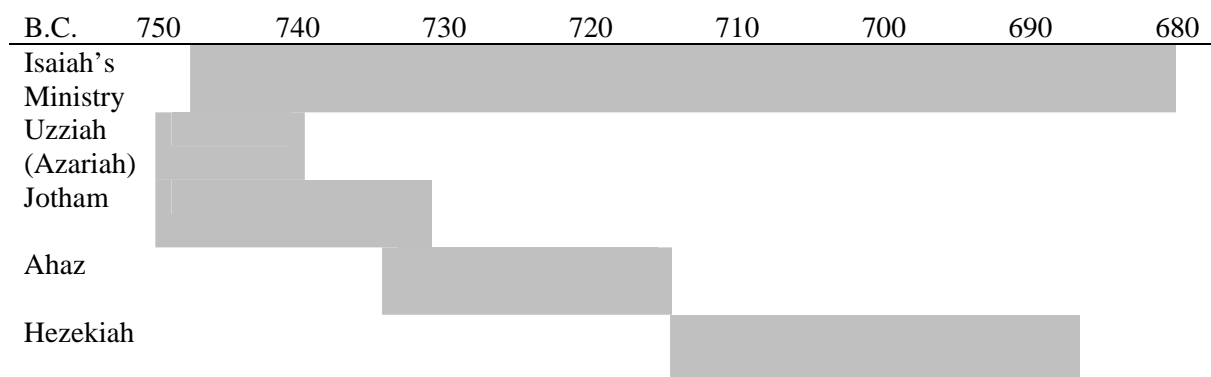
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 46 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile.



Key verse:

Isa. 46:11 – “I call a bird of prey from the east, a man for My purpose from a far country. Yes, I have spoken; so I will also bring it about. I have planned it; I will also do it.”

Quick summary:

“The discussion of Cyrus’s victories on God’s behalf led to thoughts of Babylon’s idols, who had to be carried by their worshipers and were therefore obviously powerless to save them (46:1–2). While Babylon carried their gods, Israel’s God carried them (46:3–4)! While the Babylonians lavished gold on their helpless gods, Israel’s mighty God controlled all of history. By calling in Cyrus – the ‘bird of prey from the east’ – he would destroy Babylon and free its Israelite captives (46:8–13)” (H.L. Willmington, *Willmington's Bible Handbook*, S. 370).

Take note:

Isaiah emphasizes the inability of Babylon's gods to save the Babylonians from the Persian king Cyrus or prevent the victory that will result in Judah's return home after 70 years in exile. The prophet calls two of Babylon's chief gods by name:

- **Bel** – also known as Marduk, the chief god of Babylon. The celebrated tower of Babylon is dedicated to this god, residing in the center of one of two parts into which the city is divided; the king's palace is the focus of the city's other half. Identified with the sun, or with the planet Jupiter, Bel is worshiped in turrets, on housetops and other high places so as to be nearer to the heavenly hosts (see Jer. 19:13, 32:29; Zeph. 1:5). Bel is the Babylonian god of fortune, “the most propitious star to be born under” (Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, S. Is 46:1). According to the Apocryphal book *Bel and the Dragon*, Cyrus casts down Bel.
- **Nebo** – the son of Marduk, is the god of writing and learning and is associated with Mercury, or Hermes, in astrology. The extent of Nebo worship is reflected in the compounding of the god's name with the names of Babylonian kings, for example Nebuchadnezzar.

The Helpless Gods of Babylon (Isa. 46:1-13)

Once gloriously transported in New Year's Day processions, the Babylonian gods Bel and Nebo are now seen as heavy burdens being dragged into captivity. They crouch and cower, as if in fear of the Persians, and they are incapable of saving themselves or their Babylonian subjects. The gods credited with empowering Nebuchadnezzar to enslave the Jews are now in shackles. In contrast, the one true God, the Holy One of Israel, has sustained His people from the womb and carried them along since birth (v. 3). From the time of conception to old age, the Lord watches over His people and delivers them from trouble. “I have made you, and I will carry you; I will bear and save you,” the Lord declares (v. 4).

The gods of gold and silver cannot compare to the God of Israel. Pagans hire skilled craftsmen to fashion idols out of precious metals. They place them on sturdy mounts where they may be approached and implored. They kneel down and bow to the gods. They hoist them on their shoulders and set them in prominent places. And they cry out to these hand-molded deities. But the idols don't budge. They don't answer the desperate cries. And they can't save. Like Elijah, who taunted the false gods on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:20-29), Isaiah often derides pagans and their gods (see Isa. 40:18-20; 44:9-20; 45:16, 20; 46:1-2). Unlike these lifeless gods, the one true God hears and saves.

In verses 8-11 the people of Babylon are called to remember what the Lord did “long ago.” The Lord speaks in the past tense, even though His work of defeat (for the Babylonians) and deliverance (for the Jews) is more than a century in the future. God is not bound by time, nor is He troubled by the earth's mightiest kings. “I declare the end from the beginning,” He says, “and from long ago what is not yet done, saying: My plan will take place, and I will do all My will”

(v. 10). God demonstrates His uniqueness by His knowledge and control of the future (Isa. 45:21) and His ability to bring Cyrus from the east like a bird of prey (Isa. 46:11). Interestingly, the standard of Cyrus is a golden eagle on a spear, and he is described by some as having a nose similar to the beak of a hawk or eagle.

Matthew Henry writes: “Cyrus came from the east at God’s call: for God is Lord of hosts and of those that have hosts at command. And, if God give him a call, he will give him success. He is the man that shall *execute God’s counsel*, though he comes *from a far country* and knows nothing of the matter. Note, Even those that know not, and mind not, God’s revealed will, are made use of to fulfil [sic] the counsels of his secret will, which shall all be punctually accomplished in their season by what hand he pleases” (*Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 46:5).

The “hardhearted” and “far removed from justice” in verse 12 are the Babylonians, who will experience God’s justice at the hands of the Persians. They also will see the Lord’s salvation as He delivers the Jews, restores them to their homeland and places His majesty in Israel.

Closing Thought

Just as Isaiah delivers a message of hope to the Jews when they need it most, the New Testament writers urge Christians to take heart in troubled times. “‘Fear not’ is God’s great promise to us as Christians,” writes Warren Wiersbe. “He is greater than Satan and this world, so we need not fear. He has a purpose for our lives, and He will fulfill it if we trust Him. He will pardon our sins and keep His promises” (*Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the Old Testament*, S. Is 40:1).

Chapter 47: Sit in the Dust

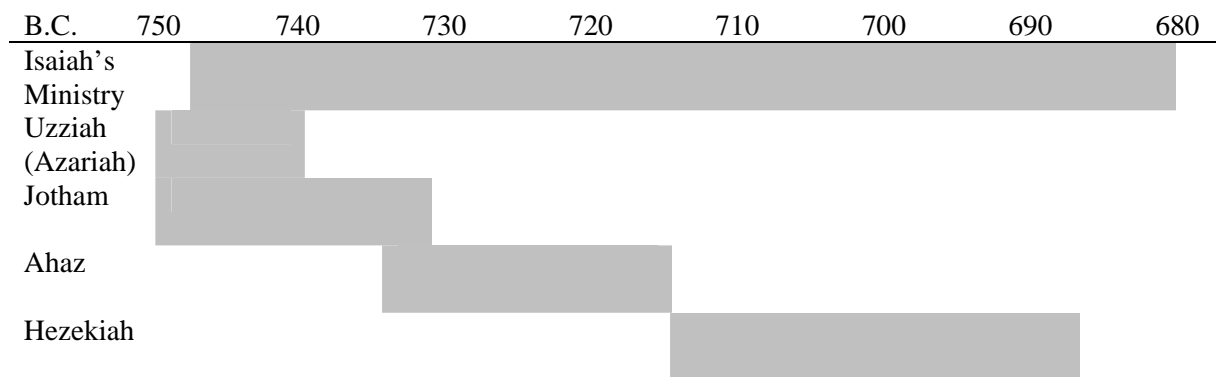
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 47 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile.



Key verses:

Isa. 47:3-4 – “Your nakedness will be uncovered, and your shame will be exposed. I will take vengeance; I will spare no one. The Holy One of Israel is our Redeemer; the LORD of Hosts is His name.”

Quick summary:

Babylon's destruction is foretold. This prophecy is fulfilled in 539 B.C. when Persian King Cyrus captures the city. Babylon's failure is exposed in verse 6. The Lord has disciplined the Jews, placing them under Babylon's control, but the captors went beyond reasonable punishment and “showed them no mercy.” Now under God's judgment, Babylon is challenged to turn to its sorcerers, who must try to do the impossible – to prevent disaster at the hands of the Persians. They will fail because the Lord says, “I will take vengeance; I will spare no one” (v. 3).

Take note:

Twice, Babylon is called “Daughter Chaldea” (vv. 1, 5) and throughout the chapter she is depicted as a pouting mistress. Once “pampered and spoiled,” she must now grind meal with a millstone, remove her veil and bare her thigh as she wades through rivers. She will sit in silence and go into darkness, no longer a “mistress of the kingdoms” (v. 5). Once a lover of luxury who never considered the consequences of her actions, she now experiences loss of children and widowhood in a single day. In the last days, Babylon is depicted in a similar way, indulging in idolatry, immorality and excessive materialism. Like Babylon in Old Testament times, the kingdom in the last days is utterly destroyed and the world grieves her loss, but the judgment comes from God (Rev. 18).

The Shame of Babylon (Isa. 47:1-4)

Proud Babylon will be conquered and its people will become humbled servants, sitting in the dust as a sign of mourning (see Jonah 3:6). The words “Virgin Daughter” depict the people of the city as young and innocent women, possibly meaning the city’s walls have never been breached, or the people have never been captured. The people no longer will be delicate like virgins. Rather, they will endure hardships, grinding meal with millstones, unconcerned about their clothing or modesty. Some no doubt will be abused and raped. Warren Wiersbe writes, “Babylon, the proud queen, is now a humbled slave. ‘I will continue forever—the eternal queen!’ she boasted (v. 7, NIV). But in a moment, the judgment for her sins caught up with her; and she became a widow” (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 45:1).

Verse 4 predicts the response of the Jews, who will rejoice at the devastating work of God’s hand on their oppressors. They will praise God, realizing that their redemption comes from His direct and divine intervention in human history. “The Holy One of Israel is our Redeemer,” they proclaim. “The Lord of Hosts is His name.” Matthew Henry reminds us, “God can make those sit silently that used to make the greatest noise in the world, and send those into darkness that used to make the greatest figure. Let him that glories, therefore, glory in a God that changes not, and not in any worldly wealth, pleasure, or honour, which are subject to change” (*Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 47:1).

The Sins of Babylon (Isa. 47:6-8, 10)

Babylon has conquered Judah only because God has allowed it. More to the point, God chose this proud and pagan nation as His rod of discipline against the unrepentant Jews, a fact that should cause the Babylonians to place their victory in proper perspective. But they see things differently. They treat their captives with impunity, utterly destroying Judah’s capital city and place of worship. Although Yahweh places the Jews under the Babylonians’ control, they show no mercy and make life exceptionally difficult even for the elderly (v. 6). The Babylonians never entertain the thought that their rule is temporary. Brashly, the nation boasts, “I will be the mistress forever” (v. 7). Instead of seeing their triumph as an opportunity to serve the true and living God, they “did not take these things to heart or think about their outcome” (v. 7).

What's more, the Babylonians think they can never be defeated. Enjoying the spoils of victory, sitting in the lap of luxury, resting in the security an undefeated army provides, the women declare they will never be widowed or know the loss of children (v. 8). But they are led astray by their "knowledge" and their "wisdom" (v. 10). "Their policy and craft, which they called their *wisdom*, were their confidence. They thought they could outwit all mankind, and therefore might set all their enemies at defiance. But their *wisdom and knowledge perverted them*, and turned them out of the way, made them forget themselves, and the preparation necessary to be made for hereafter" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, S. Is 47:7). Those who trust in their wealth, their wisdom and their wickedness will find these false comforts in the end to be their ruin.

The Suffering of Babylon (Isa. 47:5, 9, 11-15)

Babylon is considered nearly impregnable, yet because of her sins the Lord says she will "sit in silence" (the posture of mourning), "go into darkness" (the state of misery) and "no longer be called mistress (queen) of kingdoms" (v. 5). Disaster and devastation are coming suddenly and unexpectedly. The once-invincible Babylonians will be unable to anticipate, avert or escape the calamity. The Babylonians prided themselves in their sorcerers, who supposedly foretold future events and cast spells to exert influence over others. Such alleged knowledge would be of no value in the coming days, for the sorcerers would not be able to see destruction coming or cast spells to make their conquerors go away.

In verses 12-15 the Lord mockingly urges the Babylonians to continue their sorceries and spells. Like Elijah jeering the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), Yahweh pokes fun at Babylon's inept spiritual leaders. "Let them stand and save you – the astrologers who observe the stars ... they are like stubble; fire burns them up.... They cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame ... each wanders his own way; no one can save you." Matthew Henry remarks: "Witchcraft is a sin in its own nature exceedingly heinous; it is giving that honour to the devil which is due to God only, making God's enemy our guide and the father of lies our oracle. In Babylon it was a national sin, and had the protection and countenance of the government; conjurors, for aught that appears, were their privy counsellors [sic] and prime ministers of state. And shall not God visit for these things?" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, S. Is 47:7).

Babylon and Chaldea are especially well known for their astrologers. In Chaldea the astrologers form a particular caste, in which knowledge is passed from father to son. They teach that the universe is eternal and that the movements of the celestial bodies are directed by a council of the gods. Their long and careful study of the heavens makes them more able than others to calculate the movements and influence of the stars. To assist them in their calculations, the astrologers divide the heavens into 12 equal parts, our houses – six above the horizon and six below – "and the various subjects that affect the happiness of human beings, such as fortune, marriage, life, death, religion, etc., were distributed among them. From the position of the stars in these houses the calculations were made.... And from the varied appearances of the heavens they foretold events that not only affected lands and nations, but also brought happiness or unhappiness to kings and common people" (James M. Freeman, *Manners & Customs of the Bible*. [Rev. ed.], S. 364).

No matter. Yahweh is direct and precise in His judgment that all the labors of the astrologers will come to naught, for He has determined that their season of sin is about to come to an end: “Look, they are like stubble; fire burns them up. They cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame” (v. 14).

Closing Thought

D.A. Carson comments: “It is Babylon’s proper fate: there can be no mercy, for she has shown none.... Yet the description is not without pity. We are watching the triumph of justice, but equally the tragedy of the sinner. Dust and toil, nakedness and shame, silence and darkness – these symbols of damnation have an added bitterness by the glimpse of the arrogant gaiety which they quench for ever. We can enter into her sinking of heart as the trusted expedients fail (the *magic spells, sorceries* and horoscopes of vs 12–14), and the old associates drift prudently away, ‘each in his own direction’ (15), like the fair-weather friends that they are” (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, S. Is 47:1).

Chapter 48: I Will Delay My Anger

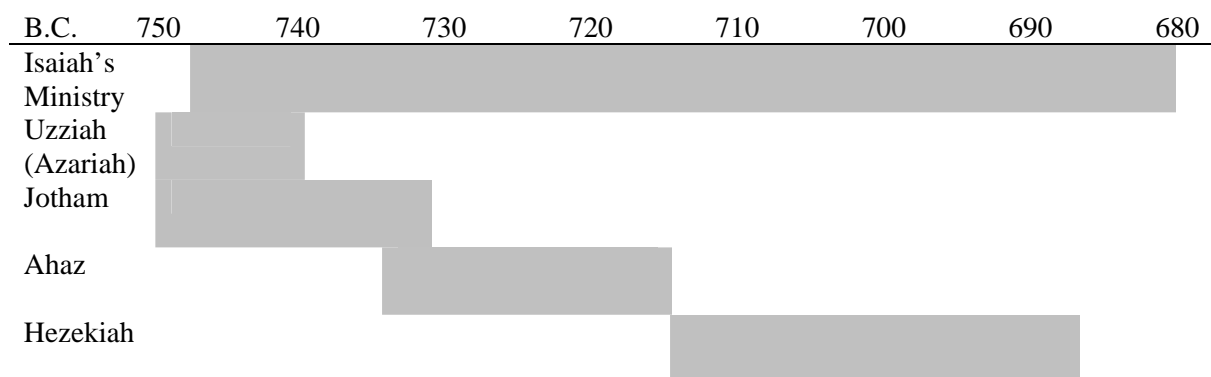
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 48 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile.



Key verses:

Isa. 48:9 – I will delay My anger for the honor of My name, and I will restrain Myself for your benefit and for My praise, so that you will not be destroyed.

Quick summary:

Isaiah 48 summarizes the message of chapters 40-47, assuring the Jews of their promised deliverance from Babylon through Cyrus. God has always known that His people would forsake Him. Yet for the honor of His name and the benefit of His praise, He remains true to His promises and saves them. He also tells them well in advance what He's going to do so they will not attribute the events to the work of idols or natural causes. Yahweh prophetically signals the day of His people's liberation from Babylon, depicting their salvation as an escape from a barren desert to a land of abundant water.

Take note:

Verse 16 features a glimpse of the Trinity: “‘Approach Me and listen to this. From the beginning I have not spoken in secret; from the time anything existed, I was there.’ And now the Lord God has sent me and His Spirit.” Certainly the “Lord God” is a reference to the Father, while “His Spirit” speaks of the Holy Spirit. But the prophet, referring to himself as “me” speaks “not in his own person so much as that of Messiah, to whom alone in the fullest sense the words apply” (Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, S. Is 48:16). This fact becomes clearer when we read Isa. 61:1-2a: “The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and freedom to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor ...” Jesus reads these very words in the synagogue in Nazareth and then proclaims, “Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled” (Luke 4:21).

Remembering God’s Prophecies (Isa. 48:1-11)

This prophecy speaks to the Jews in exile in Babylon more than a century in advance. Comfortable in captivity, the people see no need to return to their homeland. They forget that the reason for their exile was their wanton sinfulness. They took oaths and invoked the Lord’s name but lacked the holiness Yahweh demands of those called by His name. The Lord told them the captivity would take place, but they refused to repent. And now – more than 100 years later – they are too complacent to go back home. The Lord calls them stubborn, with necks of iron and foreheads of bronze. He reminds them that He told them what would happen far in advance so they would not attribute this knowledge to their lifeless idols. “You have heard it,” says the Lord. “Observe it all. Will you not acknowledge it?” (v. 6).

From now on, the Lord says, He will “announce new things ... hidden things” that the Jews have not known. That is, He tells them the Persians will defeat the Babylonians, resulting in the opportunity for His people to go home. The Lord has done this, and no one else. “God by his prophets told them beforehand of their deliverance, lest they should attribute the accomplishment of it to their idols. Thus he saw it necessary to secure the glory of it to himself, which otherwise would have been given by some of them to their graven images: ‘I spoke of it,’ says God, ‘lest thou shouldst say, My idol has done it or has commanded it to be done,’” (*Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 48:1).

Warren Wiersbe ties the mood of complacent Judah to that of the modern-day church: “One would think that the Jews would have been eager to leave their ‘prison’ and return to their land to see God do new and great things for them. They had grown accustomed to the security of bondage and had forgotten the challenges of freedom. The church today can easily grow complacent with its comfort and affluence. God may have to put us into the furnace to remind us that we are here to be *servants* and not *consumers* or *spectators*” (*Be Comforted, An Old Testament Study*, S. Is 45:1).

Still, the Lord is faithful. Though the Jews deserve destruction for their wickedness, the Lord promises to delay His anger “for the honor of My name” and restrain Himself “for your benefit and [for] My praise” (v. 9). He refines His people in the furnace of affliction, “but not as silver” (v. 10). This phrase could be taken one of two ways. First, the people – wicked, complacent, and hard-hearted – are more like dross than like silver. Second, the affliction the Lord brings on His people is not severe enough to burn all their sinfulness away. Both views are possible; the former is probably the best. In verse 11, Yahweh then asks, “... how can I be defiled? I will not give My glory to another.” In other words, why should the Lord permit His name to be polluted by utterly destroying His special people to whom He has made everlasting promises?

Noting God’s Sovereignty (Isa. 48:12-19)

Isaiah often writes of two proofs of God’s uniqueness: His creative power and His ability to foretell the future. “My own hand founded the earth,” the Lord says in verse 13, “and My right hand spread out the heavens.” Next, He makes it clear that no god could predict the future emergence of Cyrus, or make the Persian king his ally in defeating the seemingly unbeatable Babylonians. “Who among the idols has declared these things?” He asks. “The Lord loves him (Cyrus); he will accomplish His will against Babylon ... I have spoken; yes, I have called him; I have brought him, and he will succeed in his mission” (vv. 14-15).

The Lord speaks in the first half of verse 16, stressing that He has not been working in secret since the time of creation. But a different speaker steps forward in the middle of the verse, beginning with the words, “And now.” Commentators suggest it is Cyrus, Isaiah, or perhaps even Israel, but the most likely spokesman is the Messiah. “And now the Lord God has sent me and His Spirit,” He says. “Probably the Messiah, God’s Servant, is intended because of His association (as in 42:1; also note 11:1-2) with the Spirit. Just as Cyrus would not fail in his mission (48:15), so the Messiah-Servant, sent by God with the Holy Spirit on Him, will not fail in His mission” (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1102).

Isaiah again quotes Yahweh – “the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel” – beginning in verse 17 to stress the fact that God’s discipline has a purpose: “I am the Lord your God, who teaches you for [your] benefit, who leads you in the way you should go.” Through the Babylonian siege and subsequent captivity, and through 70 years of exile, the Lord is teaching His people to trust Him. The writer of Hebrews later echoes this truth, assuring his readers that God’s punishment is an outgrowth of His love: “God is dealing with you as sons. For what son is there whom a father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline – which all receive – then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had natural fathers discipline us, and we respected them. Shouldn’t we submit even more to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time based on what seemed good to them, but He does it for our benefit, so that we can share His holiness” (Heb. 12:7-10).

There are consequences of disobedience, and blessings to be missed, which the Lord makes clear: “If only you had paid attention to My commands,” He says. “Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea. Your descendents would have been as [countless] as the sand, and the offspring of your body like its grains; their name would not be cut off or eliminated from My presence” (vv. 18-19).

Fleeing Babylon (Isa. 48:20-22)

The edict of Cyrus to free the Jews and return them to their homeland is recorded in 2 Chron. 36:22-23: “The LORD put it into the mind of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom and also [to put it] in writing: This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build Him a temple at Jerusalem in Judah. Whoever among you of His people may go up, and may the LORD his God be with him.”

From the perspective of Isaiah’s time, more than a century prior to this declaration, the people are to know that when the day of freedom comes, their descendents are to leave Babylon with haste. As they go, they will rejoice at their redemption, much as the people in Moses’ day rejoiced at their release from Egyptian bondage. In both cases, it is the Lord who buys back His people. Just as He provided food, shelter and water for the multitude fleeing Egypt, He will supply the Jews leaving Babylon with everything they need. Isaiah reminds his countrymen that Yahweh can split the rocks in the desert and cause abundant water to gush forth (see Ex. 17:1-17; Ps. 78:15-16).

The chapter ends with a contrasting statement for those who oppose the Lord. “There is no peace,” says the Lord, “for the wicked” (v. 22). This declaration, applying to Jew and Gentile alike, is repeated in Isa. 57:21.

Closing Thought

What blessings do we miss by getting out in front of the Lord rather than waiting on Him? What peace do we forfeit when we reject His light and grope in the darkness of our own frail wisdom? Matthew Henry comments: “Now God tells them [the Jews] what he would have done for them if they had persevered in their obedience, *First*, That they might be the more humbled for their sins, by which they had forfeited such rich mercies. Note, *This* should engage us (I might say, enrage us) against sin, that it has not only deprived us of the good things we have enjoyed, but prevented the good things God had in store for us. It will make the misery of the disobedient the more intolerable to think how happy they might have been. *Secondly*, That his mercy might appear the more illustrious in working deliverance for them, though they had forfeited it and rendered themselves unworthy of it. Nothing but a prerogative of mercy would have saved them” (S. Is 48:16).

