

The substance of this exposition was presented at the FIEC Church Planters' Conference at Cuckfield, Sussex, on 11th November, 2003. At the conclusion of this, the second of three expositions, a leader of the FIEC testified that in forty years of ministry in England he had witnessed downgrade only and that Isaiah's optimism was hard to credit. It is mysterious that while there is serious decline in Western Europe there is significant advance in most other parts of the world.

Isaiah is pivotal historically. He is quoted sixty times in the NT, more than any other prophet. His long ministry began during the reign of Uzziah and continued on through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. Mannaseh is not mentioned but Isaiah may well have continued into that time as well.

Isaiah was the foremost spiritual leader of his times. This is illustrated by four historical chapters (36-39) devoted to a time of acute national crisis when Sennacherib the Assyrian and his mighty army besieged Jerusalem. Isaiah guided the king and the people through this crisis.

As far as salvation is concerned, Isaiah is the evangelical prophet of the Old Testament (45:22). As far as language is concerned, he is the Shakespeare of the Bible. As far as the Son of God is concerned, Isaiah describes in most detail his incarnation, his life of perfect obedience, his sufferings, death and burial. 'He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death' (53:9). Isaiah also foresaw a kingdom that would expand to the point of world dominion: 'the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea' (11:9). All this was revealed to the prophet in a time when Judah would increasingly struggle to survive at all. Only a stump would be left. Yet out of that stump of Jesse the salvation of the worldwide Church would come.

Here I will explore the dimensions of the last times as we find them described by Isaiah.

Isaiah 2

They will beat their swords into ploughshares

This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

In the last days

the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
as chief among the mountains;
it will be raised above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

Many peoples will come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."

The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.

They will beat their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war any more.

Come, O house of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the LORD. (2:1-5)

The last days we take to refer to the times of the Messiah from his first coming to his second coming. The second coming will usher in the final judgment of all mankind and the eternal state of blessedness for the righteous and eternal hell for the wicked.

'A strict sequence of events must be observed here. The abolition of war cannot come about before the nations have learned to submit to the Word of God' (Leupold).

Sin leading to war has always been the greatest curse of the human race. It was the two great world wars

of the 20th century that blew away the liberal postmillennial optimism that prevailed in the early part of that century and which has led to the disintegration of the philosophy of the Enlightenment (Modernism) to give way to a now rampant postmodernism. There is a gulf between optimism based on self-confident humanism of what man can do and what the LORD achieves by spiritual means (Zc.4:6). He has purposed to achieve the impossible by his omnipotence in his own time and according to his own will. His instruments are weak. He perfects strength out of our weakness, as Paul says: 'my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12:9, cf.Heb.11:34).

Isaiah concludes this prophecy with a call to unbelieving Israel to walk in the light of the LORD. E.J.Young points to the fact that there are two basic interpretations of this passage. The first is that this prophecy will be fulfilled in the present final age. The second is known as dispensationalism, which takes the fulfilment to happen in the millennium following Christ's return. Young says that 'dispensationalism does violence of a serious kind to the general structure of biblical eschatology.' Young also points out the difficulty in believing the possibility of the cessation of wars when sin is endemic in the human race. The poetic nature of Isaiah may give licence to the idea that this prophecy is relative, that is that the gospel will be so pervasive that peace will prevail as never before. If we look at the European Union of today and compare it with the horrors of the 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 wars, this is peace indeed! But if we look at Africa chaos predominates.

Isaiah 9

the government will be on his shoulders

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and for ever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this. (9:6,7)

'What this child inaugurates in a seemingly small beginning will have within it potentialities of growth well nigh unbelievable' (Leupold).

The obstacles to this increase seem insurmountable but we must, in the words of Alec Motyer on this text, note, 'the zealous determination of Yahweh, the exodus-God, whose nature it is to save his people and overthrow his foes'. Isaiah stresses divine omnipotence to achieve his purpose, 'The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this!' The matter is expressed by Daniel, 'In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure for ever' (2:44).