The Book of Isaiah

Chapter 49: A Light for the Nations

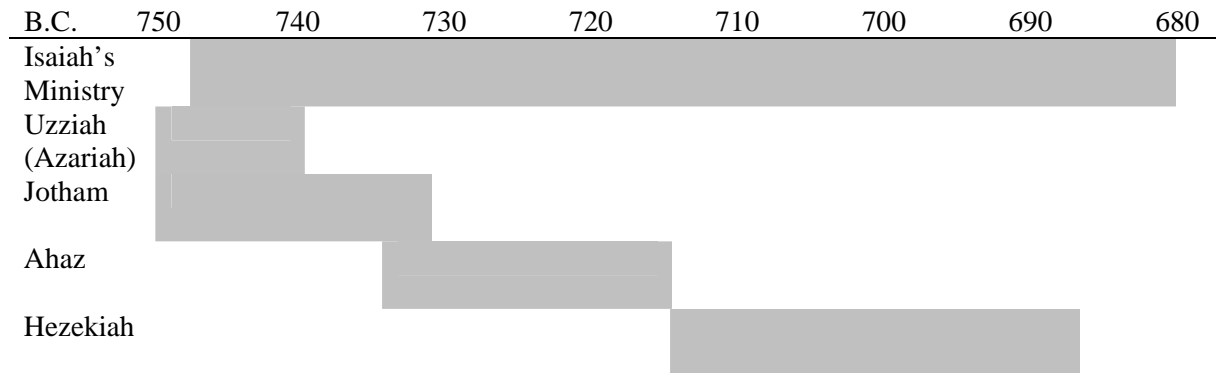
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 49 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verse:

Isa. 49:6 – He [the Lord] says, “It is not enough for you to be My servant raising up the tribes of Jacob and restoring the protected ones of Israel. I will also make you a light for the nations, to be My salvation to the ends of the earth.”

Quick summary:

In this chapter and the next, Isaiah prophesies about the Servant of the Lord (the Messiah), His mission, and His obedience to God (the Father). Rejected by His own people (v. 4; John 1:11), the Messiah will restore Israel to the Lord and bring salvation to the Gentiles (vv. 5-6). His mouth is likened to a sharpened sword, a reference to His speaking ministry (v. 2; Rev. 1:16). The name Israel is applied here to the Messiah as the One who fulfills Yahweh's expectations for His people (v. 3). Verses 15-16 feature one of the strongest statements in Scripture of God's faithfulness to His people.

Take note:

In verse 1 the Servant declares, “The Lord called me before I was born. He named me while I was in my mother’s womb.” This Messianic passage speaks both to the deity and humanity of God’s Servant and strikes a common chord between Jesus and others who have been sent to proclaim salvation to mankind. Jeremiah is chosen of God in his mother’s womb (Jer. 1:5), as is John the Baptist (Luke 1:15) and the apostle Paul (Gal. 1:15). The key difference here, as we learn from other Old Testament and New Testament passages, is that Messiah is the eternal Son of God, the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). He existed long before John the Baptist, Jeremiah or even Abraham (John 8:58). Still, He added to his deity sinless humanity so that He would be “a merciful and faithful high priest” (Heb. 2:17).

The Second “Servant Song” (Isa. 49:1-13)

God’s Servant, the Messiah, is the speaker in verses 1-5. He calls not only Israel to hear His voice, but the coastlands (islands) and distant peoples because His message is for all mankind. His words are like a sharpened sword – truth that defends the righteous and destroys the rebellious. Often in Scripture God’s words are likened to a sword (Isa. 1:20; Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:16, 19:15). They pierce to the very heart, discerning our thoughts and intents, bringing conviction and judgment. For those who repent, God’s word is a comfort and a mighty protector, but to those who rebel, His word is the ultimate destroyer.

Why is the Servant called “Israel” in verse 3? “This cannot refer to the nation because the Servant is to draw that nation back to God. The Messiah is called Israel because He fulfills what Israel should have done. In His person and work He epitomizes the nation” (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1103).

In verse 6 Yahweh tells the Servant that He will do more than restore the nation of Israel; He will be “a light for the nations” and “My salvation to the ends of the earth.” The Servant will be “despised” and “abhorred” by people, but ultimately “[k]ings will see and stand up, and princes will bow down” to Him (verse 7). This prophecy is expanded in Isa. 53 where, in verse 6, Isaiah writes, “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering who knew what sickness was. He was like one people turned away from; He was despised, and we didn’t value Him.” The Messiah will be rejected by His own people in His first coming (John 1:10-11), but one day all people will acknowledge Him (Phil. 2:10-11). This does not imply that all people will be saved, for the Scripture is clear that those who go to their graves rejecting Christ have chosen to spend eternity apart from Him (Rev. 20:11-15).

Warren Wiersbe adds this observation: “Our Lord could not minister to the Gentiles until first He ministered to the Jews (vv. 5–6). Read carefully Matthew 10:5–6; 15:24; Luke 24:44–49; Acts 3:25–26; 13:46–47; and Romans 1:16. When our Lord returned to heaven, He left behind a believing remnant of Jews that carried on His work. We must never forget that ‘salvation is of the Jews’ (John 4:22). The Bible is a Jewish book, the first believers and missionaries were Jews, and the Gentiles would not have heard the Gospel had it not been brought to them by Jews. Messiah was despised by both Jews and Gentiles (Isa. 49:7), but He did God’s work and was glorified” (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 49:1).

In verse 8 the terms “time of favor” and “day of salvation” may be a reference to the Millennium, when Messiah sits on the throne of David and fulfills all remaining covenant promises to Israel. Prisoners are told to “come out” and those in darkness are commanded to “[s]how yourselves” (v. 9). The release of Judah from Babylonian captivity will foreshadow that day when God’s kingdom comes in fullness and God’s people are freed from physical suffering and their struggle with sin. The apostle John’s allusion to verse 10 in Rev. 7:17 – “He will guide them to springs of living waters” – may indicate that many Gentiles will join their Jewish brothers and sisters in making Israel their homeland. In fact, the rest of this section tells us that “many will come from far away, from the north and from the west, and from the land of Sinim,” which, according to some scholars, could be a reference to Persia or China (v. 12).

It’s important to remember that the extension of God’s grace to the Gentiles requires the fulfillment of His promises to the Jews. If the Jews are not returned to their homeland, how will Messiah be born in Bethlehem? How will the temple, with its sacrifices that foreshadow the Christ, be built? How will Nazareth be the place He grows up, or Jerusalem be the scene of His teaching, trials, crucifixion and resurrection? All that Yahweh does for the Jews He does with an eye toward all humanity.

Comfort for Jerusalem (Isa. 49:14-23)

This section begins with Zion lamenting, “The Lord has abandoned me” (v. 14). It continues with some of Yahweh’s most tender assurances that He will rescue and exalt His people (vv. 14-23a). And it concludes with God stating His purpose: “Then you will know that I am the Lord; those who put their hope in Me will not be put to shame” (v. 23b). The Lord compares His love for Israel to a mother’s love for her children. Isaiah depicts Israel as a nursing child, completely dependent on the Lord who will never forsake or forget them. “Look, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands,” the Lord says in verse 16. Warren Wiersbe comments: “The high priest bore the names of the tribes of Israel on his shoulders and over his heart (Ex. 28:6-9), engraved on jewels; but God has engraved His children’s names on His hands. The word ‘engraved’ means ‘to cut into,’ signifying its permanence. God can never forget Zion or Zion’s children” (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 49:1).

Although dark days loom on the horizon for Jerusalem, the Lord assures the people that the best days are yet to come. “As I live,” the Lord declares, “you will wear all your children as jewelry, and put them on as a bride does” (v. 18). Zion may seem like a forgotten mother, but one day her children – the returning inhabitants of Israel – will adorn her like bridal ornaments. In fact, the land will not be large enough to hold them. We know that the exiles who return from Babylon after King Cyrus’ decree are relatively small in number, so the return mentioned in verses 19-21 probably is a reference to Israel’s return at the beginning of the millennium.

In the future, when Israel returns to the land, the Gentiles will worship God, honor the Jews and even help transport them to their homeland. What a startling turn of events from the anti-Semitism that has marred so much of human history. The Lord says the Gentiles “will bring your sons in their arms, and your daughters will be carried on their shoulders” (v. 22). Even more amazing, the world’s leaders will pay homage to God’s people: “Kings will be your foster

fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. They will bow down to you with their faces to the ground, and lick the dust at your feet” (v. 23). What is the purpose of all this? So the Jews “will know that I am the Lord” (v. 23).

Comfort for the Captives (Isa. 49:24-26)

Isaiah closes the chapter with two poignant questions for the citizens of Judah: Can the prey be taken from the mighty? Can the captives of the tyrant be delivered? After all that Isaiah has said and all that the Lord has declared and done, some of the Jews still lament that their situation is hopeless and their future is bleak. But the Lord clearly is in command, even of the world’s most powerful rulers. Notice how the Lord responds:

- “Even the captives of a mighty man will be taken, and the prey of a tyrant will be delivered” (v. 25). No power on earth will thwart God’s plan for Israel. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus makes it clear that no power in the heavens will stop Him, either. He comes into the world to invade Satan’s kingdom and to bind the strong man (Satan), thus plundering his goods by leading lost sinners into the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 12:25-29).
- “I will contend with the one who contends with you, and I will save your children” (v. 25). The Assyrians will be defeated on the hills surrounding Jerusalem – 185,000 in a single night. What’s more, the emerging Babylonians will only succeed for a while in conquering God’s people and then will be brought low. In the last days, the antichrist and his followers who oppose Israel will be cut down by the returning King of kings and Lord of Lords. The best allies of God are allies of God’s people, and the worst enemies of God are the enemies of the Jews.
- “I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they will be drunk with their own blood as with sweet wine” (v. 26). The reference to eating their own flesh could be symbolic of internal strife among the enemies of God’s people (see Isa. 9:20). Drinking their own blood is just retribution for shedding the blood of God’s servants. Sweet wine is fresh and new; a great deal is required to intoxicate someone. Therefore it is an appropriate image of the large quantities of blood that would be required of God’s enemies (see Rev. 14:10, 20; 16:6).
- Finally, Yahweh reminds the people they should be confident in their future deliverance: “Then all flesh will know that I, the Lord, am your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (v. 26).

Closing Thought

Matthew Henry comments: “See what will be the effect of Babylon’s ruin: *All flesh shall know that I the Lord am thy Saviour*. God will make it to appear, to the conviction of all the world, that, though Israel seem lost and cast off, they have a Redeemer, and, though they are made a prey to the mighty, Jacob has a mighty One, who is able to deal with all his enemies. God intends, by the deliverances of his church, both to notify and to magnify his own name” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 49:24).

The Book of Isaiah

Chapter 50: A Case against God

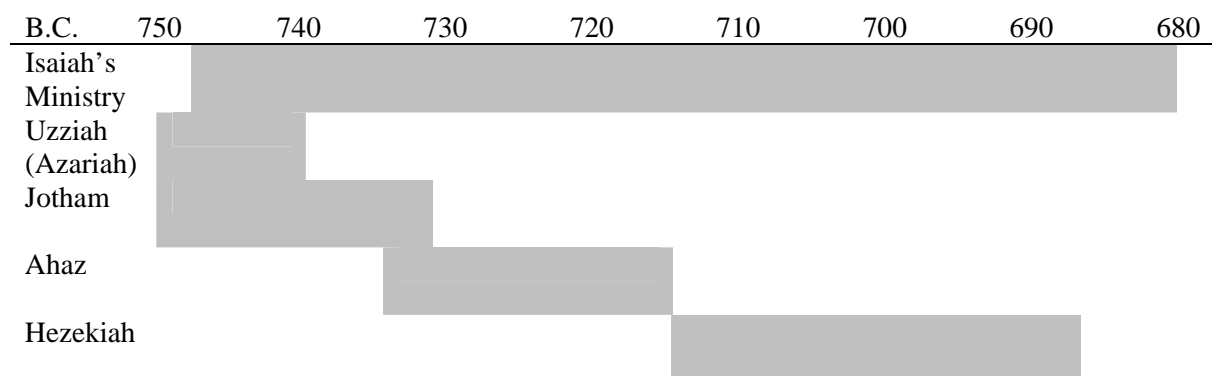
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment Chapters 1-35	Part 2: Historical Interlude Chapters 36-39	Part 3: Salvation Chapters 40-66
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When this takes place:

Chapter 50 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verse:

Isa. 50:8 – The One who justifies Me is near; who will contend with Me? Let us confront each other. Who has a case against Me? Let him come near Me!

Quick summary:

This chapter is a contrast between two servants: faithless Israel and the faithful Messiah. Israel has failed God, not because He divorced the nation but because, in effect, the nation divorced Him. By contrast, the faithful Servant humbly learns from Yahweh and even endures persecution in carrying out His will. Ultimately, Israel must choose: The people can walk in God's light or in the light of their own campfires, which already are only temporary comforts.

Take note:

The suffering of the Servant in verse 6 is a stunningly accurate portrait of Jesus' physical torment at the hands of His Roman executioners. In obedience to the Father and for the sake of lost humanity, Jesus willingly endures flogging, scorn and spitting. Compare the elements of this verse with the New Testament fulfillments:

- "I gave my back to those who beat Me ..." (Matt. 27:26; Luke 22:63; John 19:1)
- "My cheeks to those who tore out My beard" (while there is no specific reference to this in the Gospels, it is likely the Roman guards carried this out as a way to produce pain and humiliation; to pluck the hair is the highest insult against an Oriental)
- "I did not hide My face from scorn and spitting" (Matt. 26:67; Mark 14:65, 15:19; John 19:3)
- Yet the Servant does not strike back, knowing "the Lord God will help Me" (v. 7; see 1 Peter 2:22-23).

The Correction of Israel (Isa. 50:1-3)

Judah's captivity in Babylon is a direct result of the people's sins, and the Lord illustrates this truth in two ways. First, He compares the nation to a divorced woman. According to Mosaic Law, the husband could give his wife a divorce certificate detailing her faults and she would have to leave the home (Deut. 24:1). Judah has so transgressed its covenant relationship with Yahweh that He is compelled to send her away. Second, the Lord compares the Jews to children being sold into indentured servitude because of a great debt (see Ex. 21:7; 2 Kings 4:1; Neh. 5:5).

Yet there is another way of looking at these verses. Since Yahweh is posing two questions – "Where is your mother's divorce certificate?" and "[W]ho were My creditors that I sold you to?" – it's possible that He is assuring the people that He has not completely written them off or abandoned them because of their sins. In fact, this perspective is more in line with the whole of Isaiah. While the people have indulged in grievous sins and the nation has turned a cold shoulder to Yahweh, the Lord must discipline them as an act of love but will fulfill His promises to them. The Babylonian captivity is but for a time; it will not last forever.

In verse 2, the Lord reminds the people that their rejection of Him is unreasonable. He has sent the prophets and performed miracles among them, yet like an unfaithful wife the nation has preferred idolatry and social injustice. If only the people would call to Him in repentance. "Is My hand too short to redeem?" He asks, using Oriental imagery of weakness. "Or do I have no power to deliver?" Of course He does. He dries up the sea by his rebuke, a reference to His work in the exodus (Ex. 14:21). He turns rivers into wilderness, perhaps an indication of the coming disaster for Israel's wealthy and powerful enemies. He causes the enemies' fish to rot, a reminder of His judgment on the Egyptians (Ex. 7:18, 21). And He dresses the heavens in black, another of Yahweh's judgments on the Egyptians (Ex. 10:21). In short, the people are responsible for their sins and deserve divine discipline, yet their gracious and all-powerful God will remain faithful to His promise never to forsake them.

The Obedient Servant (Isa. 50:4-9)

The Lord teaches the Servant to comfort the weary, and the Servant obediently carries out His will. From a New Testament perspective, we can see that Jesus, the Suffering Servant, comes to do the Father's will (see, for example, Matt. 26:39, 42) and in His humanity learns obedience (Heb. 5:8). Jesus provides comfort through His teaching, miracles and physical presence among the outcast. He willingly endures hardship, including rejection, false trials, mocking, scourging, slapping and crucifixion. Undeserving of any of this, He walks through His ministry with His face set toward Jerusalem and a destiny with death. Ultimately, He knows He will be vindicated (through His resurrection and exaltation to the Father's right hand) and sit in judgment over those who have rejected Him.

Four times in this passage the Servant uses the name "Lord God." Coming from the Hebrew *Yahweh Adonai*, this name may be translated "Sovereign Lord." According to Robert B. Girdlestone, the name means that "God is the owner of each member of the human family, and that he consequently claims the unrestricted obedience of all" (*Synonyms of the Old Testament*, p. 34). So the emphasis in this passage is the Servant's willing submission to the Lord in every aspect of His life and ministry.

Warren Wiersbe notes that the Servant's *mind* and *will* are yielded to the Lord. His mind is submitted so that He may learn the Word and will of the Father. Everything Jesus says and does is taught to Him by the Father (John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 8:28). He prays to the Father for guidance and meditates on His Word (Mark 1:35; John 11:42). At the same time, His will is submitted so that those who see Him see the Father (John 14:9). The people of Judah in Isaiah's day are neither willing nor obedient, but the Servant models perfect yieldedness to the Lord God even though His obedience results in severe persecution and even death (Matt. 26:67; 27:26, 30-31).

Finally, it's vital to remember that the Servant, though divine, operates on faith while ministering on earth. "Keep in mind that when Jesus Christ was ministering here on earth, He had to live by faith even as we must today. He did not use His divine powers selfishly for Himself but trusted God and depended on the power of the Spirit" (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Comforted*, An Old Testament Study, S. Is 50:4).

The Challenge to Israel (Isa. 50:10-11)

This chapter closes with an exhortation from the Servant to follow His example: "Who among you fears the Lord, listening to the voice of His servant?" Jesus lays down a similar challenge when He says, "Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Me" (John 5:23b; see also Luke 10:16b). The Servant reminds his listeners that even the godly sometimes face dark moments and must trust in the Lord. Consider Jesus who, while bearing our sin debt on the cross, cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me" (Matt. 27:46b). "[T]he servant of God is never wholly without 'light.' A godly man's way may be dark, but his

end shall be peace and light. A wicked man's way may be bright, but his end shall be utter darkness (Ps 112:4; 97:11; 37:24)" (Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. Is 50:10).

In contrast to the godly, the wicked face the darkness, not by trusting in God, but by trusting in themselves. They kindle fires and set ablaze firebrands (pieces of burning wood), walking in their manmade light that all too quickly becomes extinguished. Those who reject God's light, preferring their own schemes, will "lie down in a place of torment" (v. 11). King Solomon once wrote, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it is the way of death" (Prov. 16:7), and one day Jesus will tell even those who claim the name of Jesus but seek salvation their own way, "I never knew you! Depart from Me, you lawbreakers!" (Matt. 7:23).

The stark yet simple truth is that salvation is found only in the Lord and His Servant. Jesus proclaims, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). Peter echoes this truth with these words, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). For those who reject the truth – and the Author of truth – there is a place of everlasting separation from God (Luke 16:23, 28; Rev. 20:13-15; 21:8).

Closing Thought

Matthew Henry comments: "Those that make the world their comfort, and their own righteousness their confidence, will certainly meet with a fatal disappointment, which will be bitterness in the end. A godly man's way may be melancholy, but his end shall be peace and everlasting light. A wicked man's way may be pleasant, but his end and endless abode will be utter darkness" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 50:10).

The Book of Isaiah

Chapter 51: Jerusalem's Wakeup Call

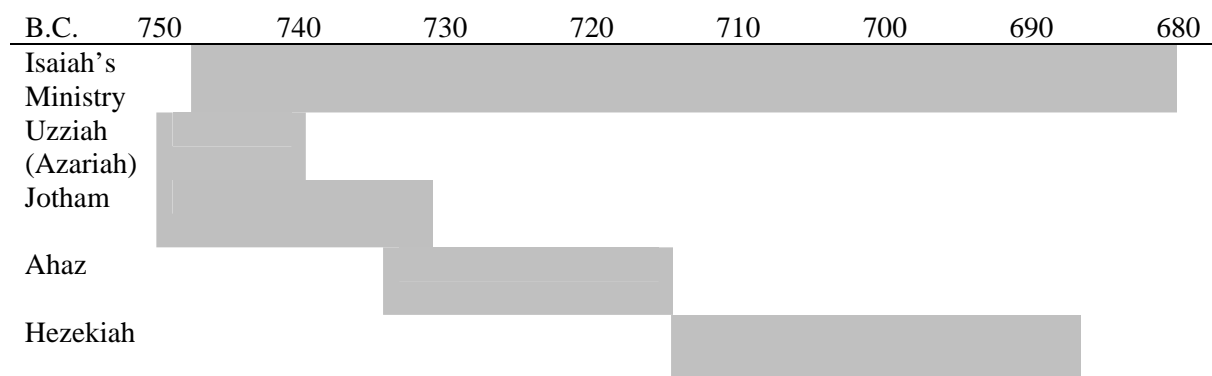
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment Chapters 1-35	Part 2: Historical Interlude Chapters 36-39	Part 3: Salvation Chapters 40-66
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When this takes place:

Chapter 51 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verse:

Isa. 51:6 – Look up to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and its inhabitants will die in like manner. But My salvation will last forever, and My righteousness will never be shattered.

Quick summary:

Having introduced the Servant, Isaiah now reassures the Jewish captives that one day they will be free. His message also foreshadows the coming of Messiah and the final liberation of the faithful in God's everlasting kingdom. H.L. Willmington summarizes: "Isaiah urged his hearers to give their full attention to his important message: They were to 'listen' (51:1, 4, 7), 'wake up' (51:17; 52:1), and then respond by immediately leaving sinful Babylon (52:11–12). Just as God had blessed Abraham, he would 'comfort Israel' (51:1–3), making its wilderness 'as beautiful as Eden' (51:3; see 29:17–24). He would bring everlasting salvation and justice to all people (51:4–8). Isaiah called on the Lord to bring about a second Exodus, as the nation he had led out of Egypt would now be led out of Babylon (51:9–11; see 63:11–14). He also looked further into the

future, to the 'everlasting joy' of the Millennium (see 35:10). The Lord agreed that he, who had created all things, could certainly free his people from exile (51:12–16). He would soon transfer his wrath from Israel to their oppressors (51:17–23)" (*Willmington's Bible Handbook*, Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, S. 371).

Take note:

Calling on His people to observe the heavens and the earth, the Lord contrasts the fleeting nature of this sinful and fallen world with His everlasting salvation. Yahweh declares:

- **"... the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and its inhabitants will die in like manner."** The psalmist notes this in Ps. 102:25-26: "They (the heavens and the earth) will perish ... all of them will wear out like clothing. You will change them like a garment, and they will pass away." So does Jesus in Matt. 24:35 ("Heaven and earth will pass away ...") and Peter in 2 Peter 3:10 ("... the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed").
- **"But My salvation will last forever, and My righteousness will never be shattered."** This is a theme repeated often in both the Old and New Testaments. The psalmist, for example, writes, "All that He does is splendid and majestic; His righteousness endures forever" (Ps. 111:3). The apostle Paul notes, "salvation ... is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory" (2 Tim. 2:10), and the writer of Hebrews adds, "He (Jesus) became the source of eternal salvation" (Heb. 5:9).

Patriarch and Promise (Isa. 51:1-8)

The believing remnant in Israel is to remember Abraham and receive encouragement. Though present circumstances are bleak, the future is bright for those who trust in God. The people are to look back to Abraham and Sarah, the "rock from which you were cut" and "the quarry from which you were dug" (v. 1). Abraham is but a single person when God calls him, yet he becomes the father of the Jewish race and the one through whom the promised Messiah comes. Abraham and Sarah waited many years for the child God promised them. Still, the Lord was faithful and gave them Isaac. The long wait glorified God because Sarah conceived long after her supposed child-bearing years. In like manner, the faithful remnant of Judah must believe that when the Lord has finished using the Babylonians to chasten His chosen people, He will deal with wicked Babylon and restore the Israelites to their homeland. Just as Yahweh made Sarah's barren womb fruitful, He will turn Judah's wasted homeland into a blossoming treasure once again. "For the Lord will comfort Zion," the people are told in verse 3. "He will comfort all her waste places, and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord."

Next, the believers in Judah are urged to look forward. The Lord's justice will extend beyond Judah's borders and reach the whole world. His people will be vindicated – not because of their goodness but because of God's greatness. Notice the Lord's use of the personal pronoun in verses 4-6: "My people," "My nation," "My justice," "My righteousness," "My salvation," "My arms," "My strength." "This is the grace of God, doing for His people what they did not deserve and what they could not do for themselves" (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Comforted* [An Old Testament Study], S. Is 51:1).

Finally in this section, the Lord admonishes the people to look within, where they will find either fear or faith. Throughout the book, Isaiah calls on the people to trust God, who overcomes their fears. "You are to regard only the LORD of Hosts as holy. Only He should be feared; only He should be held in awe," the people are warned in Isa. 8:13. Later, they are told the day is coming when they will declare, "God is my salvation. I will trust [Him] and not be afraid. Because Yah, the LORD, is my strength and my song, He has become my salvation" (Isa. 12:2). Isaiah tells his fellow countrymen that the moth will devour the enemy like a garment and the worm will eat them like wool. Moths and worms do their work slowly and secretly, but effectively nonetheless. While the Jews couldn't see it, the seeds of destruction already were being sown in Babylon, and the pagan nation that God would use to chasten His people one day would be punished for their rebellion against Yahweh and His chosen ones. Meanwhile, the Lord's salvation and righteousness will endure forever.

Prayer and Protection (Isa. 51:9-16)

Verses 9-11 may be read as a prayer of the righteous remnant, calling on God to rise up and deliver His people as He did in the Exodus. The questions beginning, "Wasn't it you ...?" are rhetorical affirmations of God's great acts in history and express the people's confidence in the His continuing sovereignty:

- "Wasn't it You who hacked Rahab to pieces, who pierced the sea monster?" (v. 9). This is a reference to Egypt. "In Ugaritic literature Rahab was the name of a female sea monster associated with Leviathan. Perhaps the hippopotamus, an animal that often sits in the water of the Nile doing nothing, represents that mythical water beast. Understandably Rahab came to be a poetic synonym for Egypt (and also for a demon behind Egypt) when God overpowered the Egyptian soldiers in the sea at the Exodus" (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, 1:1080).
- "Wasn't it You who dried up the sea ... who made the sea-bed into a road for the redeemed to pass over?" (v. 10). Just as the Lord enabled the Jews to cross the Red Sea on dry ground and then drowned the pursuing Egyptian armies (Ex. 14:21-31), He would allow His people to return to their homeland in a new exodus. Their response would be singing, joy and gladness (v. 11).

In verses 12-16 the Lord personally assures the Israelites He will protect them. He provides comfort now, even though His people are on the cusp of divine discipline, and urges them to remember that the God who laid the foundations of the earth is able to carry them through exile in Babylon and restore them to their homeland. Why should God's people fear human enemies, who are as frail as grass, when the Lord of the universe is on their side? Though they deserve the chastening they are about to receive, Yahweh has not abandoned His purpose for them. He has established the Jews as His unique people. He invested His word in them. He promised to bless all mankind through them with the coming Messiah. He will not forget His promises or forsake His people.

Matthew Henry reminds us that there is a message here for the church: "The people whom Christ has redeemed with his blood, as well as by his power, will obtain joyful deliverance from every enemy. He that designs such joy for us at last, will he not work such deliverance in the mean

time, as our cases require? In this world of changes, it is a short step from joy to sorrow, but in that world, sorrow shall never come in view. They prayed for the display of God's power; he answers them with consolations of his grace.... Happy is the man that fears God always. And Christ's church shall enjoy security by the power and providence of the Almighty" (*Matthew Henry Concise, Bible Navigator, v. 12*).

Proclamation and Punishment (Isa. 51:17-23)

Earlier in this chapter, the remnant – or the prophet – asks the Lord to wake up and do something about the plight of the Jews. But beginning in verse 17, it is the people of Jerusalem who are roused from their sleep because the Lord is about to do something: He is bringing their calamity to a close. In exile in Babylon, the people “have drunk the cup of His fury” all the way to the dregs (v. 17). That is, they have experienced the full weight of His wrath. In the leveling of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, the people endured “devastation and destruction [to the land], famine and sword [to the people]” (v. 19). Even the children “lie at the head of every street like an antelope in the net” (v. 20). When God’s judgment falls upon an entity – a family, city, or nation, for example – no one in that entity is exempted from His divine rod. While some argue that this is unfair, or even that it reveals an unloving God, there are several biblical truths to keep in mind: 1) God knows everything, including what would happen if He didn’t put a stop to an entity’s evil; 2) God’s wrath falls only after His mercy has been soundly and repeatedly rejected; and 3) God will judge every individual one day, and the youngster whose life is cut short because of her parents’ sins will be compensated in eternity for what was lost in time.

For the remnant living in Babylon, however, there is good news: “Look, I have removed the cup of staggering from your hand; that goblet, the cup of my fury. You will never drink it again” (v. 22). And for the Jews who could not imagine how the Holy One of Israel used the pagan and brutal Babylonians as His instrument of judgment, the Lord now tells them that the Babylonians’ day of reckoning has come. “I will put it [the cup of His fury] into the hands of your tormentors,” the Lord says in verse 23. The Babylonians, who had walked over the Jews’ dead bodies in Jerusalem, would now experience similar horrors at the hands of the Persians.

Closing Thought

When we hear of persecuted and martyred Christians around the world, we should take comfort in God’s promise that those who oppress His people will experience His wrath. Matthew Henry comments: “How justly God will reckon with those who have carried it so imperiously towards his people: *The cup of trembling shall be put into their hand. Babylon’s case shall be as bad as ever Jerusalem’s was. Daniel’s persecutors shall be thrown into Daniel’s den; let them see how they like it. And the Lord is known by these judgments which he executes*” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume, S. Is 51:17*).

Chapter 52: “Your God Reigns!”

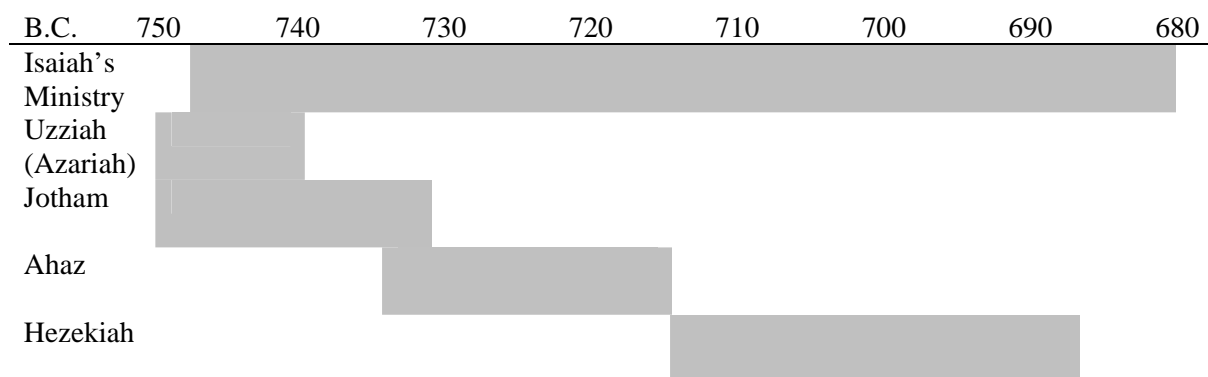
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 52 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah’s immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verse:

Isa. 52:7 – How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the herald, who proclaims peace, who brings news of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God Reigns!”

Quick summary:

God’s people are called to shake off the stupor of the Lord’s judgment and prepare for deliverance from Babylonian captivity – and ultimately for the coming of their King, the Messiah. The exiles will return to their homeland. Even more important, the whole world one day will proclaim to the Jews, “Your God reigns!” (v. 7). “While Christ reigns presently at the right hand of God the Father through the work of the Spirit on the earth, he will one day return visibly to rule his kingdom on earth. Paul used this verse in Romans 10:15 of the messengers who herald the ‘good news’ of salvation in Christ. The message was addressed to the Jews in Babylon, who would have to choose between economic security in Babylon and the hazards and hardships of returning to Judah” (Robert B. Hughes, J. Carl Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, The Tyndale Reference Library, S. 267). The chapter closes with a summary of the Messiah’s work: His earthly ministry, crucifixion, resurrection and redemption.

Take note:

As H.L. Willmington notes, Isaiah encapsulates the work of the Messiah in the last three verses of the chapter:

- His earthly ministry. “See, My Servant will act wisely; He will be raised and lifted up ...” (v. 13; compare John 12:32).
- His crucifixion. “Just as many were appalled at You – His appearance was so disfigured that He did not look like a man, and His form did not resemble a human being ...” (v. 14).
- His resurrection. “He will be ... highly exalted” (v. 13b; compare Phil.2:8-11).
- His redemption. “[S]o He will sprinkle many nations. Kings will shut their mouths because of them, For they will see what had not been told them, and they will understand what they had not heard” (v. 15). (*The Outline Bible*, S. Is 52:13-15)

Wake Up, Jerusalem (Isa. 52:1-6)

Jerusalem is urged to wake up. The people’s exile in Babylon is ending. What’s more, the city will be adorned in new clothes – no doubt a reference to the rebuilding of both the city and the temple. No longer will pagan conquerors trample her beneath their feet, for “the uncircumcised and the unclean no longer will enter you” (v. 1). While Jerusalem and the temple are indeed rebuilt, this message finds its complete fulfillment in the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of His kingdom. From a New Testament perspective, Jerusalem’s full exaltation will be experienced with the return of the King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; 19:11-16; 21:1-27).

The command to stand up and shake off the dust (v. 2) means the people are to stop mourning. Dust on one’s head is an ancient sign of grieving (see Job 2:12). The people have been sold because of their sin (Isa. 50:1) but now are being redeemed “without silver” (v. 3), meaning they will pay nothing for their freedom because the Lord is graciously bringing them back. What a picture of our salvation from sin as Christ paid the price with His own blood to redeem us (Eph. 1:7). Our redemption is completely of God’s grace (Rom. 4:4-5; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5-7) but came at the cost of God’s own Son (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 1 Cor. 6:20).

Yahweh briefly recounts the history of the nation in slavery. They have been slaves in Egypt. The northern kingdom has been conquered by the Assyrians, who also exact tribute from Judah before plundering the land and laying siege to Jerusalem. Now Babylon comes along. The Babylonians will destroy the capital city, level the temple and carry the people into exile, mocking them and blaspheming God along the way (v. 5). Through all this God remains faithful to His covenant promises, delivering His people time after time. One day the Jews will return to Him in belief. They will know His name – even better, they will know Him personally. They will know “on that day that I am He who says, Here I am” (v. 6).

Beautiful Feet (Isa. 52:7-10)

The defeat of the Babylonians at the hands of Cyrus is good news for the Jewish captives because it means they are set free. The Good News today is that Christ has come and set us free from the bonds of sin and death. The apostle Paul quotes Isaiah 52:7 to emphasize the glorious role of believers who herald the Gospel message: “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe without hearing about Him? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: **How welcome are the feet of those who announce the gospel of good things!**” (Rom. 10:15).

Ultimately, the whole world will proclaim to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (v. 7; see also Ps. 93:1; Isa. 24:23). Even those who reject Christ as Savior one day will bend the knee and acknowledge Him as Lord (Phil. 2:10-11). Isaiah declares in verse 8 that “every eye will see when the Lord returns to Zion.” While this has an immediate fulfillment for the captives in Babylon, who will witness God’s work of restoring His people and their land, it appears to look further into the future as well. About the Jewish people Zechariah proclaims, “[T]hey will look at Me whom they pierced” (Zech. 12:10), and the apostle John records, “Look! He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, including those who pierced Him. And all the families of the earth will mourn over Him” (Rev. 1:7).

While Christ’s return will crush His enemies (see Rev. 19:11-21), it will cheer His followers. Isaiah tells us, “Be joyful, rejoice together, you ruins of Jerusalem! For the Lord has comforted His people; He has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has displayed His holy arm in the sight of all the nations; all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God” (vv. 9-10). In the *New Bible Commentary*, D.A. Carson points out three key factors in the news of Judah’s redemption: 1) the messenger, “whose lustre is that of his message;” 2) the watchmen, those who are looking for redemption, “otherwise the news will fall on deaf ears;” and 3) the event, “which is here none other but the Lord in action” (S. Is 52:1).

A Clean Break with Babylon (Isa. 52:11-12)

These verses depict a priestly procession, in contrast to the unceremonious departure of God’s people from Egypt (Ex. 12:33). They also stress urgency. After 70 years in exile, the people have become comfortable living among pagans. Isaiah’s words are intended to rouse God’s people to action. Taking a longer view, just as the Jews are urged to “go out from there,” “do not touch anything unclean,” and “purify yourselves,” the church in Rev. 18:4 is admonished to “come out” from Babylon the Great in the last days so she will not share in Babylon’s sins or suffer their consequences.

There is a personal message here as well. The more satisfied we are with the world and its ways, the less we behave like citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Just as the Jews initially are disoriented in Babylon – perhaps even horrified by its pagan ways – Christians naturally are uncomfortable in their first contact with the ways of the world. But as time goes on, as the senses adjust and the spirit is dulled, what was once reprehensible is now acceptable, perhaps even admirable. The flesh takes over. The Holy Spirit is grieved. And divine discipline is at the door.

Perhaps this is why the New Testament writers so often implore Christians to guard their hearts. “I say then, walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh,” writes the apostle Paul (Gal. 5:16). “And don’t grieve God’s Holy Spirit, who sealed you for the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30). Finally, Peter warns that believers, although secure in their salvation, still live in dangerous times: “Be sober! Be on the alert! Your adversary the Devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

Suffering and Exaltation (Isa. 52:13-15)

Two key points are made in verse 13. First, the Servant will act wisely, carrying out the Lord’s will. Jesus confirms this as the reason He is sent to earth. He is in constant communication with the Father, desires to glorify Him in all things, and is obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). Second, the Servant will be “raised and lifted up and highly exalted.” Jesus declares that if He is lifted up from the earth He will draw all people to Himself, a reference to His death on the cross (John 12:32). But following His death and resurrection, He is exalted to the Father’s right hand (Phil. 2:9; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22).

Verses 14 and 15 present a stunning contrast between the Servant in His first and second comings. Many will be “appalled” – awestruck or astonished – at the Servant. In his earthly ministry, He is not the attractive king they expect. Further, in the events leading up to His crucifixion, His appearance is so disfigured that He does not resemble a human being. But when He returns and establishes His kingdom on earth “He will sprinkle many nations” (v. 15). This is associated with cleansing by the priest under the Mosaic Law (Lev. 4:6, 8:11, 14:7). Although disregarded, the Servant actually provides what the nations need most: cleansing from sin (John 1:29; Heb. 10:14). As a result, the kings will shut their mouths. At the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior (Titus 2:13), the world’s rulers will have nothing to say.

Closing Thought

Warren Wiersbe writes: “Many people have been tortured and killed in an inhumane way, but knowing about their suffering does not touch our conscience, though it might arouse our sympathy. Our Lord’s sufferings and death were different, because *they involved everybody in the world*. The Gospel message is not ‘Christ died,’ for that is only a fact in history, like ‘Napoleon died.’ The Gospel message is that ‘Christ died *for our sins*’ (1 Cor. 15:1–4, italics mine). You and I are as guilty of Christ’s death as Annas, Caiaphas, Herod Antipas, and Pilate. Now we see why people are astonished when they understand the message of the Gospel: This Man whom they condemned has declared that *they are condemned* unless they turn from sin and trust Him. *You cannot rejoice in the Good News of salvation until first you face the bad news of condemnation*. Jesus did not suffer and die because He was guilty, but because *we* were guilty. People are astonished at this fact; it shuts their mouths” (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 52:13).

Chapter 53: The Suffering Servant

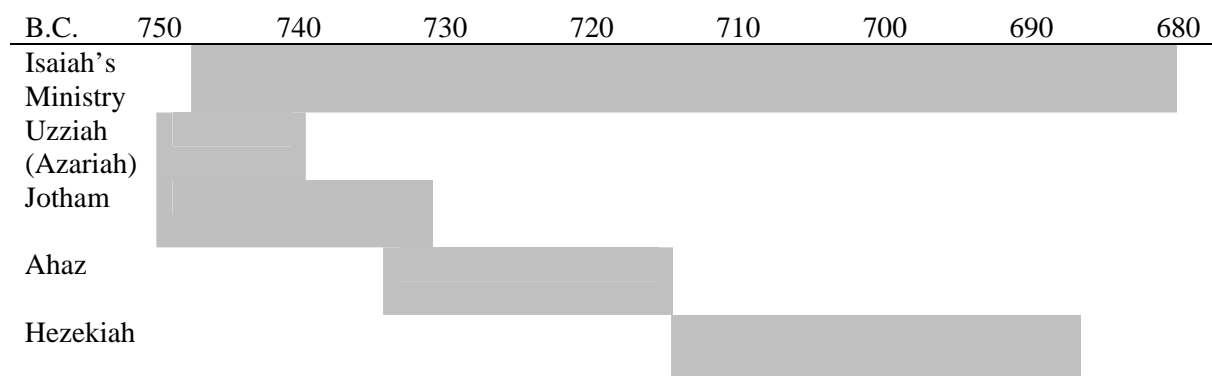
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 53 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verses:

Isa. 53:5-6 – But He was pierced because of our transgressions, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on Him, and we are healed by His wounds. We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished Him for the iniquity of us all.

Quick summary:

Isa. 52:13 – 53:12 make up the fourth Servant Song in which the Servant dies in the place of the guilty to satisfy God's judgment of sin. Warren Wiersbe (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 52:13) sees this song unfolding in five parts:

1. Exaltation – the shocking Servant (Isa. 52:13-15)
2. Humiliation – the sorrowing Servant (Isa. 53:1-3)
3. Expiation – the smitten Servant (Isa. 53:4-6)
4. Resignation – the silent Servant (Isa. 53:7-9)
5. Vindication – the satisfied Servant (Isa. 53:10-12)

Take note:

Many Jews today reject the notion that Isaiah 53 is a Messianic prophecy fulfilled in Jesus. Instead, they say, this chapter is a reference to the nation of Israel, which has suffered great violence throughout history – in Isaiah’s day at the hands of the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, Greeks and Romans, and more recently by the Nazis and the Arab nations that surround modern Israel. But this interpretation is fraught with problems, as Robert B. Hughes and Carl J. Laney explain: “Early Jewish interpretation of this passage understood the ‘servant’ (52:13) to refer to the Messiah. This also was the interpretation by the early church (cf. Acts 8:30–35). Not until the twelfth century was it suggested that the ‘servant’ of Isaiah 53 was the nation of Israel. But the nation of Israel has not suffered innocently (53:9) or willingly (53:7). Nor did Israel’s suffering provide substitutionary atonement (53:5)” (*Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, S. 267).

As we will see, this passage is naturally and wonderfully fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

Despised and Rejected (Isa. 53:1-3)

The chapter opens with a depiction of the Servant as a nondescript “young plant” shooting up out of “dry ground.” When Jesus appears seven centuries later, He is not the Messiah the Jews are expecting – handsome, charismatic, flush with political and military designs for the oppressed nation of Israel. Rather, He is poor and plain, a Galilean carpenter with seemingly little interest in the Romans, who says His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). Although His words and works attract great crowds, His appearance does not distinguish Him from other Jewish men. Further, His religious views are at odds with those of the Jewish leaders, and His refusal to be declared king infuriates the political zealots of His day. He is, indeed, a young sprout in barren soil. Warren Wiersbe summarizes Isaiah’s use of horticultural imagery to describe Jesus: “Messiah is the Branch of the Lord (4:2); the remnant is like the stumps of trees chopped down (6:13); the proud nations will be hewn down like trees, but out of David’s seemingly dead stump, the ‘rod of Jesse’ will come (10:33–11:1). Because Jesus Christ is God, He is the ‘root of David’; but because He is man, He is the ‘offspring of David’ (Rev. 22:16)” (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 53:1).

So how do the people respond to this unlikely Servant? They treat Him as a common slave. They despise Him, reject Him, put a cheap price on His head, and look the other way when he passes by. The apostle John puts it this way: “He was in the world, and the world was created through Him, yet the world did not recognize Him. He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him” (John 1:10-11). This Servant does not value the same things the people of His day – or ours – value: wealth (Luke 16:14), prestige (Luke 14:7-14), self-reliance (Luke 18:9-14), and self-indulgence (Matt. 16:21-28; Luke 22:24-27).

But what does the phrase “a man of suffering who knew what sickness was” mean? While it could refer to a sickly person, or one who experiences much pain and illness, more likely it describes the Great Physician who gives Himself to those who are suffering for the purpose of providing relief. This is how Matthew sees it, quoting from Isa. 53:4 in Matt. 8:16-17: “When evening came, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. He drove out the spirits

with a word and healed all who were sick, so that what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: **He Himself took our weaknesses and carried our diseases.**”

Struck Down by God (Isa. 53:4-6)

These verses capture the essence of the sacrificial system and point us to the heart of the gospel: the innocent dying for the guilty for the remission of sins. Just as the blood of spotless animals atone for people’s sins under the Old Covenant, the blood of the sinless Servant, who fulfills the Law, takes away the sin the world (John 1:29). Jesus bears our sins on the cross (1 Peter 2:24), but He also addresses the consequences of Adam’s sin by ministering to people in need. Matthew 8:14-17 applies Isaiah 53:4 to Jesus’ healing ministry, not to His death. Those who apply this passage today and teach that healing from all sickness is a “right” of the believer fail to understand Isaiah’s prophecy and Matthew’s application of it. It is true that the effects of the fall, including illness, will be reversed in our bodies in resurrection and glorification (1 Cor. 15:51-57), as well as in creation in the new heavens and new earth (2 Peter 3:10-13; Rev. 21-22). But until these promises are fulfilled, believers must understand that we continue to live in this present evil age (Gal. 1:4) in a world that groans beneath the weight of sin (Rom. 8:18-22).

All that the Servant suffers is our fault, and for our benefit: He bears our sicknesses, carries our pains, is pierced for our transgressions, is crushed for our iniquities and heals us by His wounds. Yet we regard Him as stricken, struck down by God and afflicted (vv. 4-5). Note the graphic depiction of the Servant’s suffering. He is “pierced because of our transgressions.” Nails pierce His hands and feet (Ps. 22:16; Luke 24:39-40), and a spear pierces His side (Zech. 12:10; John 19:31-27; Rev. 1:7). This is not a Jewish form of execution. Isaiah foresees a Roman crucifixion centuries before it is introduced. The Servant also is “crushed,” not physically because not a bone of Jesus is broken, but in His soul and spirit as He who knows no sin becomes sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). He is punished for our peace. The only way a lawbreaker may be at peace with the law is to be innocent or to pay the penalty the law requires. Jesus *is* innocent, yet pays the penalty for our sins so that we may stand blameless before God (see Rom. 5:1, 8:1). Finally, the Servant heals our wounds. The reference to healing in verse 5 concerns sin, as Peter makes clear (1 Peter 2:24). Sin is sometimes compared to sickness that only God can cure (Isa. 1:4-6; Jer. 30:12; Nahum 3:19).

Isaiah refers to our sin as “transgression” and “iniquity.” Transgression means rebellion against God, deliberately crossing the line He has established. “Iniquity” refers to our sin nature, our natural tendency to live independently of God. In other words, the prophet understands that we are sinners by nature and by choice. In verse 6, he compares us to sheep that are prone to wander. “By nature, we are born children of wrath (Eph. 2:3); and by choice, we become children of disobedience (2:2). Under the Law of Moses, the sheep died for the shepherd; but under grace, the Good Shepherd died for the sheep (John 10:1–18)” (Wiersbe, S. Is 53:4).

Silent as a Lamb (Isa. 53:7-9)

As a slave is silent before his master, even though wrongly accused, the Servant does not speak in His own defense. This is fulfilled beautifully in Jesus, who is silent before Caiaphas (Matt. 26:62–63), the chief priests and elders (27:12), Pilate (27:14; John 19:9) and Herod (Luke 23:9). He holds his tongue while Roman soldiers mock and beat him (1 Peter 2:21–23). This humble endurance intrigues the Ethiopian eunuch as he reads the account in Isaiah (Acts 8:26–40). Is the Servant powerless? Is He somehow deserving of this treatment? Has He nothing to say in His own defense? Couldn't He argue the unfairness – the illegality – of this judicial charade? What has He done? He has done no violence, nor has He spoken deceitfully (v. 9). So why does He remain silent in the face of this monstrous injustice? Perhaps Jesus answers it best: “Am I not to drink the cup the Father has given Me?” (John 18:11). Anything He says in His own defense could lead to the release Pilate is inclined to grant. But escaping the cross negates His very mission. Therefore, His silence secures His death, for which He came into the world. “He was willingly led to death because He knew it would benefit those who would believe” (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1108).

The Servant is compared to a lamb, a frequent symbol of the Savior in Scripture. A lamb dies at Passover for the sins of the household (Ex. 12:1-13). The Servant dies for His people, the nation of Israel (v. 8). Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Nearly 30 times in Revelation alone, Jesus is called the Lamb.

A victim of execution on a cross knows his corpse most likely will be left unburied. Yet the Romans release Jesus' body to Joseph and Nicodemus, who bury Him nearby. There are two key facts to note here. First, the Romans never would have given Joseph Jesus' body if the Servant were not dead (Mark 15:42-47; John 19:38-42). Second, Joseph, a wealthy man, never would have chosen an execution site for his own burial, especially when he lived so far away. What's the explanation? The Lord planned it this way and gave us a unique prophecy through Isaiah that is fulfilled magnificently in Christ.

Joyful in Submission (Isa. 53:10-12)

The last three verses of this chapter reveal the cross from God's perspective. Even though wicked men crucify Jesus, God planned His death long ago for the redemption of mankind (Acts 2:22-23; Rev. 13:8). There is a secret to the Servant's death that Isaiah reveals: It *pleases* the Lord. “[T]he Lord was pleased to crush Him,” reads verse 10, and we later learn the Messiah is pleased to be crushed. He comes to do the Father's will, not His own (John 6:38; Heb. 10:7, 9), and “for the joy that lay before Him” endures the cross (Heb. 12:2). In addition, the Lord makes the Servant sick, meaning He not only bears our sins but partakes in sin's consequences. This seems unreasonable to the unbeliever, but it is an essential truth that spurs deep gratitude in the hearts of those who trust in Christ.