This spiritual conquest takes time. It goes forward by prayer. 'Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession' (Ps.2:8). This conquest cannot be achieved without open doors. Iron barriers must be

broken down. Hence the above text is followed by, 'You will rule them with an iron sceptre; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.' In our generation the fall of atheistic Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe illustrates this factor of Christ's power to break down iron curtains (Ps 110:1). The bronze gates of the false prophet today impede the advance of the gospel. All power belongs to Jesus (Mt. 28:18). Only he can remove these barriers and at the same time impart the strength to his labourers to go through open doors into the harvest fields. The universal evangelical Church is burdened in prayer about this above all other subjects.

With regard to increase we should take heart that during the 20th century evangelicals increased as never before one hundredfold in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and some parts of Asia such as South Korea and China.

Isaiah 11

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD

God loves to bring great blessing out of weakness and humble beginnings. King David was the last in a line of brothers of an obscure family. In this chapter the focus is on the stump of Jesse. From that unlikely background and from the roots of that stump of Jesse came a branch, the Messiah. His attributes of wisdom and understanding and the righteousness of his reign are described in 11:1-5. Then follows a metaphorical description of the regenerative effects of his gospel which are far-reaching and extend eventually to all the earth:

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.(11:6-9).

Isaiah goes on immediately to declare that in that day when knowledge is advancing, the Root of Jesse (the Messiah) will stand as a banner for the peoples. The nations will rally to him and his place of rest will be glorious.

The time described does not refer to heaven. While we cherish the reality of the coming regeneration of the cosmos and the presence on the new earth of many of the finest animals (Rom 8:22-25). I for one do not expect that there will be cobras and vipers there!

It is vital to discern when Isaiah is using metaphor and when he is not. For instance, note metaphor and hyperbole in 55:12, 'You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.'

On Isaiah 2:6-9 Matthew Henry is emphatic when he says that this is poetry and expounds as follows: 'Unity and concord; these are intimated in these figurative promises, that even the wolf shall dwell peaceably with the lamb. Men of the most fierce and furious dispositions, who used to bite and devour all about them shall have their temper so strangely altered by the efficacy of the gospel and grace of Christ, that they shall live in love even with the weakest, and such as formerly they would have made an easy prey of. So far shall the sheep be from

hurting one another, as sometimes they have done (Ezk.34:20,21),that even the wolves shall agree with them. Christ, who is our Peace, came to slay all enmities and to settle lasting friendships among his followers, particularly among Jews and Gentiles, when multitudes of both, being converted to the faith of Christ, are united in one sheepfold,....they that inhabit the holy mountain shall live as amicably as the creatures did that were with Noah in the ark and it shall be a means of their preservation for they shall not hurt or destroy one another as they have done.'

This beautiful scene of peace is so far removed from terrorism and wars that fill our TV screens that it seems like a pipe dream. Yet we should note Isaiah 42:4.'He will not fail or be discouraged until he establishes justice in the earth.' These words suggest a long hard battle which is won in the end by patience until the true religion prevails in all the world.

Isaiah 19

Blessed be Egypt my people

This chapter is devoted to Egypt. The first part of the chapter is a warning to Israel not to put her trust in Egypt. Israel was a weak small nation placed between two mighty powers, Assyria in the north and Egypt in the south. The chapter is a warning that even the strongest nations can implode from within. Germany, a strong nation, was destroyed by Naziism (1933-1945). The Soviet Union was brutalized by Stalin and tortured by atheistic Communism, finally falling apart into fifteen nations and from the premium league of power was relegated to a lower division. Isaiah sees better times ahead for Egypt.

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork and Israel my inheritance" (19:23-25).

'A highway is a favourite metaphor in this book for the removal of alienation and separation (11:16; 40:3; 49:11; 62:10). In rough and hilly Israel, the force of such a figure is obvious' (Oswalt). Swift and open communication comes when there is a powerful unity and zeal in the truth. Here warring Assyria and Egypt which stand for all the warring nations of the earth are in complete unity.