But even better news than the Servant's death is that the Lord "will prolong His days" (v. 10), meaning He will be raised from the dead and live forever. Jesus' words in John 11:25 prove the value of this truth: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Me, even if he dies, will live." Jesus is obedient to the point of death, and in His obedience defeats Satan and his works, claims the spoils and is highly exalted by the Father (Eph. 1:19-23; Phil. 2:8-10). His obedience also results in a spiritual family: "He will see His seed ... My righteous servant will justify many ... I will give Him the many as a portion" (vv. 10-12).

There also is *satisfaction* in these verses. The Servant's obedience satisfies the heart of the Father. But even more, His sacrificial death satisfies the law of God. Warren Wiersbe explains: "The theological term for this is 'propitiation' (Rom. 3:25; 1 John 2:2). In pagan religions, the word meant 'to offer a sacrifice to placate an angry god'; but the Christian meaning is much richer. God is angry at sin because it offends His holiness and violates His holy Law. In His holiness, He must judge sinners; but in His love, He desires to forgive them. God cannot ignore sin or compromise with it, for that would be contrary to His own nature and Law. How did God solve the problem? *The Judge took the place of the criminals and met the just demands of His own holy Law!* 'He was numbered with the transgressors' and even prayed for them (Isa. 53:12; Luke 22:37; 23:33-34). The Law has been satisfied, and God can now graciously forgive all who will receive His Son" (S. Is 53:10).

Closing Thought

Matthew Henry writes: "When men brought bulls and goats as sacrifices for sin they made them offerings, for they had an interest in them, God having put them under the feet of man. But Christ made himself an offering; it was his own act and deed. We could not put him in our stead, but he put himself, and said, *Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit*" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 53:10).

The Book of Isaiah

Chapter 54: I Will Take You Back

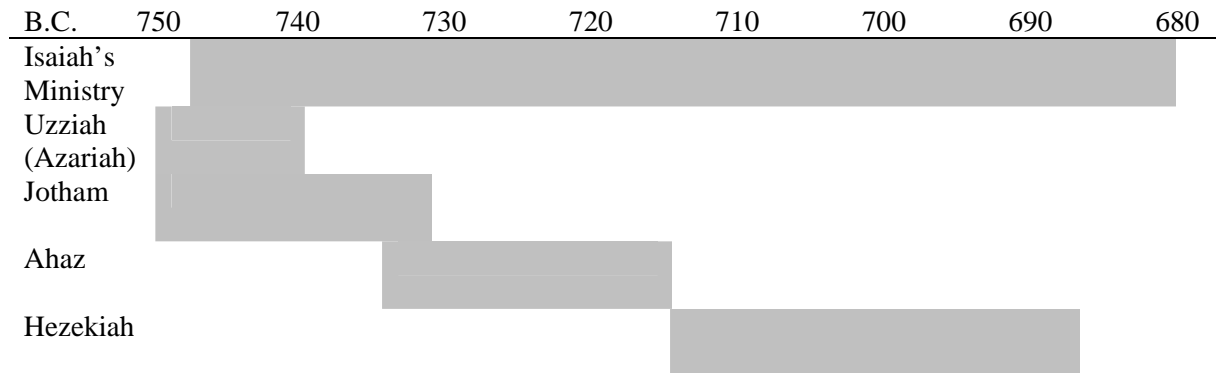
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 54 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verses:

Isa. 54:7-8 – “I deserted you for a brief moment, but I will take you back with great compassion. In a surge of anger I hid Myself from you for a moment, but I will have compassion on you with everlasting love,” says the Lord your Redeemer.

Quick summary:

Israel is encouraged to burst into song because her punishment is over and the Lord, like a loving husband, is taking back His wayward bride and showering her with blessings. Her exile in Babylon was necessary because of her grievous sin, but it was only a temporary banishment because the Lord is faithful to His promises. Just as God honored His covenant with Noah, He will honor His “covenant of peace” with Israel. These verses await their complete fulfillment in the messianic kingdom.

Take note:

The imagery throughout this chapter is that of Yahweh, the faithful husband, forgiving Israel, the unfaithful wife, restoring her to her home and bestowing her with undeserved blessings. Warren Wiersbe comments: “Isaiah has used the marriage image before (50:1–3) and will use it again (62:4). Jeremiah also used it (Jer. 3:8), and it is an important theme in both Hosea (chap. 2) and Ezekiel (chaps. 16 and 23). The nation was ‘married’ to Jehovah at Mt. Sinai, but she committed adultery by turning to other gods; and the Lord had to abandon her temporarily. However, the prophets promise that Israel will be restored when Messiah comes and establishes His kingdom” (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 54:1).

Israel’s Numerical Growth (Isa. 54:1-3)

Israel is likened to a barren woman who experiences the shame of childlessness and knows full well the void it brings to her life. But the Lord promises that days of gladness lie ahead and that her tents will be expanded to accommodate the children who will be born to her. The image of expanding the tent reminds the people of God’s covenant with Abraham, who dwelled in tents and was called outside to count the stars as a sign of the Lord’s promise of offspring. In similar fashion, this ragtag band of post-exilic Jews will re-inhabit the Promised Land and fill it. God will do for them what He did for Abraham and Sarah (Isa. 49:18-21; 51:1-3).

“Jerusalem, once desolate and mourning (Lam. 1:1-5), will be revitalized and teeming with people. Also like a nomad who has so many children he has to enlarge his tent to accommodate them all, Israel’s descendants will increase and even settle in the cities of foreign nations because there will not be enough room for them in their homeland” (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1109). The complete fulfillment of this prophecy awaits the messianic kingdom.

Paul quotes Isa. 54:1 in Gal. 4:27 and applies the spiritual principle to the church. As God blesses Sarah and the Jewish remnant with children, He will bless His church, even though at present it is only a small company of faithful followers in a wayward world.

Israel’s Regathering (Isa. 54:4-8)

The Lord promises Israel He will take her back the way a gracious husband takes back an unfaithful wife. The people are urged not to fear for they will not be put to shame, and not to be humiliated for they will not suffer disgrace. While deserving of such consequences for their spiritual adultery, the Israelites will be welcomed into the arms of a faithful and forgiving Husband. And who is this Husband? Their “Maker – His name is Yahweh of Hosts ... the Holy One of Israel ... Redeemer ... the God of all the earth” (v. 5).

Yahweh will not destroy the people He has created for His own glory. “He is their Redeemer and cannot sell them into the hands of the enemy. He is their Husband and will not break His covenant promises. As an unfaithful wife, Israel had forsaken her Husband; but He had not permanently abandoned her. He only gave her opportunity to see what it was like to live in a land

where people worshiped false gods. God would call her back and woo her to Himself (Hosea 2:14–23), and she would no longer be ‘a wife deserted’ (Isa. 54:6, NIV). She felt forsaken (49:14), but God did not give her up” (Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Comforted*, S. Is 54:1).

The husband / wife analogy is used frequently in Scripture to describe God’s relationship with Israel. Israel is the unfaithful wife who runs after pagan deities. In anger, God abandons Israel, but only for a time (see Jer. 31:31-34). He is faithful and compassionate. He will remain true to His promises. He will restore His people. In much the same way the New Testament writers refer to Christ as the bridegroom and the church as His bride. Unlike Israel, the church is not yet married to Christ. Rather, she is espoused, or engaged, and is expected to remain chaste and pure until the Bridegroom comes for Her. The apostle Paul, as a friend of the groom, urges his fellow believers to resist false teachings so they will not be enticed to embrace “another Jesus” and thus commit spiritual adultery (2 Cor. 11:4). Ultimately, a great day is in store for Christ and His church when they sit down together at the marriage feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7-9).

Israel’s Security (Isa. 54:9-10)

The Lord reminds Israel that His love, mercy and covenant promises remain even though the stinging memory of exile is fresh in the people’s minds. Yahweh has kept His word not to destroy the earth by flood again (Gen. 9:11-17), so His people may count on Him to faithfully carry out His promises of future national blessing. “Though the mountains move and the hills shake, My love will not be removed from you and My covenant of peace will not be shaken,” He assures them (v. 10). This does not mean the Lord will withhold future discipline from Israel, for we see the temple destroyed again in 70 A.D. and the Jews dispersed among the nations as a result of their rejection of Jesus as Messiah. But even then, the Lord has preserved a believing remnant, restored the Jews to their homeland (in 1948) and will bring about a spiritual revival in the land when the people He has chosen finally trust in Jesus as His Son and their Savior.

Israel’s Peaceful Future (Isa. 54:11-17)

Throughout the centuries, Jerusalem has experienced many sorrows, prompting the Lord to call her “storm-tossed, and not comforted” (v. 11). However, in coming days the Lord will build up the city with stones made of precious gems as a symbol of her great value. This also may be seen as foreshadowing the New Jerusalem, which comes down from heaven and is beautifully adorned with precious jewels (Rev. 21:9-27). The children will be taught by the Lord, experience great prosperity and stand securely on a foundation of righteousness. The people no longer will fear oppression from without or corruption from within, for the Lord will protect them.

No doubt this is a preview of the Millennium, during which time no nation will be allowed to defeat Israel. “If anyone attacks you, it is not from Me,” says Yahweh in verse 15, contrasting God’s use of Assyria to punish the northern kingdom (722 B.C.) and Babylon to discipline the southern kingdom (587 B.C.). Further, the Lord assures His people that “whoever attacks you will fall before you.” He continues in verse 17: “No weapon formed against you will succeed, and you will refute any accusation raised against you in court. This is the heritage of the Lord’s servants, and their righteousness is from Me.” It is always the righteousness of God that saves,

not man's own "filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6). We see this stated plainly and illustrated beautifully in the New Testament. In Jesus' parable of the wedding banquet (Matt. 22:1-14), an invited guest is bound hand and foot and cast into outer darkness because he has refused to wear the wedding garment providing by the king. This shows that no one's own righteousness merits entrance into the kingdom, only the righteousness of Christ. And in Rev. 7:9-17, an innumerable host of people, robed in white, stands before the throne and the Lamb. Their robes are white because "they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

D.A. Carson writes that "the *righteousness* of v 14 and the impregnability of vs 15–17 are deep rooted in personal discipleship, which is one of the marks of the new covenant. This is the true strength of God's city, which is promised not immunity from attack but the unanswerable weapon of truth" (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, S. Is 54:11).

Closing Thought

Lawrence O. Richards comments about the covenant of peace in verse 10: "[T]he focus of this covenant is on security. God throws a protective covering over His people so that they will be safe. While this is an eschatological covenant, it has present application to you and me. God's protective covering has been thrown over us as well. God the Holy Spirit is Himself 'a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession' (Eph. 1:14). Because we are God's own we are safe and secure" (*The Bible Readers Companion*, electronic ed., Logos Research Systems, S. 440).

The Book of Isaiah

Chapter 55: God's Higher Thoughts and Ways

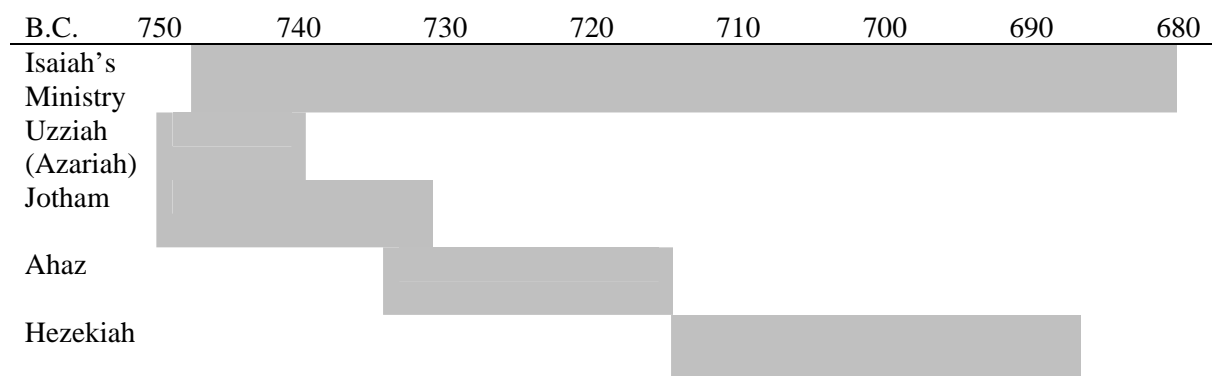
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 55 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verses:

Isa. 55:8-9 – “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways.” This is the Lord's declaration. “For as heaven is higher than earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Quick summary:

Because the Servant has accomplished His mission, all who are thirsty are invited to drink from the waters of salvation. But there is urgency in this invitation. “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call to Him while He is near,” the reader is admonished in verse 6. All are welcome – Jew and Gentile alike – but they must forsake their wicked ways and abandon their pride. In so doing, they will find great joy. Even the ones unsure of their ability to proclaim God's truths are assured that His word “will not return to Me empty” (v. 11).

Take note:

The word “thirsty” in verse 1 is used throughout Scripture as a metaphor for spiritual longing. Here are a few examples:

- **Ps. 42:1-2:** As a deer longs for streams of water, so I long for You, God. I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and appear before God?
- **Ps. 63:1:** God, You are my God; I eagerly seek You. I thirst for You; my body faints for You in a land that is dry, desolate, and without water.
- **John 4:13-14:** Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks from this water will get thirsty again. But whoever drinks from the water that I will give him will never get thirsty again—ever! In fact, the water I will give him will become a well of water springing up within him for eternal life.”
- **John 7:37-39:** On the last and most important day of the festival, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone is thirsty, he should come to Me and drink! The one who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, will have streams of living water flow from deep within him.” He said this about the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were going to receive, for the Spirit had not yet been received, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.
- **Rev. 21:6:** And He said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give to the thirsty from the spring of living water as a gift.”

An Invitation (Isa. 55:1-2)

The Lord issues an invitation to “everyone who is thirsty” to come to Him and be satisfied. Water is a precious commodity in many parts of the East, and an abundance of water is a special blessing (Isa. 41:17, 44:3). In addition, wine, milk and bread are dietary staples. People labor to provide these for themselves and their families, digging wells, tending crops and watching over their livestock. Yet many continue to go hungry and thirsty – an apt analogy for the busyness of religious works that fail to satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart. While many gladly would pay for the food that sustains spiritual life, Yahweh beckons us to come and buy “without money and without cost” (v. 1). Salvation is God’s gift to mankind. It may not be earned, bought, traded for or stolen; it is available freely to all who receive it in faith (John 5:24; Rom. 4:4-5; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5).

Warren W. Wiersbe notes, “In Scripture, both water and wine are pictures of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39; Eph. 5:18). Jesus is the ‘bread of life’ (John 6:32–35), and His living Word is like milk (1 Peter 2:2). Our Lord probably had Isaiah 55:2 in mind when He said, ‘Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life’ (John 6:27, NKJV)” (*Be Comforted*, An Old Testament Study, S. Is 55:1).

An Everlasting Covenant (Isa. 55:3)

By coming to the Lord, people will have life and enjoy the benefits of the Davidic Covenant, in which God promises that David’s line will continue forever (2 Sam. 7:11b-16). Some interpreters say this is a reference to the New Covenant (Jer. 32:40; Heb. 13:20). While this may apply in

some respects, the immediate context specifically mentions David. Of course, the Davidic Covenant is fulfilled in the Messiah (Luke 1:30-33; Acts 13:34-39), who reigns forever and who, through His blood, provides eternal life for all who enter into the New Covenant by faith. That's why Jesus makes it abundantly clear that eternal life is found only in Him: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6).

The Nations and Messiah (Isa. 55:4-5)

The reference to "him" in verse 4 speaks not of David, but the Messiah, who will be the world's "leader and commander." The word "you" in verse 5 likely means the people of Israel, who will summon the nations to worship the one true and living God. "Isaiah 55:5 indicates that God will use Israel to call the Gentiles to salvation, which was certainly true in the early days of the church (Acts 10:1ff; 11:19ff; 13:1ff) and will be true during the kingdom (Isa. 2:2-4; 45:14; Zech. 8:22). Jerusalem will be the center for worship in the world, and God will be glorified as the nations meet together with Israel to honor the Lord" (Wiersbe, S. Is 55:1).

Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset and David Brown make an interesting observation about the order of Isaiah's words in verse 5, which states, "so you will summon a nation you do not know, and nations you do not know will run to you." They remark, "God must *call*, before man can, or will, *run* (So 1:4; Jn 6:44). Not merely *come*, but *run eagerly*" (*A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, S. Is 55:5). Salvation is from the Lord (Jonah 2:9). Unless He takes the initiative to send His Son; unless the Son pays our sin debt through His death, burial and resurrection; unless the Holy Spirit draws unbelievers to Christ; and unless God grants saving faith to those who are dead in trespasses and sins, there is no hope of redemption for any human being.

Salvation Offered to All (Isa. 55:6-13)

Isaiah calls on his fellow countrymen to seek the Lord while He may be found, for when judgment falls it will be too late. While this plea has an immediate application for Judah, it also speaks to individuals in all generations concerning salvation. Although the Jews are God's covenant people, they are granted forgiveness of sins and eternal life only by trusting in Him. The message is the same today to all people, as the apostle Paul writes: "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, since the same Lord of all is rich to all who call on Him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:12b-13). But God's gracious invitation is limited in time. "[I]t is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment," writes the author of Hebrews (9:27), so it is crucial for sinners to receive the Lord by faith today, for tomorrow is promised to no one. "Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

The wicked who turn from their evil ways and abandon their sinful thoughts will find the Lord compassionate and forgiving. Because all people are natural-born sinners, their thoughts and deeds are independent of God and lead to earthly distress and eternal judgment. But Isaiah has a message from the Lord: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways." [This is] the LORD'S declaration. "For as heaven is higher than earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9).

Believers today are assured of higher thoughts and ways because we have “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). No longer enslaved to sin, we have the freedom to be the eyes, ears, mouth and hands of our Savior, encouraging one another in the faith and testifying of God's power to a lost world. The apostle Paul goes ever further in describing the power and promise of the Christian life: “So if you have been raised with the Messiah, seek what is above, where the Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on what is above, not on what is on the earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with the Messiah in God. When the Messiah, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory” (Col. 3:1-4).

The Lord also reminds us that just as the rain and snow water the earth, resulting in an abundance of food, His word brings life and peace to those who receive it: “My word that comes from My mouth will not return to Me empty, but it will accomplish what I please, and will prosper in what I send it to do” (v. 11). Jamieson, Fausset and Brown note, “Rain may to us seem lost when it falls on a desert, but it fulfils some purpose of God. So the gospel word falling on the hard heart; it sometimes works a change at last; and even if so, it leaves men without excuse” (S. Is 55:11). John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck add: “In the Near East dry hard ground can seemingly overnight sprout with vegetation after the first rains of the rainy season. Similarly when God speaks His Word, it brings forth spiritual life, thus accomplishing His purpose” (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1111).

The chapter closes with a description of the joy of the exiles when they go out of Babylonian captivity and, longer term, the joy of Israel in the Messianic age. When Christ sits on the throne of David and His people are gathered before Him, all nature will rejoice in the Lord (see also Isa. 35:1-2, 44:23). After Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, thorns and thistles grew up and the earth yielded her fruit grudgingly. With the return of Christ, however, the effects of the fall will be reversed and instead of the thornbush, a cypress will spring up, and instead of the brier, a myrtle will grow. The creation itself will rejoice in the redeeming work of our great God and Savior.

Closing Thought

Matthew Henry comments: “What is the qualification required in those that shall be welcome – they must thirst. All shall be welcome to gospel grace upon those terms only that gospel grace be welcome to them. Those that are satisfied with the world and its enjoyments for a portion, and seek not for a happiness in the favour of God – those that depend upon the merit of their own works for a righteousness, and see no need they have of Christ and his righteousness – these do not thirst; they have no sense of their need, are in no pain or uneasiness about their souls, and therefore will not condescend so far as to be beholden to Christ. But those that thirst are invited to the waters, as those that labour, and are heavy-laden, are invited to Christ for rest. Note, Where God gives grace he first gives a thirsting after it; and, where he has given a thirsting after it, he will give it, Ps. 81:10” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 55:1).

The Book of Isaiah

Chapter 56: Israel's Blind Watchmen

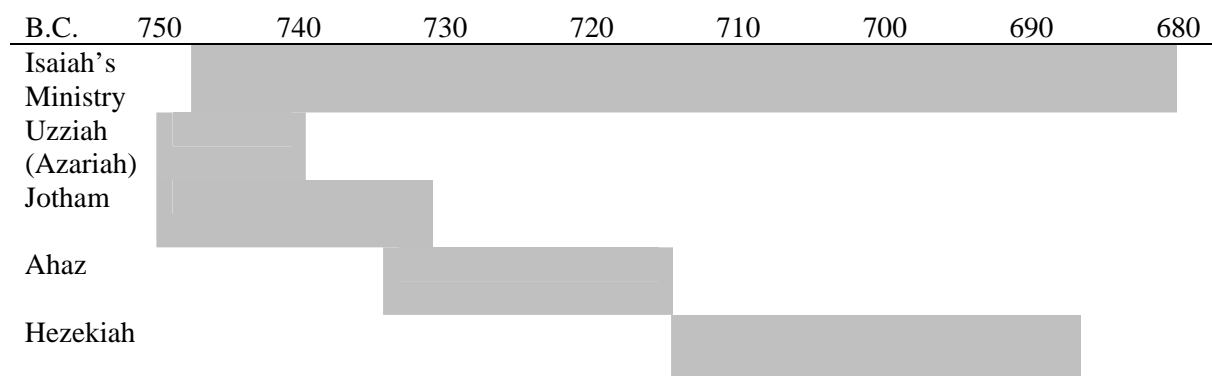
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 56 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verses:

Isa. 56:10-11 – Israel's watchmen are blind, all of them, they know nothing; all of them are mute dogs, they cannot bark; they dream, lie down, and love to sleep. These dogs have fierce appetites; they never have enough. And they are shepherds who have no discernment; all of them turn to their own way, every last one for his own gain."

Quick summary:

Chapter 56 begins the final section of the book of Isaiah. While chapters 40-55 survey the Babylonian exile and speak of redemption largely in terms of a Jewish homecoming, chapters 56-66 focus on the homeland, which is seen partly as a place of corruption (Isa. 56:9-59:15a) and devastation (Isa. 63:7-64:12), but also as a place of restoration and beauty when touched by the Lord's hand (Isa. 60-62). "The final chapters (65-66), like the prelude (56:1-8), show God's welcome of the outsider and the heathen to his holy mountain and eternal kingdom, but press home the peril of an everlasting exclusion from these glories" (D.A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed., S. Is 55:6). Specifically, chapter 56 contrasts God's grace and man's wickedness, as evidenced in the lives of Judah's leaders.

Take note:

The Gentiles who believe will be included in God's blessings for Israel. The Gentiles' inclusion in God's plan for worldwide blessing is addressed in many passages of Scripture, for example:

- **Gen. 12:3:** I will bless those who bless you, I will curse those who treat you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.
- **Acts 15:16-18:** After these things I will return and will rebuild David's tent, which has fallen down. I will rebuild its ruins and will set it up again, so that those who are left of mankind may seek the Lord – even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who does these things, which have been known from long ago.
- **Gal. 3:6-9:** Just as Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness, so understand that those who have faith are Abraham's sons. Now the Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and foretold the good news to Abraham, saying, All the nations will be blessed in you. So those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith.
- **Eph.3:4-6:** By reading this you are able to understand my insight about the mystery of the \dots . This was not made known to people in other generations as it is now revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: the Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the same body, and partners of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

A House of Prayer for All (Isa. 56:1-8)

Isaiah begins the chapter with a command from the Lord to live righteously “for My salvation is coming soon, and My righteousness will be revealed” (v. 1). The word “salvation” may be seen here as both spiritual deliverance (from idolatry and other sins) and physical protection (from the Assyrians now and from extinction during Babylonian exile later). While salvation always has been a work of God's grace, the Jews are exhorted to live righteously as an acknowledgement of their special relationship with Yahweh. Since the Sabbath is a sign of Israel's covenant with the Lord, keeping the Sabbath signifies belief in the covenant and trust in the covenant-keeping God (v. 2). In a similar manner, our good works as Christians are the natural response to God's work of grace in our lives and are intended to bring glory to God (Matt. 5:16; Eph. 2:10).

In verses 3-5 the Lord reminds believing Gentiles that they have a part in His salvation and a place in His kingdom. God's intention always has been to redeem people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). Equally gracious is God's promise to eunuchs who, under the Law, are excluded from the full rights and privileges of citizenship (Deut. 23:1). The reason for their segregation is that their parents have deliberately mutilated them for the purpose of serving in the palaces of kings and noblemen. Such a focus on status and cultural extremes would serve to take their eyes off Yahweh and prevent them from having children who would honor the one true and living God. Though the eunuchs are not at fault for their parents' actions, the consequences are a reminder to all Jews not to allow foreign beliefs and practices to influence them. Eunuchs, however, are never excluded from God's salvation, and the Lord adds to spiritual deliverance the promise of full citizenship in the Messianic kingdom, including “a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters” (v. 5).

Foreigners who “love the Lord’s name” will be regathered along with believing Israelites. They demonstrate their belief in Yahweh by serving Him and honoring His covenant with Israel. It should not be overlooked in this passage that Gentiles are invited to observe the Sabbath along with the Jews. Warren W. Wiersbe explains: “God never before asked the Gentiles to join the Jews in keeping the Sabbath, *but here He does so*. He calls the very people He prohibited from entering His covenant nation: foreigners and eunuchs (Deut. 23:1–8). This is another picture of the grace of God (see Acts 8:26ff). The invitation is still, ‘Ho, everyone! Come!’ It applies to sinners today, but it will apply in a special way when Israel enters her kingdom, the temple services are restored, and the Sabbath is once again a part of Jewish worship” (*Be Comforted*, An Old Testament Study, S. Is 55:1).

In the future, the Lord will bring Jews and Gentiles alike to His holy mountain, where they will rejoice in His house of prayer. There, they will offer burnt offerings and sacrifices on His altar. But a question arises: If this promise points to the Millennium, which comes well after Messiah’s sacrifice on the cross, why are animal sacrifices necessary, or even appropriate? One possible explanation is that these are not blood sacrifices, but spiritual ones. The apostle Paul, for example, exhorts us as Christians to present our bodies as living sacrifices that are holy and pleasing to God; this is our “spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). The writer of Hebrews tells us to “offer up a sacrifice of praise” (Heb. 13:15). And Peter reminds us that we are “living stones ... built into a house for a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). In this case, the Lord’s “altar” could be a reference to the cross, where the Old Testament sacrifices are fulfilled and done away with and which sanctifies our sacrifices of prayer and praise.

Another possible explanation is that God will reinstitute the sacrificial system as a memorial to His Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The shed blood of innocent animals will serve as a reminder of the penalty for sin and the great price Jesus paid to redeem us from our sins. In either case, the focus of this promise is that redeemed people from across the world will gather in Jerusalem and worship the Lord.

Sleeping Watchmen (Isa. 56:9-12)

While much of chapters 49-57 offer a glimpse of Israel’s future glory, the closing verses of this chapter and all of chapter 57 describe the spiritual situation in Isaiah’s day and serve as a condemnation of the nation’s wicked. In verse 9, the “animals of the field and forest” are invited to “come and eat!” This is a call to the Gentile nations – Babylon in particular – to devour Israel as punishment for her spiritual stupor. Israel’s “watchmen” – the priests and other religious leaders – are described as “blind” and “ignorant.” They are ravenous dogs who love to eat and sleep, yet as mute beasts are unable to sound a warning of approaching danger. The leaders also are depicted as shepherds with no discernment, acting like the very sheep they are supposed to lead. Concerned only with their own comfort, they drink wine, guzzle beer and tell themselves the future is bright.

Warren Wiersbe comments: “Spiritual leaders are ‘watchmen’ (Ezek. 3:17–21; 33:1–11) who must be awake to the dangers that threaten God’s people. They are ‘shepherds’ who must put the care of the flock ahead of their own desires. When the foreign invaders (‘beasts of the field’) come, the shepherds must protect the flock, no matter what the danger might be. See Acts 20:18–38 for the description of a faithful spiritual ministry” (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 56:9).

By coming to the Lord, people will have life and enjoy the benefits of the Davidic Covenant, in

Closing Thought

Matthew Henry writes: “[W]hy are the dogs set to guard the sheep if they cannot bark to waken the shepherd and frighten the wolf? Such were these; those that had the charge of souls never reprov’d men for their faults, nor told them what would be in the end thereof, never gave them notice of the judgments of God that were breaking in upon them. They barked at God’s prophets, and bit them too, and worried the sheep, but made no opposition to the wolf or thief.... They loved their ease, and hated business, were always *sleeping, lying down and loving to slumber*. They were not overcome and overpowered by sleep, as the disciples, through grief and fatigue, but they lay down on purpose to invite sleep ... It is bad with a people when their shepherds slumber (Nah. 3:18), and it is well for God’s people that their shepherd, the keeper of Israel, neither slumbers nor sleeps” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 56:9).

The Book of Isaiah

Chapter 57: No Peace for the Wicked

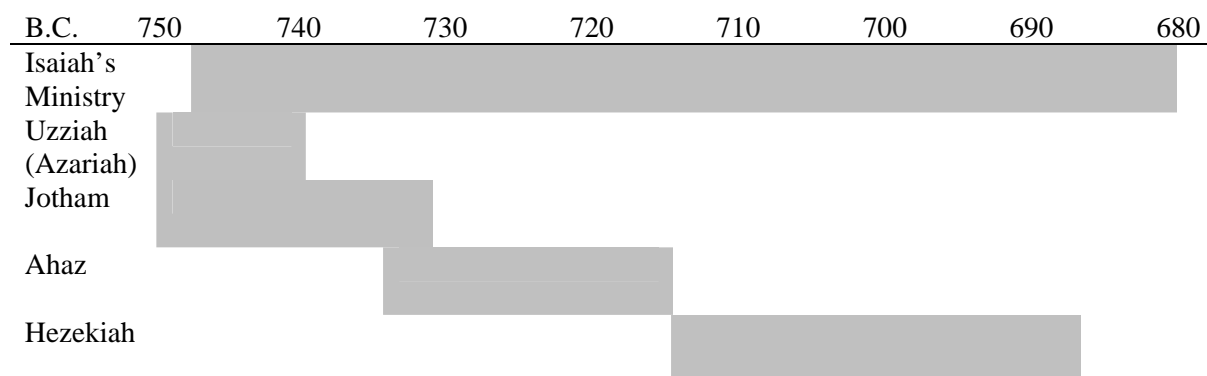
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 57 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verse:

Isa. 57:13 – When you cry out, let your collection [of idols] deliver you! The wind will carry all of them off, a breath will take them away. But whoever takes refuge in Me will inherit the land and possess My holy mountain.

Quick summary:

To their ignorance and moral blindness (Isa. 56:9-12), Judah's leaders have added idolatry and immorality. Yet the Lord refuses to give up on them. If any of these backsliders trusts the Lord and humbles himself, the Lord will heal him and lead him. The promise of peace, however, is balanced by a stern warning: "But the wicked are like the storm-tossed sea, for it cannot be still, and its waters churn up mire and muck. There is no peace for the wicked ..." (vv. 20-21).

Take note:

Verse 15 is a remarkable passage. The “High and Exalted One” lives in “a high and holy place,” yet He also dwells with “the oppressed and lowly of spirit.” How can this be? First, consider that God is like none of His creatures. He is above all things, and in contrast to the idols that the people of Judah worship in vain, His eyes are too pure to look on evil, and He can’t tolerate wrongdoing (Hab. 1:13). He is the uncontested master of the universe and has the right to judge all things. He is higher than the highest; higher than the nations and the heavens (Ps. 113:4). At the same time, He is accessible to those who humble themselves before Him and is especially kind toward the faithful who suffer oppression. What will the Lord do for these people? “He will give them reviving joys and hopes sufficient to counterbalance all the griefs and fears that break their spirits. He dwells with them, and his presence is reviving” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 57:13).

The Righteous Perish (Isa. 57:1-2)

The chapter begins with a bleak assessment of the situation in Judah, whose leaders are so corrupt and whose social and spiritual fabric is so torn that the righteous must die to find any peace. Isaiah suggests that many of the righteous will die, mercifully, before the Babylonian invasion and therefore be spared the consequences of the nation’s depravity. Warren Wiersbe comments: “God permitted the unrighteous leaders to live and suffer the terrible consequences of their sins, but the righteous people died before the judgment fell. The godly found rest and peace; the ungodly went into Captivity, and some of them were killed. *Rebellious people do not deserve dedicated spiritual leaders*. When His people reject His Word and prefer worldly leaders, God may give them exactly what they desire and let them suffer the consequences” (*Be Comforted, An Old Testament Study*, S. Is 56:9).

The Pagans Denounced (Isa. 57:3-13)

Judah and Jerusalem are polluted with idols in the days leading up to the Babylonian captivity. Although King Hezekiah and King Josiah are godly leaders who destroy the high places and campaign against Judah’s slide toward destruction, the people are determined to indulge in paganism. Isaiah and Jeremiah preach passionately about the consequences of abandoning God, but their message ultimately falls on deaf ears.

The Lord likens idolatry to sexual immorality, which often is a part of pagan practices. The people are called “sons of a sorceress, offspring of an adulterer and a prostitute!” (v. 3). In public and in private, the citizens of Judah are inflamed with lust for their false gods. In the groves under green trees, they visit the shrine prostitutes. In the valleys, they offer their children as sacrifices (Hezekiah’s apostate son, Manasseh, would burn his own son as a sacrifice to Molech – 2 Kings 21:6). Under cliffs and among the smooth stones of the *wadis*, they worship gods who cannot hear them or help them. On the mountaintops and behind closed doors, they persist in idolatry and immorality. The Lord pulls no punches in confronting the people. He calls them “rebellious children” and a “race of liars” (v. 4).

The people also are guilty of consorting with foreign leaders and trusting them for protection. “You went to the king with oil and multiplied your perfumes,” the Lord says; “you sent your envoys far away and sent [them] down even to Sheol. You became weary on your many journeys, [but] you did not say ‘I give up!’” (vv. 9-10a). The Israelites even embrace the paganism of their foreign allies in order to curry their favor. All the while they are hedging their bets, retaining a cursory acknowledgement of the God of Israel. On their doorposts and gates they write the laws of God as He instructed them to do (Deut. 6:9, 11:20), but inside they worship idols “in secret,” a duplicitous religious practice that God finds detestable (Deut. 27:15). In the end, the Lord describes their religious pluralism as a lie; it is neither faithful to God nor true to paganism. As a result, their actions will bring God’s judgment and their idols will provide no comfort.

The Lord’s patience with the Israelites is seen by some as silence, or perhaps abandonment, or even worse, as tacit approval of their idolatry. But He will be silent no longer. “I will expose your righteousness,” He declares in verse 12. The outward righteousness of His people will be exposed for what it is: empty religious ritual. And when His judgment falls, He invites them to call upon their idols for salvation: “When you cry out, let your collection [of idols] deliver you! The wind will carry all of them off, a breath will take them away” (v. 13a). Even so, there is hope, for the God of Israel remains merciful: “But whoever takes refuge in Me will inherit the land and possess My holy mountain” (v. 13b).

The Contrite Comforted (Isa. 57:14-21)

The Lord draws a sharp contrast between Himself and His people in order to reveal His holiness and their sinfulness. While the people are two-faced liars, intoxicated with idolatry, He is “the High and Exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy” (v. 15a). That reality should bring the Israelites to their knees in fearful repentance, just as the Law should cause every person to see his or her wretchedness in the light of God’s perfection. The purpose of the Law is not to save us but to make us aware of our sinfulness. As the apostle Paul writes in Rom. 3:20, “for through the law [comes] the knowledge of sin.” But God doesn’t leave us in this hopeless state. He sends His Son, who lives a sinless life and fulfills the law, then dies in our place on the cross, conquering sin and death on our behalf. Therefore Paul proclaims a few verses later, “For we conclude that man is justified by faith apart from works of law” (Rom. 3:28). The message to the Israelites of Isaiah’s day, and to us, is that Holy God desires a relationship with sinful people, who are forgiven of their sins and made holy by God’s grace. Those who persist in idolatry – whether it’s the worship of a stone pillar or the determination to live a self-indulgent life independently of God – will find themselves outside the security and protection of the one true and living God.

The Lord reacts decisively to sin. “Because of his sinful greed I was angry, so I struck him; I was angry and hid,” He says of the self-righteous in verse 17. Yet Yahweh’s heart is tender and His mercy is evident. “I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and comfort him and his mourners,” He promises in verse 18, foreseeing repentance. God’s gracious act of redemption produces a natural response in His people; it creates “words of praise” (v. 19).

The exhortation to prepare a road for the people of faith in verse 14 harkens back to Isa. 40:3-5, which speaks of a road being prepared for the Lord. But now the people are walking to the Lord. Even though He is majestic, exalted and holy, He desires fellowship with His people and invites them into His presence. All of this is possible, not because men and women have merited God's favor, but because an infinitely compassionate God sent His Son to invade Satan's kingdom and rescue believing sinners from death and hell. The praises that flow naturally from the lips of the redeemed produce a glorious habitation for the Redeemer.

The wicked, on the other hand, will never experience peace. Like the storm-tossed seas, they will find rest elusive and will never stand with the redeemed upon the calm sea of glass before the throne of God in heaven (Rev. 4:6, 15:2). Their sinful activities "churn up mire and muck" (v. 20), a stark contrast to the cool, clear living water Messiah offers (John 4:10-13, 7:37-39; Rev. 7:17). The question to all people today is: Which water do you prefer – the murky, churning waters of a self-centered life or the clear, cool, satisfying waters of a Spirit-led life?

Closing Thought

Matthew Henry writes: "The wicked ... are always like the sea in a storm, for they carry about with them, [1.] Unmortified corruptions. They are not cured and conquered, and their ungoverned lusts and passions make them like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, vexatious to all about them and therefore uneasy to themselves, noisy and dangerous.... [2.] Unpacified consciences. They are under a frightful apprehension of guilt and wrath, that they cannot enjoy themselves; when they seem settled they are in disquietude, when they seem merry they are in heaviness; like Cain, who always dwelt in the land of shaking. The terrors of conscience disturb all their enjoyments, and cast forth such mire and dirt as make them a burden to themselves.... *My God hath said it*, and all the world cannot unsay it, That there is no peace to those that allow themselves in any sin. What have they to do with peace?" (S. Is 57:17).

The Book of Isaiah

Chapter 58: The Fasting God Chooses

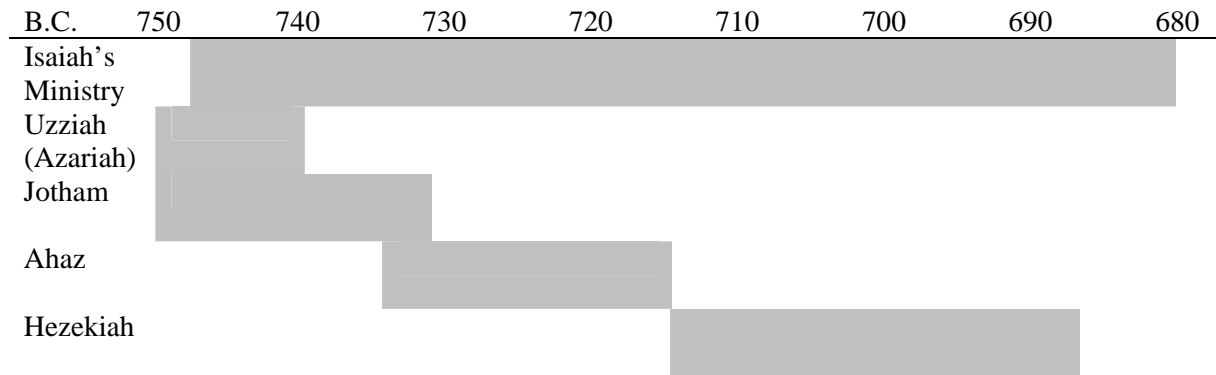
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment Chapters 1-35	Part 2: Historical Interlude Chapters 36-39	Part 3: Salvation Chapters 40-66
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When this takes place:

Chapter 58 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verses:

Isa. 58:6-8 – Isn't the fast I choose: To break the chains of wickedness, to untie the ropes of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, and to tear off every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the poor and homeless into your house, to clothe the naked when you see him, and to not ignore your own flesh and blood? Then your light will appear like the dawn, and your recovery will come quickly. Your righteousness will go before you, and the LORD's glory will be your rear guard.

Quick summary:

Isaiah takes to task those who go through the motions of religious observance while at the same time committing sins and promoting corruption. The kind of worship pleasing to God includes a desire to live an upright life and to help the poor and oppressed. It also means setting aside the Sabbath as a time to worship God and delight in Him rather to pursue worldly pleasures.

Take note:

The poor and oppressed are always close to the Lord's heart. Consider these passages of Scripture:

- Deut. 24:14-15 – Do not oppress a hired hand who is poor and needy ... You are to pay him his wages each day before the sun sets, because he is poor and depends on them. Otherwise he will cry out to the LORD against you, and you will be held guilty.
- Prov. 14:31 – The one who oppresses the poor insults their Maker, but one who is kind to the needy honors Him.
- Jer. 5:28 - They have become fat and sleek. They have also excelled in evil matters. They have not taken up cases, such as the case of orphans, so they might prosper, and they have not defended the rights of the needy.
- Amos 2:6-7 – The LORD says: I will not relent from punishing Israel for three crimes, even four, because they sell a righteous person for silver and a needy person for a pair of sandals. They trample the heads of the poor on the dust of the ground and block the path of the needy...
- Luke 1:52-53 – He has toppled the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly. He has satisfied the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

Fruitless Fasting, Pointless Praying (Isa. 58:1-5)

The Lord instructs Isaiah to proclaim loudly (literally, “with throat”) the sins of the nation. He is not to “hold back” but is to raise his voice “like a trumpet” so that all the people of Judah know that God sees and judges their transgressions. Verse 2 describes the outward righteousness of the people as they go to the temple, obey God's laws, fast, and appear eager to serve the Holy One of Israel. But the Lord, who sees the heart (1 Sam. 16:7), is not impressed with the external trappings of religious rituals. Remember what He tells His people in chapter 1: “What are all your sacrifices to Me? ... I have had enough of burnt offerings and rams and the fat of well-fed cattle; I have no desire for the blood of bulls, lambs, or male goats.... Stop bringing useless offerings. I despise [your] incense.... I hate your New Moons and prescribed festivals. They have become a burden to Me; I am tired of putting up with [them]. When you lift up your hands [in prayer], I will refuse to look at you; even if you offer countless prayers, I will not listen” (Isa. 1:11-15). Quoting Isa. 29:13, Jesus offers a similar rebuke to the religious leaders of His day: “These people honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. They worship Me in vain, teaching as doctrines the commands of men” (Matt. 15:8-9).

These are important passages that speak to Christians today. Is our worship a humble response to God's grace, or is it a self-centered effort to draw attention to us or to curry God's favor? Warren Wiersbe notes, “When we worship because it is the popular thing to do, not because it is the right thing to do, then our worship becomes hypocritical” (*Be Comforted: An Old Testament Study*, S. Is 56:9). The Jews are commanded to observe only one fast on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-31), but they are permitted to fast personally at other times. Somehow, the permission to fast devolved into a contest among God's people to gain His attention. Now they complain that the Lord hasn't “seen” or “noticed” their fasting. They are showing off their “piety” to God while engaged in pugilistic activities among themselves. Wiersbe summarizes: “True fasting will

lead to humility before God and ministry to others. We deprive ourselves so that we might share with others and do so to the glory of God. If we fast in order to get something for ourselves from God, instead of to become better people for the sake of others, then we have missed the meaning of worship. It delights the Lord when we delight in the Lord” (S. Is 56:9).

True Worship (Isa. 58:6-14)

Fasting is meant to encourage believers to respond positively to God’s commands. As they deprive themselves of certain physical needs – food, sleep, or sexual relations, for example – they are better able to see the weakness of their flesh and to hear God’s voice. Although the citizens of Judah are fasting, they are neglecting the clear instructions from the Lord to care for the less fortunate among them and to treat them as members of their own family who at one time had been slaves in Egypt. In others words, they are missing the point. Fasting should result in self-denial, not self-indulgence. When believers share with others it serves as a reminder that all they own ultimately belongs to God.

Fasting in the Old Testament normally lasts from sunrise to sunset. It is religious in purpose and is undertaken for a variety of reasons: to express grief (1 Sam. 31:13), to demonstrate one’s seriousness when appealing to God (Ezra 8:23), to indicate repentance (Jonah 3:5-10), and to honor the solemnity of the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-31). Later generations will add commemorative days to the religious calendar and remember them with fasting (Zech. 8:19). In the days of Jesus, the Pharisees fast each Monday and Thursday (Luke 18:12). Jesus condemns the dirtying of the face to show others than one is fasting, but He does not denigrate the practice. In fact, Jesus appears to have fasted often, including the 40 days before His public ministry (Luke 4:1-2). “Isaiah’s point is that fasting as an expression of piety is of far less concern to God than a righteous lifestyle. Spirituality is shown by the loving quality of our personal relationships (Isa. 58:4) and by our commitment to social justice and to helping the poor and oppressed (Isa. 58:6–7), not by fasting” (Lawrence O. Richards, *The Bible Readers Companion*, electronic ed., S. 442).

If the people have an inner righteousness, as opposed to a hypocritical outer righteousness, it will be revealed in acts of charity and justice honored by God. The blessings promised to Israel for obedience are spelled out in Deut. 28:1-14 and include:

- Exaltation above the nations of the earth
- Blessings in the city and the country (the entire nation will be blessed)
- Blessings for descendents
- Productive soil, livestock and herds
- Abundant rain and food
- Victory over enemies
- Blessings in “everything you do”
- Establishment as God’s holy people
- Holding the surrounding nations in awe
- Many children and animals
- Being a lender to nations but not a borrower

In Isaiah 40, the Lord promises to reward obedience with light (often a picture of blessing), healing (spiritual restoration), righteousness (high standards), protection from trouble and answered prayer (vv. 8-10). Further, He will give His people guidance, satisfaction, strength, fertility and physical restoration. These are special blessings promised to Israel as God's chosen people, who are to be a shining testimony of the one true God's power, wisdom and grace.

For believers today, it's important to avoid carrying these promises to Israel over into the church. Some Christian leaders today have adopted an entitlement mentality that says in effect, "Because I am a child of the King, and am a joint-heir with Jesus, I may claim my inheritance now – with health, wealth and worldly success." While this is an attractive point of view to believers who live in a sinful and fallen world, the New Testament nowhere promises Christians a cushy life. Quite the contrary, the apostles experienced intense persecution, and many suffered martyrs' deaths. Further, Paul wrote in no uncertain terms that "all those who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). Even so, believers should take heart because our treasure is in heaven and Jesus promises to compensate us for faithfulness with everlasting rewards (see Matt. 6:19-21; Rev. 22:12-14).

Closing Thought

Trent C. Butler writes: "If ritual fasting was simply boosting one's own religious ego, what was the key to divine blessing? What was acceptable to the Lord? God called for concrete action, helping others in need. Again the emphasis is on overcoming injustice with righteous acts. God does not want anyone under someone else's yoke. Here is the beginning of the fight against slavery of every kind. God hates oppression. He wants his people to set oppressed people free. God's people are dedicated to providing the basic needs of life to those who do not own them. We feed the hungry and provide shelter for the poor, homeless wanderer. We clothe those who cannot afford proper clothing, and we make sure we take care of our own flesh and blood" (*Holman Old Testament Commentary: Isaiah*, p. 334).

The Book of Isaiah

Chapter 59: The Redeemer Will Come

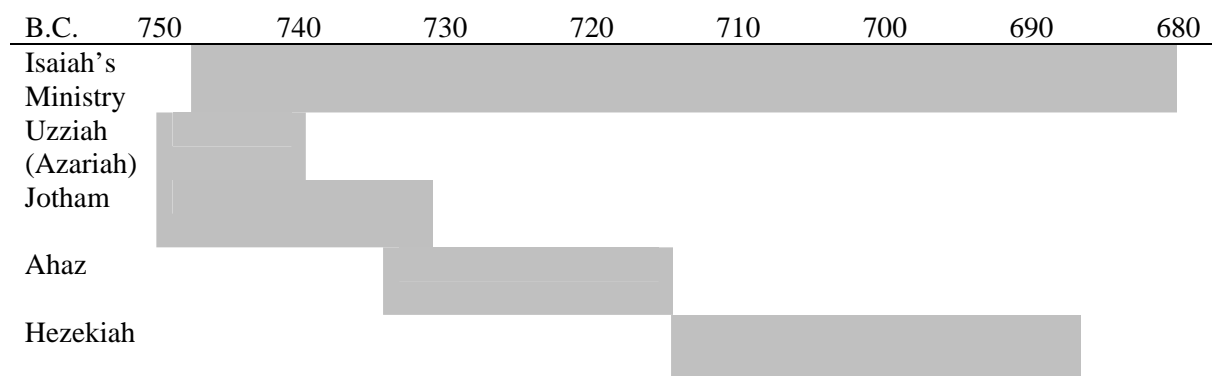
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 59 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verses:

Isa. 59:15b-16 – The Lord saw that there was no justice, and He was offended. He saw there was no man – He was amazed that there was no one interceding; so His own arm brought salvation, and His own righteousness supported Him.

Quick summary:

Israel's sins have separated them from God. Isaiah describes their sins – inequity, injustice, violence, corruption – and, speaking for the people, acknowledges their guilt. Their sins have left them blind and hopeless. The Lord will judge their sins but, as always, offers hope to those who repent. "Indeed, the Lord's hand is not too short to save, and His ear is not too deaf to hear," Isaiah writes in verse 1.