The full dimensions of this prophecy await fulfilment. Pentecost was a beginning. In the centuries following the destruction of Jerusalem and the Diaspora of the Jews (AD70) Christianity was established in North Africa, but in that time it is difficult to see a union through Jerusalem to Assyria of a kind which satisfies this prophecy. Today there is a literal road from Baghdad to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem to Cairo. It may not be a double carriageway yet, but this prophecy depicts a time when such will be needed for use for conferences of Christians from these nations.

Isaiah 49

That you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth

Alec Motyer in his exposition of Isaiah stresses the biographical and autobiographical character of the four Servant passages. The second Servant passage is of special interest since it describes the despondency of the Messiah who voices inward pain at his seeming lack of success. The spiritual harvest is so small.

'I have laboured and spent my strength for nothing.'
God says to him:

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring my salvation to the ends of
the earth." (49:6)

Albert Barnes suggests that the application of redemption on such a wide scale is the highest honour conferred on God's Son. He makes this application, 'There is no higher glory for man than to tread in the footsteps of the Son of God, and he who by self-denial and love and personal toil and prayer does most for the conversion of the whole world to God, is most like the Redeemer and will have the most elevated seat in the glories of the heavenly world.' Daniel 12:3 would certainly support this.

Isaiah 59-60

nations will come to your light

Motyer collates the passages from chapter 59 to 66 under the heading, 'The Anointed Conqueror' (Motyer p.15). Isaiah describes the development of a worldwide reverence for the LORD. This will come about through the coming of a Redeemer in Zion. This advent is characterized by the power of the Holy Spirit as he comes like a pent-up flood (59:19). His coming in power is against a dark background of rebellion and ignorance. 'See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples' (60:2). The LORD is grieved by the absence of justice. He is appalled that there is no one to intervene. Therefore he comes to work salvation himself. 'The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins' (59:20).

The apostle Paul cites this scripture in his treatise on the future of ethnic Israel in Romans 11. In answer to the question, has God finished with the Jews? he suggests an answer in two parts. First, there is always a remnant of which he Paul was a representative. Second, there is a larger gathering yet to be, a fullness which will bring blessing as life from the dead (Rom.11:12,15,25-36).

Isaiah 60:1-22 consists of ten stanzas, all of which except one fall into eight lines, five on each side of the pivotal statement of verse 12 that the nation which will not serve Zion, will perish. Isaiah is unique among the prophets in his use of the metaphor of light. Jesus is the light of the world. 'The poem centres on the Abrahamic theme that those who bless him will be blessed and those who curse him will be cursed (Gn. 12:3; 27:29)' (Motyer, p.493). 'The least of you will become a thousand, the smallest a mighty nation. I am the LORD; in its time I will do this swiftly' (60:22). 'It may seem to be delayed, and put off so long, that we are out of hopes for it; but as the Lord will do it, so he will hasten it; will do it with all convenient speed; though much time be passed before it is done, no time will be lost; he will *hasten it in its time*, in the proper time, in the season wherein it will be beautiful; he will do it in the time appointed by his wisdom, though not in the time prescribed by our folly. And this is really hastening it; for though it seem to tarry, it does not tarry if it come in God's time; for we are sure that that is the best time, which he that believes will patiently wait for' (Matthew Henry).

Dirk Odendaal in his work on Isaiah 40-66 (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970) draws the threads together: 'In these chapters we also see the nations subjecting themselves to Israel (49:23; 60:12, 14),

being themselves active in bringing the scattered people of Israel home (49:22; 60:9), then performing the most menial tasks for Israel (49:23; 60:10; 61:5) and acknowledging the true mystery of Israel, i.e. “God is with you only...” (45:14 – the end of anti-Semitism?). The nations are all streaming to the light of Yahweh’s glory which has arisen over Israel (60: 1-3).’