Take note:

Isaiah draws a sharp contrast between the Lord's faithfulness and Israel's wickedness:

- “The Lord’s hand is not too short to save” (v. 1) vs. “your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity” (v. 3).
- The Lord’s “ear is not too deaf to hear” (v. 1) vs. “your sins have made Him hide His face from you so that He does not listen” (v. 2).
- God “put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and He wrapped Himself in zeal as in a cloak” (v. 17) vs. “They ... weave spider’s webs.... Their webs cannot become clothing, and they cannot cover themselves with their works. Their works are sinful ...” (vv. 5-6).
- “He will repay according to their deeds” (v. 18) vs. “they rush to shed innocent blood ... ruin and wretchedness are in their paths ... there is no justice in their ways” (vv. 7-8).

Ultimately, the Redeemer will come to Zion and set things right. While He tarries, the people are called to repent of their sins and return to the Holy One of Israel.

Israel’s Sin (Isa. 59:1-11)

Isaiah begins by reminding the people that the Lord could save them in spite of their difficult circumstances. He is powerful enough; His “hand” or “arm” is not too short to save. And He is caring enough; His “ear” is not too deaf to hear. The problem is that the people are so entrenched in wicked behavior that the Lord chooses not to rescue them or hear their cries until they have passed under the rod of judgment and turned from their evil ways. Their iniquities have “built barriers” between them and God, and their sins have caused Him to “hide His face” from them so as not to listen to their pleadings (v. 2). Sin always damages our relationship with God, and when we protest that He doesn’t hear our prayers we fail to realize that the problem lies with us, not with Him.

Take note of Isaiah’s listing of the people’s sins:

- Their hands are defiled with blood, and their fingers with iniquity (v. 3a)
- They speak lies and mutter injustice (3b)
- They are dishonest, trusting in empty and worthless words (v. 4a)
- They conceive trouble and give birth to iniquity (4b)
- Their feet run after evil and they rush to shed innocent blood (7a)
- Their thoughts are sinful (7b)
- Ruin and wretchedness are in their paths (7b)
- They have not known the path of peace (8a)
- There is no justice in their ways (8a)
- They have made their roads crooked so that no one walking on them will know peace (8b)

Warren Wiersbe writes, “The people lifted their hands to worship God, but their hands were stained with blood. God could not answer their prayers because their sins hid His face from

them.... Isaiah compared the evil rulers to pregnant women giving birth to sin (59:4; Ps. 7:14; Isa. 33:11), to snakes hatching their eggs, and to spiders weaving their webs (Isa. 59:5–6). What they give birth to will only destroy them (James 1:13–15), and their beautiful webs of lies can never protect them (*Be Comforted* [An Old Testament Study], S. Is 56:9).

The reference to vipers' eggs in verse 5 illustrates the fact that God's people are entertaining evil, even fostering it, rather than crushing it in gestation. As a result, the evil hatches into a dangerous creature that destroys those who thought they could control it. The New Testament offers similar warnings to Christians about courting temptation and tolerating sin. The apostle Paul urges the church at Corinth to "purge" the "old leaven;" that is, to rid the church of pagan influences and the contamination of those living openly in sin (1 Cor. 5:7 KJV). James writes about the nefarious way sin works its way from our thoughts into our deeds unless we hold it in check: "But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desires. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death" (James 1:14-15). And the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to "encourage each other daily, while it is still called today, so that none of you is hardened by sin's deception" (Heb. 3:13).

Isaiah also compares the people's works to spiders' webs (vv. 5-6). This is not a reference to being entrapped by sin, but to the manner in which God sees through their empty worship and vain works like one sees the nakedness of a person clothed only in spiders' webs. We deceive ourselves when we live the lie of self-righteousness.

In Isa. 59:9-11, the prophet summarizes the consequences of the people's sins: "Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We hope for light, but there is darkness; for brightness, but we live in the dark. We grope along a wall like the blind; we grope like those without eyes. We stumble at noon as though it were twilight; we are like the dead among those who are healthy. We all growl like bears and moan like doves. We hope for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us."

Israel's Supplication (Isa. 59:12-15a)

In these verses the prophet, using first-person plural pronouns, identifies with the people and confesses their sins. "For *our* transgressions have multiplied before You, and *our* sins testify against *us*," he writes in verse 12. He acknowledges that Judah's sins cleave to the people, and the people are well aware of them. This admission proves a deeper level of guilt because the people, who know how to live justly, are engaged in willful rebellion against God. Isaiah goes so far as to spell out the types of sins his fellow countrymen embrace: transgression and deception against the Lord; turning away from following God; speaking oppression and revolt; conceiving and uttering lying words from the heart; turning back justice; keeping righteousness at arm's length; and keeping truth and honesty from the public square.

Isaiah laments in verse 15a, "Truth is missing, and whoever turns from evil is plundered." D.A. Carson comments, "Perhaps the most revealing touch is the victimizing of the decent man, the only one out of step ... not only public justice has warped, but public opinion with it" (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed., S. Is 59:1).

Israel's Savior (Isa. 59:15b-21)

Because of the people's depraved condition, no one but Yahweh is able to save. The Lord sees injustice and takes it personally – He is “offended” (v. 15b). He sees there is no one interceding on the people's behalf, so “His own arm” brings salvation (v. 16). It is good for us to be reminded that salvation is of the Lord. Men and women are incapable of pulling themselves up by the boot straps, making themselves acceptable to God, paying their own sin debt and securing a place in His kingdom. It is only when they cry out, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” as the tax collector does in Luke 18:13, that the Lord reaches down and delivers them from wrath. Those who bring anything of their own to the foot of the cross, and declare their works worthy of eternal life, trample on the blood of Jesus, which alone can save.

God goes forth like a warrior to fight for His people. He puts on righteousness like a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on His head (v. 17a). His other garments are vengeance and zeal, and He repays His enemies with fury and retribution. In the immediate context, God is standing up for His righteous remnant, punishing even those, like the Assyrians and Babylonians, He has used as instruments of judgment against Judah. In the broader context, the Lord assures us that He fights for us in the unseen realm and will come one day to establish His justice throughout the whole earth. The New Testament personalizes this concept by telling us how Christ equips us to fight spiritual battles. The apostle Paul notes in Eph. 4:13-17: “This is why you must take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, to take your stand. Stand, therefore, with truth like a belt around your waist, righteousness like armor on your chest, and your feet sandaled with readiness for the gospel of peace. In every situation take the shield of faith, and with it you will be able to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word.”

In every case, the Lord is in control. He wins battles for us, or through us. And the result is that people will acknowledge Him: “They will fear the name of the Lord in the west, and His glory in the east; for He will come like a rushing stream driven by the wind of the Lord. The Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those in Jacob who turn from transgression” (Isa. 59:19-20). When Messiah returns in judgment, He will pour His Spirit on believing Israelites and instill His words within them. With this promise of future hope, the nation is called to repentance.

Closing Thought

Matthew Henry writes: There shall be a present temporal salvation wrought out for the Jews in Babylon, or elsewhere in distress and captivity. This is promised as a type of something further. ... There shall be a more glorious salvation wrought out by the Messiah in the fullness of time, which salvation all the prophets, upon all occasions, had in view. We have here the two great promises relating to that salvation: (1) That the Son of God shall come to us to be our Redeemer ... (2) That the Spirit of God shall come to us to be our sanctifier” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 59:16).

The Book of Isaiah

Chapter 60: Everlasting Light

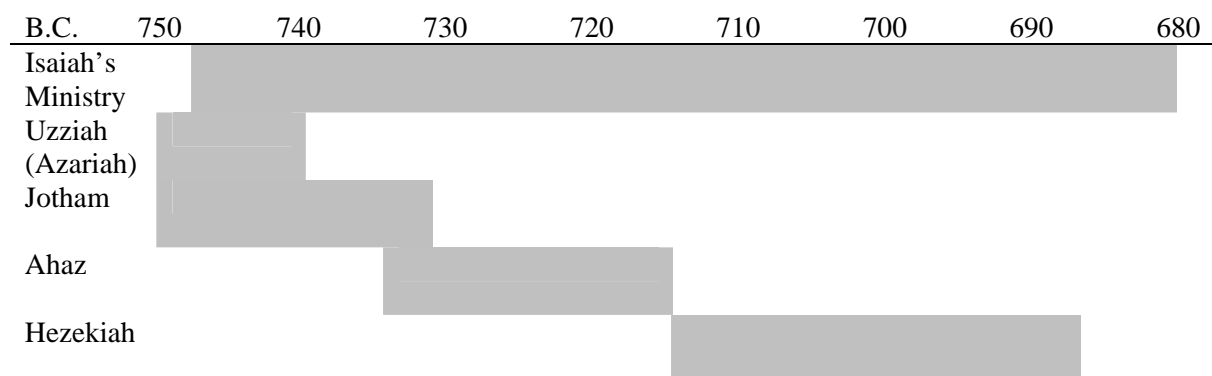
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment Chapters 1-35	Part 2: Historical Interlude Chapters 36-39	Part 3: Salvation Chapters 40-66
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When this takes place:

Chapter 60 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verses:

Isa. 60:19-20 – The sun will no longer be your light by day, and the brightness of the moon will no longer shine on you; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your splendor. Your sun will no longer set, and your moon will not fade; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and the days of your sorrow will be over.

Quick summary:

There is a marvelous future in store for Israel during the millennial kingdom. The believing remnant of Jews, as well as believing Gentiles with their great wealth, will come to Jerusalem to live and worship. Righteousness will prevail. War will cease. The city gates will be open, welcoming all foreigners. Israel's former enemies will flock to the Holy Land, bow down to the Jews and work for them. God Himself will be Jerusalem's source of light, an abiding reminder that "I, the Lord, am your Savior" (v. 16).

Take note:

The Lord's promise to be Israel's "everlasting light" (vv. 19-20) is repeated in the book of Revelation:

- Rev. 21:23-26 - The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, because God's glory illuminates it, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Each day its gates will never close because it will never be night there. They will bring the glory and honor of the nations into it.
- Rev. 22:5 – Night will no longer exist, and people will not need lamplight or sunlight, because the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign forever and ever.

God's Glory in Israel (Isa. 60:1-3)

The Lord's redeeming work will result in unique blessings for Israel, which in turn will attract the nations of the world. When Messiah comes and sits on the throne of David, His glory will shine throughout the land, piercing the spiritual darkness into which the world has fallen (see Acts 26:18; Col. 1:13; 1 Peter 2:9). "Nations will come to your light," Isaiah writes, "and kings to the brightness of your radiance" (v. 3).

The Lord has chosen both the nation of Israel and the church to be bearers of His light – Israel first, and then the church, and finally both together. Israel fails, falling into idolatry and rank wickedness, which the Lord judges in Isaiah's day through the Assyrians, and later through the Babylonians and the Romans, until the Lord temporarily sets aside Israel as the torch bearer of His kingdom in favor of the church. But the church will not fare much better, falling prey to false doctrines and spiritual coldness; even Jesus asks if the Son of Man will find faithfulness among His people on the earth (Luke 18:8).

Thankfully, God is gracious, patient, merciful, and true to His promises. Even in the darkest days for Israel and the church, the Lord preserves a faithful remnant, and at Christ's return both the nation of Israel and the church reflect the glory of His presence. The praise goes, not to God's people, but to the Lord Himself, who has chosen, called and redeemed His own. Like the moon, which has no light source but reflects the sun's rays, God's people reflect the glory of their Creator and Savior.

The Nations' Wealth in Israel (Isa. 60:4-9)

These verses seem to describe the Millennium, when Israel is secure in her borders, spiritually revived and worshiping in a rebuilt temple. The people are urged to raise their eyes and witness the influx of Jews and Gentiles, who bring their wealth and a fervent desire to worship the Lord in Jerusalem. They come from great distances, and their caravans cover the land (v. 6). The prophets Haggai and Zechariah make similar references to this coming time:

- Haggai 2:7-9a: "I will shake all the nations so that the treasures of all the nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory," says the LORD of Hosts. "The silver and gold belong to Me"—the declaration of the LORD of Hosts. "The final glory of this house will be greater than the first," says the LORD of Hosts.

- Zech. 14:14: Judah will also fight at Jerusalem, and the wealth of all the surrounding nations will be collected: gold, silver, and clothing in great abundance.

Examples of the wealth to be brought are gold, silver, incense, flocks and rams. They come from nations at the edge of the world known to the people in Isaiah's day, spanning from the Arabian Peninsula to Europe. Some of the wealth will be used as offerings, and some will be used to adorn the temple.

The sight of this great migration of people and abundance of wealth will cause the Jews to be "radiant" and their hearts to "tremble and rejoice" (v. 5). Brought in haste, this wealth will be to honor the Lord. Note how Isaiah documents this purpose: The people will "proclaim the praises of the Lord" (v. 6) and "honor the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel" (v. 9).

The Nations Acknowledge Israel (Isa. 60:10-14)

As Yahweh pours out His blessings on the nation, Israel will be the epitome of the world's political, religious, economic and social structures. "Although I struck you in my wrath," the Lord reminds the people, "yet I will show mercy to you with My favor" (v. 10b). Foreigners and their kings will help rebuild Jerusalem's walls. The flow of wealth into Israel will be steady. The gates of the city "will always be open" (v. 11), and kings will lead endless processions, with vessels laden with riches, into the vibrant capital of the revived nation. Furthermore, the Lord promises to annihilate any nation that raises its hand against His chosen people, assuring them of prosperity and peace. For Jews who survived the Assyrian onslaught on Judah and who now understand that defeat and exile at the hand of the Babylonians lie in the near future, these promises of God's faithfulness serve as a soothing balm that enables them to endure the dark days ahead.

Even the finest wood from Lebanon – pine, fir and cypress – will adorn the temple, which the Lord calls "My sanctuary" and "My dwelling place" (v. 13). Israel's oppressors – the enemies who for centuries have surrounded them and sought their destruction – will enter Jerusalem reverently, calling it "the City of the Lord" and "Zion of the Holy One of Israel" (v. 14). Warren Wiersbe notes, "Some people 'spiritualize' these promises and apply them to the Gentiles coming to Christ and His church today, but that is not the basic interpretation. Isaiah sees ships and caravans bringing people and wealth to Jerusalem (60:5–7); and the nations that refuse to honor the Lord and His city will be judged (v. 12). Even Israel's old enemies will submit and help to serve the Lord (vv. 10, 14)" (*Be Comforted, An Old Testament Study*, S. Is 60:1).

Matthew Henry lends insight into this passage: "The people of the Jews, after their return out of captivity, by degrees became more considerable, and made a better figure than one would have expected, after they had been so much reduced, and than any of the other nations recovered that had been in like manner humbled by the Chaldeans. It is probable that many of those who had oppressed them in Babylon, when they were themselves driven out by the Persians, made their court to the Jews for shelter and supply and were willing to scrape acquaintance with them. This prophecy is further fulfilled when those that have been enemies to the church are wrought upon by the grace of God to see their error, and come, and join themselves to it" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 60:9).

Righteousness in Israel (Isa. 60:15-22)

In the closing verses of this chapter, the Lord describes the wonders He has in store for His people. Israel no longer will be forsaken but will become “an object of eternal pride, a joy from age to age,” enriched by the Gentile nations and nursed like a favored child (v. 15). Just as Yahweh makes His power known in judgment, He makes His presence felt in blessing: “[Y]ou will know that I, the Lord, am your Savior and Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (v. 16). As in the days of King Solomon (1 Kings 10:21, 27), precious metals will be plentiful and peace will be the order of the day.

Violence, devastation and destruction will be gone from Israel’s borders. Jerusalem’s gates, once the means by which enemies burst into the capital city, will be scenes of public praise, and the walls, once breached by marauding enemies, will be named salvation (v. 18; see also Isa. 26:1). “Judah,” the favored tribe, means “praise.” Israel’s future peace and prosperity will bring glory to the Lord, who has carried His people through judgment and now lavishes His blessings on the redeemed.

The apostle John uses some of the characteristics of the millennial Jerusalem when he describes the holy city in Rev. 21-22. For example, Yahweh declares in Isa. 60:20, “Your sun will no longer set, and your moon will not fade; for the Lord will be your everlasting light.” Meanwhile, John notes of the New Jerusalem, “The city does not need the sun or moon to shine on it, because God’s glory illuminates it, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev. 21:23). The Lord promises in Isaiah 60 that “the days of your sorrow will be over” (v. 20), and John records that “grief, crying, and pain will exist no longer, because the previous things have passed away (Rev. 21:4). Even so, “the city Isaiah describes is the capital city of the restored Jewish nation, and Jesus Christ shall sit on the throne of David and judge righteously. The Jewish ‘remnant’ will increase and fill the land” (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 60:1).

The Lord promises to make His people righteous and secure in their land. For what purpose? “[S]o that I may be glorified” (v. 21).

Closing Thought

Warren Wiersbe writes: “God’s glory had once dwelt in the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34–38), only to depart because of Israel’s sin (1 Sam. 4:21). God’s glory then came into the temple (1 Kings 8:11), but it departed when the nation turned to idols (Ezek. 9:3; 10:4, 18; 11:22–23). The glory came to Israel in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14), but the nation nailed that glory to a cross. Today, The Babylonian Captivity had been the nation’s darkest hour, but that was not the darkness Isaiah was describing. He was describing the awful darkness that will cover the earth during the Day of the Lord (Amos 5:18), when God punishes the nations of the earth for their sins (Isa. 2:12ff; 13:6ff). But the prophet is also describing the glorious light that will come to Israel when her Messiah returns to reign in Jerusalem. Then ‘the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea’ (Hab. 2:14). Israel’s sons and daughters will come home again (Isa. 60:4, 8–9), and all of them will know the Lord” (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 60:1).

Chapter 61: The Garments of Salvation

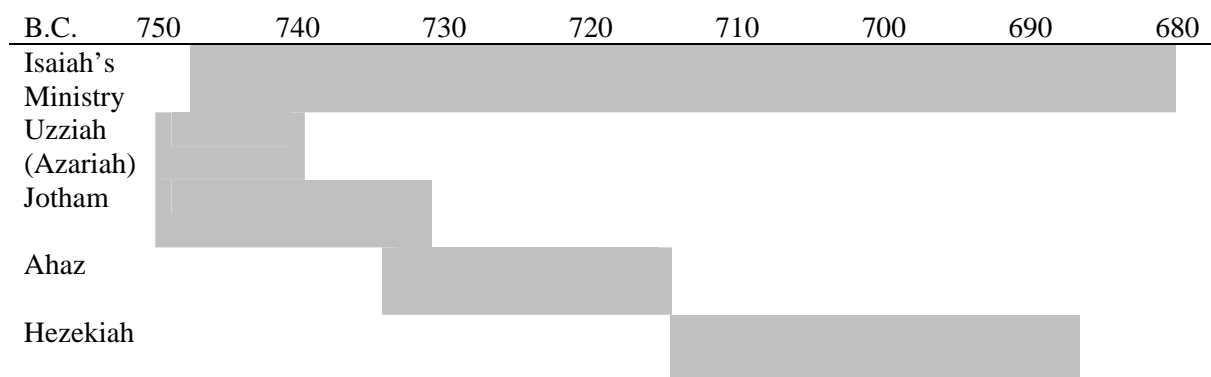
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 61 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verse:

Isa. 61:10 – I greatly rejoice in the Lord, I exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation and wrapped me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom wears a turban and as a bride adorns herself with jewels.

Quick summary:

Isaiah 61 reveals that “the Messiah, who ministered salvation at his first coming, will minister comfort for redeemed Israel at his second coming. Jesus read and applied 61:1–2 to his own ministry when he preached in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16–21). Jesus did not quote 61:2–3 in the synagogue at Nazareth because they will be fulfilled at his second coming. In the kingdom, redeemed Israel will realize its destiny to be a priestly nation” (Robert B. Hughes, J. Carl Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*, The Tyndale Reference Library, S. 268).

Take note:

In reference to Himself, Jesus quotes verses 1-2a in Luke 4:18-19. The Messiah's mission is to “bring good news to the poor” ... “to heal the brokenhearted” ... “to proclaim liberty ... and

freedom” ... and “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” He stops in mid-sentence, however, after the word “favor,” showing that His work would be in two advents. In His first advent He does the work laid out in verses 1-2a. In His second advent, He will carry out the work mentioned in verses 2b-3, bringing judgment on unbelievers and great comfort to Israel.

The Trinity (Isa. 61:1-3)

All three persons of the triune Godhead are written of in verse 1: the Spirit, the Lord God, and the Messiah, signified by the personal pronoun “Me.” Three factors indicate that “Me” refers to Messiah, according to *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. First, the association of the Holy Spirit with the anointing points to Jesus Christ. After being anointed with oil, Israel’s first two kings, Saul and David, are blessed with the Spirit’s ministry (1 Sam. 10:1, 10; 16:13). In a similar fashion, the Holy Spirit anoints Jesus to be Israel’s King (Matt. 3:16-17). The Hebrew word for Messiah means “the Anointed One,” and the Greek word “Christ” comes from the word *chrío*, to anoint. Second, part of this passage is read by Jesus (Luke 4:18-19) to refer to Himself. And third, the mission of the Anointed One as spelled out in Isaiah. 61 is the earthly ministry of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1116).

Further, when the Messiah comes, He will transform the Jews’ sadness to joy. From a New Testament perspective, the grief of captivity in Egypt, the defeat of the northern kingdom at the hands of the Assyrians, the destruction and exile of the southern kingdom at the hands of the Babylonians, the Diaspora at the hands of the Romans, the Holocaust, and the yet-future trials of the Great Tribulation will become distant memories as God comforts and blesses the redeemed of Israel. Isaiah reports in advance all that the coming One will do for His people:

- Comfort all who mourn
- Provide for them
- Give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes (a sign of mourning; see 2 Sam. 13:19; Esther 4:1; Dan. 9:3)
- Give them festive oil (to soothe and brighten the spirits; see Ps. 23:5; 45:7; 104:15; Ecc. 9:8; Matt. 6:17; Heb. 1:9)
- Give them splendid clothes instead of despair (bright garments are a sign of joy and acceptance)
- Call them righteous trees planted by the Lord, displaying His splendor (Isa. 60:21)

Yes, days of judgment lie ahead. Yahweh will chasten and rebuke His own, but in so doing He will turn their feet away from idolatry and, in the last days, turn their hearts toward their Creator and King.

Israel Rebuilt (Isa. 61:4-9)

The Jews will return to their homeland after the Babylonian captivity and rebuild the temple and the cities. While these verses in some respects speak to this promise, the greater truth lays farther in the future, after Messiah returns and ushers in the Millennial Kingdom. Israel will rebuild her ruined cities, even those buried beneath the rubble of antiquity. The nation will be so revered that

“strangers” and “foreigners” will assist with farming and shepherding. Every Jew will know the Lord and, as a nation of priests, will deal personally with Him and even mediate on behalf of others. This was to be one of Israel’s ministries in the world (Ex. 19:6), but unfortunately she fell short and today awaits the empowerment by the Messiah to fulfill this ancient duty – one which the church will share (Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

The wealth of nations will come to Israel (see also Isa. 60:5, 11). But even more important, the Lord, seeing that Israel’s shame is “double,” will bless the nation with a double portion (v. 7). The “double” refers to the inheritance the first-born son in a family receives from his father’s estate (Deut. 21:17). Just as the eldest son is given special honor, Israel, as the Lord’s firstborn (Ex. 4:22), will be exalted among the nations, resulting in “eternal joy.”

“I will faithfully reward them,” Yahweh promises in verse 8, “and make an everlasting covenant with them.” This is the New Covenant spoken of by Jeremiah (32:40), Ezekiel (16:60; 37:26) and the writer of Hebrews (13:20). It’s also the covenant Jesus established through His blood (Matt. 26:28). Salvation is of the Jews (John 4:22) but offered freely to all (John 3:16; 5:24). In these ways – God’s blessing the nation of Israel and sending His Son, a Jew, to bear the sins of many – “[a]ll who see them [the Jews] will recognize that they are a people the Lord has blessed” (v. 9).

Some may see these verses as relegating the Gentiles to perpetual servility, but such a view mistakes metaphor for fact, according to D.A. Carson, who writes. “Under the figure of a priestly Israel served by foreigners (5–6) and enriched by its former plunderers (7–8), the reality is the people of God (whose status is not national; cf. 1 Pet. 2:10; Rev. 7:9), vindicated and enjoying their full inheritance as kings and priests (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6), while the pride of man is humbled and his power harnessed” (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, S. Is 61:5). There is no doubt that Christ’s finished work at Calvary, and the ensuing work of the Holy Spirit, make Jews and Gentiles alike joint-heirs with Jesus of God’s kingdom (Rom. 8:14-17).

A Remnant Rejoicing (Isa. 61:10-11)

Notice two metaphors for righteousness in these verses. First, “the garments of salvation.” The prophet exults that the Lord “has clothed me with the garments of salvation and wrapped me in a robe of righteousness” (v. 10). This image is carried into the New Testament to depict the justification of believing sinners, who are clothed in the righteousness of Christ (see, for example, Rev. 3:5; 7; 19:14; and note the parable of the wedding banquet in Matt. 22:1-14, in which a wedding guest is cast out for refusal to put on the appropriate attire provided by the king, symbolic Christ’s righteousness). Isaiah also makes reference to the turban worn by the high priest and the jewels worn by a bride – garments of special meaning that are worn with great joy. “Such is the beauty of God’s grace in those that are clothed with the robe of righteousness, that by the righteousness of Christ are recommended to God’s favour and by the sanctification of the Spirit have God’s image renewed upon them; they are decked as a bride to be espoused to God, and taken into covenant with him; they are decked as a priest to be employed for God, and taken into communion with him” (Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 61:10).

The second metaphor Isaiah uses for righteousness is growing plant life. “For as the earth brings forth its growth, and as a garden enables what is sown to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations,” he writes in verse 11. Just as God’s common grace – which includes seed, soil, water and sun – causes crops to spring up and sustain His creatures, so His saving grace will cause the believing Jewish remnant to proclaim righteousness and praise to all the nations. This promise is for the church as well. “Though it may sometimes be winter with the church, when those blessings seem to wither and do not appear, yet the root of them is fixed, a spring-time will come, when through the reviving beams of the approaching Sun of righteousness they shall flourish again” (Matthew Henry, S. Is. 61:10).

Closing Thought

Warren Wiersbe writes: “The background of this passage is the ‘Year of Jubilee’ described in Leviticus 25:7ff. Every seven years, the Jews were to observe a ‘sabbatical year’ and allow the land to rest. After seven sabbaticals, or forty-nine years, they were to celebrate the fiftieth year as the ‘Year of Jubilee.’ During that year, all debts were canceled, all land was returned to the original owners, the slaves were freed, and everybody was given a fresh new beginning. This was the Lord’s way of balancing the economy and keeping the rich from exploiting the poor. If you have trusted Christ as your Savior, you are living today in a spiritual ‘Year of Jubilee.’ You have been set free from bondage; your spiritual debt to the Lord has been paid; you are living in ‘the acceptable year of the Lord.’ Instead of the ashes of mourning, you have a crown on your head; for He has made you a king (Rev. 1:6). You have been anointed with the oil of the Holy Spirit, and you wear a garment of righteousness (Isa. 61:3, 10)” (*Be Comforted [An Old Testament Study]*, S. Is 61:1).

Chapter 62: The Lord's Delight

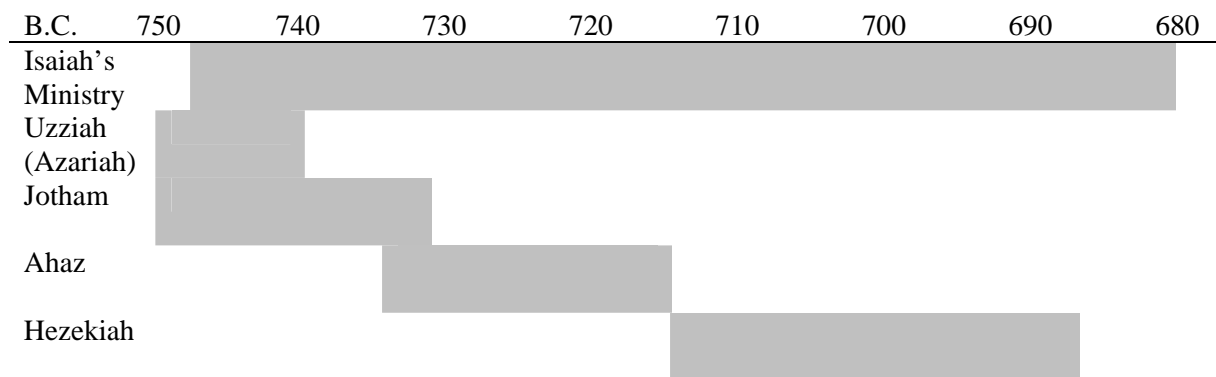
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 62 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verses:

Isa. 62:4-5 – You will no longer be called Deserted, and your land will not be called Desolate; instead, you will be called My Delight is in Her, and your land Married, for the Lord delights in you, and your land will be married. For as a young man marries a virgin, so your sons will marry you; and as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so your God will rejoice over you.

Quick summary:

The Lord promises to keep speaking and working until His purposes for Jerusalem are fulfilled. Although He has forsaken Israel because of her sin, He will restore the nation and redeem a faithful remnant. The people will throw off the disparaging names by which they are called and receive new names that testify to the world of God's special relationship with the Jews. Unlike the corrupt leaders of the present day, new and faithful watchmen will be given to Jerusalem. They will constantly remind the Lord of His promises and delight is seeing their fulfillment. God promises the Jews they will never again lose their harvests to enemies but will enjoy the fruit of their labors in the shadow of His sanctuary. Finally, there is an urgent cry to "build up the highway" and "raise a banner for the peoples" because the Lord's coming is imminent (v. 10).

Take note:

Isaiah likens Jerusalem's future relationship with Yahweh to a marriage. Rather than being called Deserted or Desolate – names that accurately describe the city in the depths of judgment – Jerusalem will be named Hephzibah (“My Delight is in Her”) and Beulah (“Married One”). When a bride marries, she receives a new name. Even though Israel already is married to Yahweh, He will give her new names that describe her spiritual renewal and depict the Lord's profound joy in her. Verse 5b reads: “... as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so your God will rejoice over you.” This description of Yahweh's special relationship with the redeemed of Israel complements the relationship Christ, the bridegroom, has with His bride, the church. Together, Jew and Gentile believers will share in a glorious and everlasting relationship with God.

Zion's Bridal Beauty (Isa. 62:1-5)

The Lord speaks in these verses, declaring that He will continue to work on Jerusalem's behalf until the nations observe her righteousness, salvation and glory, and the city is called by a new name. In the ancient Near East, names often signified character. So God's promise to call Jerusalem by a new name includes giving her a new and righteous character. The city will be like a glorious crown in the Lord's hand, or a diadem – a large medal ring – on His head, signifying that one day it will become a dazzling adornment. Since a crown is worn on the head and not the hand, “in the Lord's hand” may be figurative for “under the Lord's protection” (see Deut. 33:3). Jerusalem will display God's splendor, meaning it will manifest His character in the people's conduct. What a comforting promise this must be to those who, having survived an Assyrian siege, now await attack and exile at the hands of the Babylonians. The Lord punishes for a purpose. He is not finished with His people or His city. And future generations will bask in His glory.

“The city's new relationship with God is compared to the happiness of a marriage. Rather than being called Deserted (cf. 62:12) or Desolate, previous characteristics of the city, Jerusalem will be named Hephzibah (‘My delight is in her’) and Beulah (‘Married one’). The words *so will your sons marry you* (Jerusalem) imply that people again will live in Jerusalem and God will be happy about the wonderful state of affairs” (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1117). Hephzibah is the name of Hezekiah's wife, who may be seen as a type of Jerusalem, just as Hezekiah may be seen as a type of the Messiah. The contrast between the present and future “married” state of Zion may also be seen in Isa. 54:4-6 and Rev. 21:2, 4.

Watchmen on the Walls (Isa. 62:6-7)

In Isaiah's day watchmen are stationed on city walls, often in towers, looking out for approaching enemies – or messengers bearing good news. They are never to sleep on duty and their eyes are to be fixed on the horizon. The watches in the East are even announced by a loud cry to mark the vigilance of the watchmen. If they slumber, or even become distracted, enemies may breach the wall and take the city, or good tidings may be delayed. In a similar fashion, the

righteous people of Israel are to be alert on Jerusalem's behalf. They are to watch, not only for those who oppose the Lord, but for the Lord Himself, who has promised to bless His people, their land and their great city. In fact, they are implored to give neither themselves nor God any rest until He fulfills His promise to establish Jerusalem and make her the praise of the earth. "The 'watchmen' were to hold God to His promises, knowing that is what He desires. God's people should pray for things even when they know God has promised them. Jesus made this clear when He taught His disciples to pray that the kingdom will come" (Walvoord and Zuck, S. 1:1117). Today it is still appropriate for God's people to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Ps. 122:6).

The Lord's Promise (Isa. 62:8-9)

God promises His people they will never again lose their harvests to foreign invaders but will enjoy the fruit of their labors in the courts of His sanctuary. The "right hand" by which the Lord has sworn assures them – and us – that He will accomplish all He has spoken. Isaiah records a similar message of assurance in Isa. 45:23: "By Myself I have sworn; Truth has gone from My mouth, a word that will not be revoked; Every knee will bow to Me, every tongue will swear allegiance" (see also Phil. 2:10-11). And the writer of Hebrews makes it clear that God swears by Himself because there is no one greater: "For when God made a promise to Abraham, since He had no one greater to swear by, He swore by Himself" (Heb. 6:13).

The Jews will consume their bountiful harvests with thanksgiving, mindful that the Lord has provided peace and prosperity for them. At the same time, they will drink new wine from their vineyards in the feasts held in the courts surrounding the temple, as God has instructed them: "You are to eat a tenth of your grain, new wine, and oil, and the firstborn of your herd and flock, in the presence of the Lord your God at the place where He chooses to have His name dwell, so that you will always learn to fear the Lord your God" (Deut. 14:23). "The greatest comfort that a good man has in his meat and drink is that it furnishes him with a meat-offering and a drink-offering for the Lord his God (Joel 2:14); the greatest comfort that he has in an estate is that it gives him an opportunity of honouring God and doing good" (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 62:6).

Salvation is Coming (Isa. 62:10-12)

The final verses of this chapter are written as if the Lord is on His way. There is great urgency in the message that God's people should be ready, and should prepare the way for all believers to enter the once-deserted city of Jerusalem. The command to "build up the highway" and "clear away the stones" (v. 10) speaks metaphorically of the Jews' spiritual preparation for the Messiah and the brotherhood they will enjoy with Gentile believers. To "raise a banner for the peoples" (v. 10) is to announce to the world that Messiah is coming to Jerusalem.

The Lord gives the people of the city new names: the Holy People, the Lord's Redeemed, and Cared For. These names speak of Israel's new character after the people's hearts are turned back to God. Gentiles will be drawn there, and Jerusalem will be called A City Not Deserted (v. 12).

There are some interesting New Testament parallels to the words of the Lord Isaiah records in verse 11:

- “*Say to Daughter Zion, Look, your salvation is coming.*” John the Baptist is sent as the forerunner of Messiah, in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy (Matt. 3:1-3). Jesus of Nazareth is a Jew who comes to the Jews and proclaims salvation first to them. He commissions His 12 disciples and sends them to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:6). He tells a Gentile woman, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 15:24). And He tells the Samaritan woman at the well that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). While this does not exclude Gentiles from God’s redemptive work, it underscores God’s plan to bring salvation to the world through the Jews as God Himself becomes flesh in a Jewish Messiah (John 1:14).
- “*His reward is with Him.*” Jesus begins His earthly ministry by telling His disciples to rejoice when they’re persecuted because “your reward is great in heaven” (Matt. 5:12). And the apostle John, foreseeing Christ’s return, records the words of Jesus, “Look! I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me to repay each person according to what he has done” (Rev. 22:12).
- “*... and His recompense is before Him.*” The New Testament clearly teaches the future resurrection and judgment of all people, resulting in punishment for unbelievers (Rev. 20:11-15) and rewards for believers (Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 3:11-15).

Closing Thought

Warren Wiersbe writes: “God will have no rest till He accomplishes His purposes for His people, and the world will have no peace till He succeeds. He asks us to ‘give Him no rest’ (v. 7) but to intercede for Israel and Jerusalem, for the prayers of His people are an important part of the program of God” (*Be Comforted*, An Old Testament Study, S. Is 62:1).

Chapter 63: Look Down from Heaven

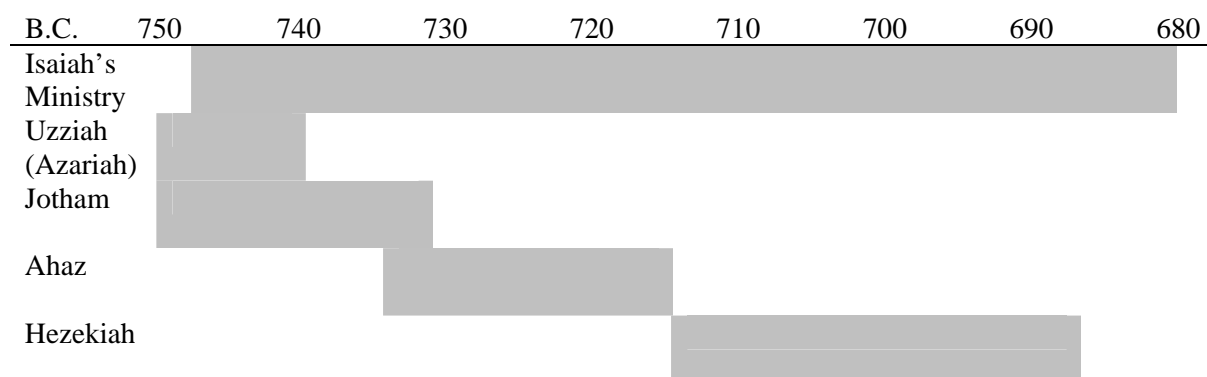
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 63 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory. This chapter in particular previews Messiah's coming to judge Israel's enemies.



Key verses:

Isa. 63:15-16 – Look down from heaven and see from your lofty home – holy and beautiful. Where is Your zeal and Your might? Your yearning and Your compassion are withheld from me. Yet You are our Father, even though Abraham does not know us and Israel doesn't recognize us. You, Lord, are our Father; from ancient time, Your name is our Redeemer.

Quick summary:

H.L. Willmington writes: "As a blood-soaked warrior approached, a watchman asked his identity. He identified himself as the one who all alone had conquered Israel's foes and was ready to redeem his people (63:1-6). Isaiah responded with praise for the God who throughout history had shown grace toward his people, no matter how often they rebelled against him (63:7-9). When he recalled the Exodus, however, Isaiah wondered why God had not yet delivered his people once again (63:11-17), and begged him to do so quickly (63:17-19).... 63:1-6 can be seen as foreshadowing Christ's second coming and victory at Armageddon (see Rev. 14:18-20; 19:11-21)" (*Willmington's Bible Handbook*, Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, S. 374).

Take note:

When the Lord comes (or returns, from a New Testament perspective), He is asked two questions: Who is this? And, why is Your clothing red? He answers the first question in verse 1, “It is I, proclaiming vindication (or righteousness).” Just as the Lord reveals Himself to Moses at the burning bush as “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14), Jesus proclaims His deity by identifying Himself to the woman at the well as “I am” (John 4:26) and to the Jewish religious leaders by declaring, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). The Lord of Isaiah 63 is the same Lord of all Scripture, establishing the truths of the Trinity and the deity of the Messiah.

The Lord answers the second question, as to why His clothing is red, “I trampled the winepress alone ... I trampled them [the nations] in My anger ... their blood spattered My garments” (v. 3). Just as juice from freshly pressed grapes will stain the garments of the vintner, so Messiah’s robes will be covered in blood when He returns to judge the nations. Zechariah foresees this day as well (Zech. 14:3), as does the apostle John (Rev. 14:19-20; 19:11-21).

The Day of Vengeance (Isa. 63:1-6)

This chapter begins with a graphic image of the Messiah approaching Jerusalem, having avenged Himself and His people of their common enemies as symbolized by Edom. His garments are spattered with blood, much as a vintner’s robes are stained from the grapes he has trampled, yet the Messiah is neither injured nor weary. In fact, He is “splendid in His apparel, rising up proudly in His great might” (v. 1). Edom is the wicked nation southeast of Israel that often opposes God’s people and therefore is under God’s wrath (see Mal. 1:4). Bozrah is a city in Edom and its name means “grape gathering.” The Lord’s clothing is red (*adom*), a Hebrew word-play on Edom. Isaiah already has identified Edom and Bozrah as typical of the impenitent world (Isa. 34:6). The imagery is clear: As a vintner crushes the harvested grapes beneath his feet, the Messiah will crush His enemies.

The ancient wine press is a large hollowed rock into which grapes are placed for people to trample. The juice runs out of a hole in the rock and is captured in vessels beneath it. As the people crush the grapes, no doubt some of the juice stains their clothing. In a similar fashion, when the Messiah crushes His enemies, His robes will be stained with their blood (Rev. 19:13). Having rejected the blood of the Lamb as payment for their sins, those who oppose the Messiah at His return will have their blood shed. They truly will die in their sins (John 8:24).

Warren Wiersbe comments: “When Jesus came to earth the first time, it was to inaugurate ‘the acceptable year of the Lord’ (Isa. 61:2; Luke 4:19). When He comes the second time, it will be to climax ‘the day of vengeance of our God’ (Isa. 63:4; 61:2). The enemy will be crushed like grapes and forced to drink their own blood from the cup of God’s wrath (51:17; Jer. 25:15–16). These images may not appeal to sophisticated people today, but the Jews in that day fully understood them” (*Be Comforted*, An Old Testament Study, S. Is 63:1).

As a side note, this passage of Scripture is the background for the Civil War’s most famous song, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” according to Lawrence O. Richards in *The Bible Readers Companion*.

God's Mercies Remembered (Isa. 63:7-14)

Before stating their two requests – that God be compassionate toward them (vv. 15-19) and that He punish their enemies (64:1-7), the righteous remnant declares the Lord's faithful love and praiseworthy acts (v. 7). While Isaiah exalts the Lord for all He has done, the Lord claims the remnant as His own and even identifies with their suffering (v. 8). This divine empathy is expressed elsewhere in Scripture, for example:

- Isa. 53:3-6 – He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering who knew what sickness was. He was like one people turned away from; He was despised, and we didn't value Him. Yet He Himself bore our sicknesses, and He carried our pains; but we in turn regarded Him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But He was pierced because of our transgressions, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on Him, and we are healed by His wounds. We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished Him for the iniquity of us all.
- Mark 8:31 – Then He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be killed, and rise after three days.
- Acts 3:18 - But what God predicted through the mouth of all the prophets—that His Messiah would suffer—He has fulfilled in this way.

The name “Angel of His Presence” (v. 9) literally means “Angel of His face,” or the One who stands continually before the Lord. Most likely this is a reference to the Angel of the Lord, or as many commentators believe, the pre-incarnate Messiah.

In verses 10-14 Isaiah reminds his fellow citizens of the post-wilderness rebellions of Israel for which they were chastened but not cut off. Even though God's people reject the Lord, He remains faithful to His covenant promises to them. There is strong emphasis on the deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit in these verses. The Holy Spirit is grieved by the rebellious Israelites (v. 10), present among the flock (v. 11), and the One who, like a gentle farmer leading his cattle into a valley, gives His people rest (v. 14).

A Forlorn Family (Isa. 63:15-19)

The Jews in Babylonian exile will plead with the Lord to look down from His “lofty home” at their plight in the same way He looked down on the people in Egypt in Moses' day. They will long for a display of His zeal, strength and compassion. The people will wonder why His “yearning” – literally the agitation of His inward parts, or the emotions that spring from compassion – is withheld from them. Even though they have drifted far away from the faithful paths of Abraham and Jacob, God is still their Father and Redeemer. In exile, the people will realize that though they have belonged to God for centuries, they have not been in a proper relationship with Him, nor have they humbly submitted to His theocratic rule. Penitently, the people will ask the Lord to return them to Him while reminding Him that their place of worship, the temple, has been destroyed.

The people ask an odd question in verse 17: “Why, Lord, do you *make* us stray from Your ways?” (emphasis added). Further, they state, “You harden our hearts ...” Are the Jews in exile blaming God for their sin and its consequences? Is there any truth to their complaint? And if so, how can they – or any of us – be held responsible for our rebellion against God? One commentary explains it this way: “They do not mean to deny their own blameworthiness, but confess that through their own fault God gave them over to a reprobate mind (Is 6:9, 10; Ps 119:10; Ro 1:28)” (Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. Is 63:17). D.A. Carson adds, “God is not to blame for their spiritual plight; it stems from their own dalliance with evil” (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, S. Is 63:15). While God certainly chooses servants like Jeremiah from their mothers’ wombs, and determines centuries in advance the leaders who will alter human history (Cyrus, for example), He is not the author of evil, nor does He tempt people with evil (James 1:13-14). Further, He does not direct people’s thoughts, words and deeds in such a way that frees them of their personal responsibility to repent, believe and follow Him. The sovereignty of God and responsibility of men and women is a mysterious biblical doctrine whose difficulty makes it no less true.

Matthew Henry shares this insight: “*Why hast thou made us to err from thy ways ...* Those are wicked indeed that lay the blame of their wickedness upon God. But I rather take it to be the language of those among them that lamented the unbelief and impenitence of their people, not accusing God of being the author of their wickedness, but complaining of it to him.... When they ask, *Why hast thou done this?* it is not as charging him with wrong, but lamenting it as a sore judgment.... God had *caused them to err and hardened their hearts*, not only by withdrawing his Spirit from them, because they had grieved, and vexed, and quenched him (v. 10), but by a judicial sentence upon them (*Go, make the heart of this people fat*, ch. 6:9, 10) and by his providences concerning them, which had proved sad occasions for their departure from him.... Convinced consciences complain most of spiritual judgments and dread that most in an affliction which draws them from God and duty” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 63:15).

Closing Thought

The chapter ends with the people of God surrendering to Him at last. J. Vernon McGee writes: “This should be the attitude of the Christian today – complete yielding to God. Most of us are afraid to yield to God because we are afraid He will be hard on us. God wants to be gentle with us if we will give Him a chance. But remember that He also is the God of judgment. He is the One who is coming to earth some day to tread the winepress of the fierceness of His wrath. God is not trying to frighten you; He is just telling you the truth” (*Isaiah: Volume II*, p. 186).

Chapter 64: Tear the Heavens Open

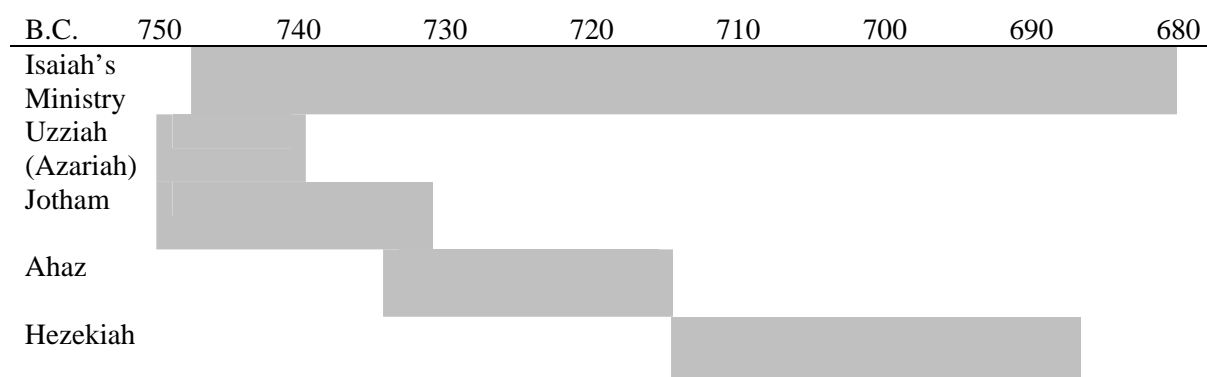
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 64 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verse:

Isa. 64:4 – From ancient times no one has heard, no one has listened, no eye has seen any God except You, who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him.

Quick summary:

Isaiah continues His plea for God to act, in language that foreshadows Messiah's glorious appearance. When Christ returns, the earth will quake, similar to the shaking of Mt. Sinai at the giving of the law. Isaiah's reference to fire also links these two events (see Ex. 19:18, 24:7; Isa. 2:5 – 4:1; Heb. 12:18-29). Isaiah confesses that the Holy One of Israel cannot tolerate the people's sins, which have gone on far too long, yet He calls upon the Lord in faith to forgive and restore.

Take note:

Verse 6 is an often-quoted passage that describes the depravity of the human heart and the inability of people to be reconciled to God through their own efforts. Isaiah laments that "all of our righteous acts are like a polluted garment" – literally, like an unclean menstrual cloth. "[A]ll

of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities carry us away like the wind.” Paul echoes this truth, stringing together a number of Old Testament passages when he writes, “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away ... there is no one who does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10-12). But the apostle’s point is not to drive us to despair; it is to direct us to Christ, in whose righteousness we are clothed: “Because of Him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them filth, so that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ – the righteousness from God based on faith” (Phil. 3:8-9). Continue here ...

The Remnant’s Plea (Isa. 64:1-7)

Convinced of their uncleanness before a pure and holy God, the people realize their desperate state and ask the Lord to rend the heavens like a piece of cloth, come down and execute judgment on Judah’s enemies. Fire and boiling water symbolize God’s judgment here, as in other passages of Scripture (see, for example, Jer. 1:13-14; Mal. 4:1). The Lord’s “awesome deeds” in verse 3 likely refer to the fire, darkness and earthquake that accompanied His giving of the law on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:16-19; Deut. 4:11-13). This same God – the only true God – acts on behalf of those who trust in Him. “Recalling this, the remnant would ask that God work on *their* behalf. They would confess their sin, spiritual uncleanness, weakness (like a shriveled leaf), and lack of prayer. However, they would not blame God for their dreadful condition; they would know that their wasting away was because of their sins. Therefore they would have to count on God’s faithfulness and promises” (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1119).

Verse 4 states: “From ancient times no one has heard, no one has listened, no eye has seen any God except You, who acts on behalf of those who wait for Him.” The apostle Paul picks up on this ancient truth in 1 Cor. 2:9 to make the point that while all people may hear God’s Word with their ears, it is only by the Holy Spirit that the heart receives the eternal truths of God’s gracious and mighty deeds, whether they concern Israel, as Isaiah reports, or the Gospel, to which Paul refers.

“Why is God not working wonders?” asks Warren Wiersbe. “They have sinned (Isa. 64:5–6) and must confess their sins and turn from them. If our *righteousness* is filthy, what must our *sins* look like in His sight! According to verse 4, God has planned for His people wonderful things beyond their imagination; but their sins prevent Him from sharing His blessings. Is there any hope? Yes, because God is a forgiving Father and a patient Potter (Jer. 18). He can cleanse us and make us anew if we will let Him have His way” (*Be Comforted*, An Old Testament Study, S. Is 63:1).

These verses contain a complete though brief description of the impact of sin on human beings, according to Lawrence O. Richards:

- First, sin is habit-forming. We continue to sin against God’s ways (v. 5).
- Second, sin rightly arouses the anger of God and directs it against us (v. 5).
- Third, sin is defiling, making it impossible for us to approach Him (v. 6).

- Fourth, sin so corrupts our character that even the best we can do is fouled by base motives (v. 6).
- Fifth, sin is destructive, shriveling us up from within and creating circumstances that sweep us away (v. 6).
- Sixth, sin alienates us from God, creating a distaste for the Lord that keeps us from calling on His name (v. 7).
- Seventh, sin causes God to hide His face from us and to judge us (v. 7).

“In view of all that sin has done to us, it is no wonder Isaiah cries out, ‘How then can we be saved?’ The answer is in verse 8” (*The Bible Readers Companion*, electronic ed., S. 444).

The Potter’s Hand (Isa. 64:8-12)

The final words of the righteous remnant’s prayer express trust in the Lord, who is confessed as Father and Potter and whose will is received with complete submission. The humbled believers are depicted as obedient children and soft clay, entrusting their lives and future to the sovereign hand of the Holy One of Israel. They plead with the Lord to withhold His anger, righteous though it is, and to extend mercy to them as His children. They remind Him that Judah’s cities have been destroyed – possible the phrase “holy cities” is a reference to upper and lower Jerusalem – and the temple has been burned to the ground. They lament, “... all that was dear to us lies in ruins” (v. 11). Therefore, the people ask the Lord to break His silence and do something about their plight. Their appeal for forgiveness and restoration is based solely on God’s grace.

The people’s lament in verse 11 is double edged. The “holy and beautiful temple” is where “our fathers praised you.” Is Isaiah reminding God of Israel’s glorious past, or confessing that his own generation has fallen so deeply into sin that worship has become cold and mechanical? Perhaps a little of both. Even so, the prophet expresses trust that the Lord will be faithful to His covenant with the people and, after severely chastening them, will restore them and their place of worship. “They interest God in the cause when they plead that it was the house where *he had been praised*, and put him in mind too of his covenant with their fathers by taking notice of their fathers’ praising him,” notes Matthew Henry. “Observe here how God and his people have their interest twisted and interchanged; when they speak of the cities for their own habitation they call them *thy holy cities*, for to God they were dedicated; when they speak of the temple wherein God dwelt they call it *our beautiful house* and its furniture *our pleasant things*, for they had heartily espoused it and all the interests of it. If thus we interest God in all our concerns by devoting them to his service, and interest ourselves in all his concerns by laying them near our hearts, we may with satisfaction leave both with him, for he will perfect both” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 64:6)

Closing Thought

We are challenged to pray as Isaiah did, with humility, candor, boldness and trust. Matthew Henry writes: “Those that would take hold of God in prayer so as to prevail with him must stir up themselves to do it; all that is within us must be employed in the duty ... our thoughts fixed and our affections flaming. In order hereunto all that is within us must be engaged and summoned into the service; we must *stir up the gift that is in us* by an actual consideration of the importance of the work that is before us and a close application of mind to it; but how can we expect that God should come to us in ways of mercy when there are none that do this, when those that profess to be intercessors are mere triflers?” (S. Is 64:6)

Chapter 65: New Heaven and Earth

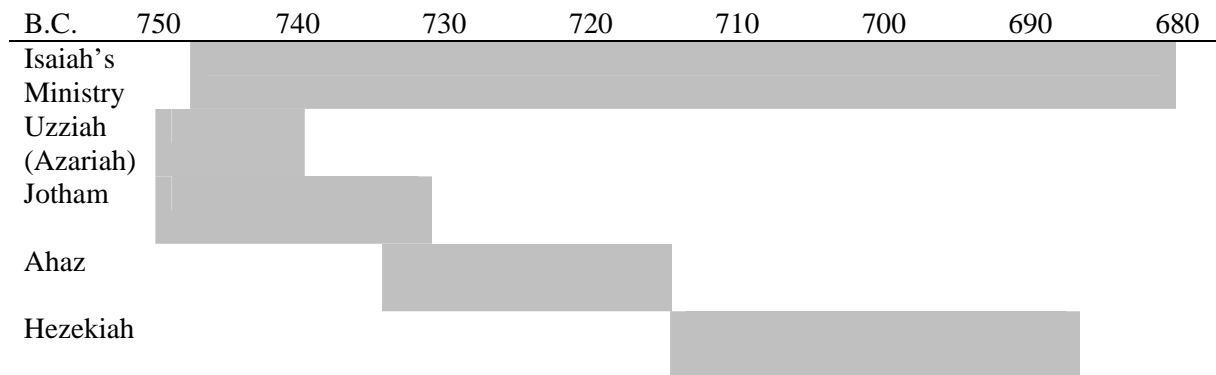
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 65 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah's immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verse:

Isa. 65:17 – For I will create a new heaven and a new earth; the past events will not be remembered or come to mind.

Quick summary:

Many non-Israelites are seeking God, while His own people rebel against Him. The Lord will punish His people but preserve a remnant, which will experience great happiness. Looking further into the future, Isaiah records the promise of God to create new heavens and a new earth. The present age, with its sin, sickness and death, will be forgotten forever.

Take note:

Verse 17 of this chapter, along with Isa.66:22 and Rev. 21:1 – 22:5, speak of new heavens and a new earth. Some aspects of chapters 65-66 seem to have in view a time when sin and all its effects are reversed. However, Isa. 65:20 suggests that death is not completely destroyed, leading some scholars to conclude that this chapter refers instead to the Millennium, a 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth that precedes the final judgment of Satan, demons and wicked people and, of course, the creation of new heavens and a new earth.

Provoking God (Isa. 65:1-16)

The Holy One of Israel has reached out continuously to His people, even to those who have not sought Him. He has cried out, “Here I am, here I am” (v.1) and spread out His hands (v. 2). The apostle Paul quotes verses 1-2 in Rom. 10:20-21 to show that the people of Israel heard God’s message yet continued in their rebellion, walking the wrong path and following their own thoughts. Rather than responding in repentance toward Yahweh who loves them, they provoke the Lord to His face in a number of ways:

- Sacrificing in gardens – that is, worshipping in pagan places (Isa. 1:29; 66:17)
- Burning incense on bricks – worshipping at pagan altars and disregarding God’s command to make altars of unhewn stone so as to separate themselves from idolaters (Ex. 20:25)
- Spending nights in secret places – consulting the dead while sitting among the graves (Isa. 8:19)
- Eating swine’s flesh, and putting polluted broth in their bowls – disregarding the Jewish dietary laws (Lev. 11:7; Isa. 66:3)
- Saying to one another, “Keep to yourself, don’t come near me, for I am too holy for you!” – hypocritically justifying themselves as more religious than their fellow countrymen (see Matt. 9:11; Luke 5:30, 18:11; Jude 19)

All of these practices are as irritating to the Lord as the smoke of day-long fires in a person’s nostrils. In response, the Lord will not keep silent; He will repay. “The Assyrian threat (Isa. 1-37) and the Babylonian Exile (chaps. 38-66) were two of the ways the Lord disciplined His people. The consequences of sin had to be faced; God would pay them back in judgment for their idolatrous worship in high places (cf. 57:7)” (John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, S. 1:1119).

Although judgment is pronounced on the entire nation, the Lord will spare a righteous remnant. Just as a few grapes are left when the vineyards are gleaned (Deut. 24:21), so a small number of those faithful to the Lord will return to the land and possess it. Sharon (v. 10), the coastal plain south of Mt. Carmel, is excellent for agriculture, and the Valley of Achor, west of Jericho, is know for its sheep herding.

The Lord has never left Himself without witness among the world’s people. In the days before the flood, Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6:8). Elijah is the only remaining prophet of the Lord in Israel in his day (1 Kings 18:22). And even in the dark days before Messiah’s return, God will seal faithful witnesses (Rev. 7:4). In contrast to the claims of Muslims that Judaism and Christianity are corrupt forms of monotheism, and contrary to the claim of Mormon founder Joseph Smith that the whole of Christendom fell into apostasy after the death of the apostles, God is faithful to preserve His message by providing truthful messengers, although they may be few in number.

In verses 11-12, the Lord warns those who abandon Him that they will come to a tragic end. Fortune and Destiny (v. 11) are the names of pagan gods worshiped by the Israelites in their efforts to discern the future. So the Lord tells them plainly what will happen: They will die by the sword because they refuse to listen and persist in evil.

Verses 13-16 contrast the Lord's servants with those who have departed from Him. The faithful will eat, drink, rejoice, and shout for joy from a glad heart, while the wicked will be hungry, thirsty, and put to shame. Further, those who abandon the Lord will cry out from an anguished heart, lament out of a broken spirit, and ultimately be killed. The faithful are promised a new name – that is, they “shall no longer be ‘forsaken’ of God for unbelief, but shall be His ‘delight’ and ‘married’ to Him (Is 62:2, 4)” (Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, S. Is 65:15). Finally, God promises to graciously forget their sins.

A New Creation (Isa. 65:17-25)

The final verses of this chapter present great promises – and pose great interpretive challenges. God's people are promised new heavens and a new earth, a pledge repeated in 2 Peter 3:13 and Rev. 21:1. In addition, they are promised a New Jerusalem, where the redeemed will live securely, enjoy the fruit of their labors, and live a long time. In contrast to military defeat and exile, the Israelites will be “a people blessed by the Lord along with their descendents” (v. 23), and their prayers will be answered even before they are expressed. While they enjoy abundant food, good health, safety and happiness, Satan's food will be dust (v. 25).

These are wonderful promises. Yet they do not describe a world completely purged of sin and its consequences. Verse 20, for example, tells us that an old man will “live out his days,” implying that eventually he will die. A 100-year-old person is to be considered a youth, and the one who doesn't live that long is “cursed.” Meanwhile, the serpent is still around, and while evil and destruction are banned from God's “holy mountain,” one might conclude they are present elsewhere on earth (v. 25).

What are we to make of this confusing picture? Are we not urged to look forward to a day when God will wipe every tear from our eyes; when death will exist no longer; when all grief, crying and pain are banished as the “former things” (Rev. 21:4)? Then why does Isaiah describe a future day when the redeemed enjoy a vastly improved, but still imperfect, lives?

Commentators generally respond in two ways. Some take the passage *literally*, understanding Isaiah to be describing conditions in the millennium, a 1,000-year reign of Messiah on earth that precedes final judgment and the creation of new heavens and a new earth. This view is consistent with a literal rendering of Rev. 20, which describes Satan as bound for 1,000 years while the followers of Jesus reign with Him on earth. At the end of the millennium, Satan is loosed for a short time to deceive the nations, then is defeated and cast into hell. Joining him in the lake of fire are unbelievers, following their resurrection and judgment before the great white throne. With Satan, demons and unbelievers consigned for eternity to hell, God purges the created order of sin and its consequences, resulting in new heavens and a new earth.

Other commentators, however, read Isa. 65 *figuratively*, understanding references to the sinner (v. 20) and the serpent (v. 25) as promises of judgment and victory. Those who hold this view also tend to see Rev. 20 in symbolic terms, describing Christ's ultimate victory over Satan, sin and death. “The wicked will no longer flourish, nor the strong prey on the weak, nor the

tempter escape his sentence (cf. v 25 with Gn. 3:14–15), in the perfect world to come. But all this is expressed freely, locally and pictorially, to kindle hope rather than feed curiosity.... [T]his is brought to pass not by a bare creative fiat, but through the Messianic king” (D.A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, S. Is 65:17).

Lawrence O. Richards shares a comforting thought: “However students of prophecy sort these elements out, it is clear from Isaiah’s warm and comforting description of God that a real transformation of man’s state and nature lies ahead. Sin’s curse is lifted, lifespan is extended, and peace is brought even to the animal kingdom. All that is wrong on earth will be set right. When you read prophecies of doom – an atomic holocaust, a greenhouse effect that will melt the ice caps and cause the oceans to overflow our cities, a new Ice Age that will destroy life on earth – do not fear. The real destiny of earth is described by Isaiah here” (*The Bible Readers Companion*, electronic ed., S. 445).

Closing Thought

Considering the present life and longevity of the unsaved, Matthew Henry writes: “Unbelievers shall be unsatisfied and unhappy in life, though it be ever so long. The sinner, though he live to *a hundred years old, shall be accursed*. His living so long shall be no token to him of the divine favour and blessing, nor shall it be any shelter to him from the divine wrath and curse. The sentence he lies under will certainly be executed, and his long life is but a long reprieve; nay, it is itself a curse to him, for the longer he lives the more wrath he treasures up against the day of wrath and the more sins he will have to answer for. So that the matter is not great whether our lives on earth be long or short, but whether we live the lives of saints or the lives of sinners” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, S. Is 65:17).

Chapter 66: Restoration and Retribution

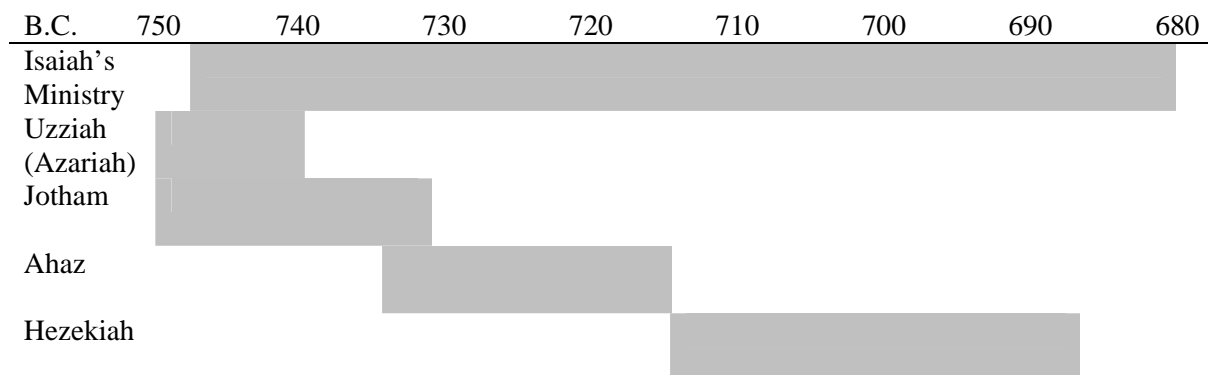
Prologue

Where we are:

Part 1: Judgment	Part 2: Historical Interlude	Part 3: Salvation
Chapters 1-35	Chapters 36-39	Chapters 40-66

When this takes place:

Chapter 66 is part of the second major section of Isaiah and deals less with Judah’s immediate plight than with its future deliverance from Babylonian exile and ultimate glory.



Key verses

Isa. 66:14-16 – You will see, you will rejoice, and you will flourish like grass; then the LORD’s power will be revealed to His servants, but He will show His wrath against His enemies. Look, the LORD will come with fire – His chariots are like the whirlwind – to execute His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire. For the LORD will execute judgment on all flesh with His fiery sword, and many will be slain by the LORD.

Quick summary:

“[M]en can look forward to the future with fear and with hope. God, the Creator, extends the offer of fellowship to the humble who are responsive to His Word (66:1–6). Zion is told to rejoice, confident that all her troubles are but birth pangs, and soon she will give birth to a glorious future (vv. 7–11). God will bless His land with peace and comfort His children in the day He executes judgment on sin (vv. 12–16). This book of powerful poetry ends in prose. God pledges that all mankind as well as the Jewish people will find Him at history’s end. The new heavens and the new earth He makes will endure. But the bodies of those who rebelled against the Lord will be scattered over old earth’s deadened lands (vv. 17–24)” (Lawrence O. Richards, *The Bible Readers Companion*, electronic ed., S. 445).

Take note:

Jesus quotes the concluding verse of Isaiah (66:24) in Mark 9:43-48 to contrast the final state of the redeemed with that of the lost. The prophet ends his book with these words: “As they [worshippers of God in the age to come] leave, they will see the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against Me; for their maggots will never die, their fire will never go out, and they will be a horror to all mankind.” Seven hundred years later, Jesus quotes this passage to warn His listeners that there are everlasting consequences for rejecting Him. He urges them not to let anything keep them from “life” or “the kingdom of God.” Yet, just as many people reject Isaiah’s call to repentance, many in Jesus’ day – and even today – reject His invitation to life and thus will find themselves in “hell – the unquenchable fire” (Mark 9:43).

God’s Throne and Footstool (Isa. 66:1-2)

The Lord is depicted figuratively as sitting on a throne, with the earth as His footstool. Jesus borrows this imagery in the Sermon on the Mount, instructing His disciples to speak truthfully – with a simple yes or no – and resist the contemporary trend to swear by heaven and earth (Matt. 5:33-37). Stephen quotes this passage in Acts 7:49-50 in his defense before the Sanhedrin to remind the Jewish leaders that the magnificent temple in Jerusalem is inferior to the God who is worshipped there – a sovereign Lord who cannot be confined to man-made dwellings. Isaiah’s point is that God, who created all things and is greater than any house of worship, seeks a personal relationship with the one who is “humble, submissive in spirit, and who trembles at My word” (v. 2). For Israel, that word is primarily the Mosaic Covenant. Point the people back to the Word of God, Isaiah is telling the people they need to obey it if they want to receive the Lord’s blessings.

Divine Payback (Isa. 66:3-6)

The stark contrasts in verse 3 expose the people’s religious practices for what they really are: external rituals void of heartfelt worship. While bringing sacrifices and offerings to the temple, the people are murderers, idolaters and breakers of the dietary laws. They have “chosen their ways and delighted in their abominations.” Therefore, harsh judgment is coming. The people who profess to know the Lord, yet hate His people and discriminate against them, will feel the hand of divine discipline when the temple is destroyed.

Jesus has similar words for the religious leaders in His day. Matthew 23 features a series of woes pronounced on religious hypocrites. Here is a sampling:

- Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You pay a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, yet you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. These things should have been done without neglecting the others. Blind guides! You strain out a gnat, yet gulp down a camel! (vv. 23-24)
- Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and every impurity. In the same way, on the outside you seem righteous to people, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (vv. 27-28)

- Snakes! Brood of vipers! How can you escape being condemned to hell? This is why I am sending you prophets, sages, and scribes. Some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will flog in your synagogues and hound from town to town. So all the righteous blood shed on the earth will be charged to you, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. I assure you: All these things will come on this generation! (vv. 33-37)

Just as God tells the people in Isaiah's day that He will use the Babylonians to judge them, Jesus tells the Jewish leaders that terrible days are coming upon them as well – divine retribution for rejecting God's Son, the Messiah. This is fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the Romans sack Jerusalem, destroy the temple and scatter the Jews.

Birth of a Nation (Isa. 66:7-21)

Israel's return to the land after the Babylonian exile will be so swift that it is likened to a woman giving birth as soon as she experiences her first labor pains. The Lord will finish what He started, resulting in great joy for His people. They will exult in a rebuilt Jerusalem just as an infant delights in her mother's breast. Peace will come to Jerusalem and the nations' wealth will flow to her. Just as Jerusalem is compared to a mother in verses 11-12, the Lord is compared to a mother who comforts her children in verse 13: "As a mother comforts her son, so I will comfort you, and you will be comforted in Jerusalem." While these promises offer great hope to the Israelites facing Babylonian captivity, they look ever further into the future to that glorious time when Christ will sit on the throne of David. This should be a message of comfort to Jews today, and to all Christians who look forward to Christ's glorious return.

While millennial blessings will flow abundantly in Israel, the Lord promises retribution against those who oppose Him and His people. Verses 15-16 are graphic depictions of God's wrath: "Look, the Lord will come with fire – His chariots are like the whirlwind – to execute His anger and fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire. For the Lord will execute judgment on all flesh with His fiery sword, and many will be slain by the Lord." D.A. Carson comments: "The *fire* and *sword* are the harsh aspect of every divine intervention (*cf.* Mt. 10:34), but this is the final one (*cf.* v 24; 2 Thes. 1:7–10). While it has reference to *all men*, the special objects of wrath are the apostates of v 17 (*cf.* 65:3–7; Lv. 11:7, 29), who have known the light and despised it" (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, S. Is 66:6).

When Christ returns, He will judge all nations (Zech. 14:3; Rev. 19:17-18) and because of that the world will see His glory. People from around the globe will turn to the Lord and worship Him. Believing Israelites will travel to distant lands to testify of God's magnificent glory and grace. Those hearing the message represent the distant outposts of Israel's world: Tarshish (probably southwestern Spain), Put (northern Africa), Lud (western Asia Minor), Tubal (northeastern Asia Minor), Javan (Greece), and other distant lands. They will be won to the Lord and will travel to Jerusalem to worship. Some will even be selected priests and Levites, positions historically reserved for Jews alone.

New Heavens and Earth (Isa. 66:22-24)

The closing verses of this breathtaking book contrast the joy of the redeemed and the fate of the damned, magnifying God's grace and justice. As the Gentiles once descended on Israel in search of plunder, they will in the age to come travel expectantly to worship the Lord. As they depart Jerusalem, they will see the bloated corpses of those who have rebelled against their King. Just outside the city lies the Valley of Hinnom (*Gehenna* in Greek), a place where children once were sacrificed to pagan gods and, in Jesus' day, a trash dump where fires burned continuously. The valley is a picture of judgment (Isa. 30:33). Jesus used it to illustrate the horrors of hell (Mark 9:43-48). According to Derek Kidner, in the synagogue verse 23 is read again after verse 24 to soften the ending of the prophecy, but the reality of hell is a true ending for unbelievers (*New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, S. Is 66:18).

For believers, however, the new heavens and earth are purged of sin and its consequences. While the terrible fate of those who reject Christ may remain with the saints as a reminder of God's mercy toward them, the pristine beauty of God's restored creation overshadows the putrid scenes of Gehenna. There is no doubt that God will shake the earth to its very foundation in the days to come, judging all people and removing the curse of sin. Note how the writer of Hebrews looks to this day: "[B]ut now He has promised, **Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also heaven.** Now this expression, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of what can be shaken – that is, created things – so that what is not shaken might remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us hold on to grace. By it, we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:26-29).

The apostle Peter also gives us a foretaste of what is to come, and how we should live in the light of God's future earthly renovation: "But the Day of the Lord will come like a thief; on that [day] the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, [it is clear] what sort of people you should be in holy conduct and godliness as you wait for and earnestly desire the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be on fire and be dissolved, and the elements will melt with the heat. But based on His promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will dwell" (2 Peter 3:10-13).

Warren Wiersbe summarizes: "Throughout his book, Isaiah has presented us with alternatives: Trust the Lord and live, or rebel against the Lord and die. He has explained the grace and mercy of God and offered His forgiveness. He has also explained the holiness and wrath of God and warned of His judgment. He has promised glory for those who will believe and judgment for those who scoff. He has explained the foolishness of trusting man's wisdom and the world's resources. The prophet calls the professing people of God back to spiritual reality. He warns against hypocrisy and empty worship. He pleads for faith, obedience, a heart that delights in God, and a life that glorifies God" (*Be Comforted*, S. Is 66:1).

Closing Thought

Commenting on Isaiah's closing verse – a graphic vision of the saved observing the damned – Matthew Henry writes: Those that worship God shall *go forth and look upon them*, to affect their own hearts with the love of their Redeemer, when they see what misery they are redeemed from. As it will aggravate the miseries of the damned to see others in the kingdom of heaven and *themselves thrust out* (Lu. 13:28), so it will illustrate the joys and glories of the blessed to see what becomes of those that died in their transgression, and it will elevate their praises to think that they were themselves as brands plucked out of that burning. To the honour of that free grace which thus distinguished them let the redeemed of the Lord with all humility, and not without a holy trembling, sing their triumphant songs” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume, S. Is 66:15*).