Isaiah 62

they shall never keep silence

It is fitting that we should conclude on a practical note. Since we have these promises we are called to intercession of a kind that gives God no rest by day or by night. Leupold translates:

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem,
I have appointed watchmen;
All the day and all the night
they shall never keep silence,
They are the ones that keep reminding the LORD:
Take no rest.
Do not grant him any rest,
until he establishes Jerusalem
and makes it famous in the earth. (62:6,7)

The watchmen are set upon the walls of Zion by the Lord Messiah himself. They are the true guardians who keep vigil and who know the times. Their prayer is ceaseless *all the day* and *all the night*; vocal, verbalizing the need, *they are never silent*. They are effectual because they are holding the LORD to achieve what he has promised, *they keep reminding the LORD*. Their prayer is disciplined, *they shall never keep silence*. It is prevailing intercession, *until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it famous in the earth*.

Will the outcome in view actually materialize? Jonathan Edwards’ thesis for the future was based on the prophecy of Zechariah 8:10-12. There will be a

mighty confluence of peoples and strong nations for the purpose of prayer. There will also be the establishment of the gospel in nations hitherto held in ignorance. From these nations now described as developing nations will emerge a mighty army of missionaries. Already the Chinese believers talk of preparing and sending out 100,000 missionaries into the world. Brazil and the Philippines now send out more missionaries than they receive. In Edwards’ day the known world was tiny compared with the 21st century. With *Operation World* (660 pages), together with *Operation China* (700 pages) and *Peoples on the Move* (488 pages) and *The Unreached People Groups of Indonesia* (155 pages) in his hands, how would Jonathan Edwards have written the concluding chapters of his book *The History of Redemption*?

The geographic and ethnic dimensions of Isaiah’s eschatology can be summed up by the verses that were used in the salvation of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, ‘Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other’ (45:22). This text is set within the context of Gentile salvation as Israel’s glory (45:18-25). Be saved! is an imperative. The sure outcome of the act of looking away from the idols of this world to the Cross of the One crucified is salvation (Nu.21:8, 9). We have here the fulfilment of the promise made at the beginning to Abraham: ‘And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you’ (Gn.12:3).

Inexpressible and glorious joy appropriate for such a marvellous salvation is expressed in 52:9, 10:

Burst into songs of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

The LORD will lay bare his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see
the salvation of our God.

Psalms 67 and 72 are parallel. Psalm 67 embraces all the people groups of the world, while Psalm 72 tells of the extent of the Messiah's dominion from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth (cf. Zc.9:9-10). Malachi expresses it like this, "My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name shall be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty' (1:11).

'Jesus prayed that his church might be one (John 17), not only in a spiritual sense or in heaven, but visibly in the world, "so that the world will believe" that the Father sent him. This unity is to mirror on a creaturely level the union in the trinity. It is thus a unity grounded in truth, not merely institutional or enforced unity but a unity in deed and truth. It is not yet evident. For the furtherance of the world-wide advance of Christ's rule, it must come. We must work towards it in some practical terms now, by abandoning manipulation, by teaching and doing the truth and by seeking to promise the unity and catholicity of the church, as well as its purity and apostolicity.' (Robert Letham in his book on the Trinity to be published by Presbyterian & Reformed).

Promises such as, 'nor will they train for war any more' and, 'earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea', are amazing! Since they provide hope and vision, these promises influence our intercession. These descriptions of the success of the gospel inspired the pioneer

missionaries such as William Carey and Adoniram Judson to effort and enterprise. May that be the effect of these and many more biblical passages upon the rising generation of evangelical believers, for it is upon their shoulders that the responsibility to complete the great commission will rest.

Contradictions?

To say the least, it would seem that these glowing descriptions of Isaiah contradict our Lord who said 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith in the earth?' (Lk.18:8). But surely he did not mean that there will not be any saving faith when he comes? We believe that if he returned today more than 50 million Chinese would exult in his coming! Surely we are intended to apply Luke 18:8 in its context. That means if we search our own hearts we will hardly find *the kind of faith* that the persistent widow displayed in her ceaseless petitions. Very few indeed have that kind of faith.

Isaiah seems to contradict the words of our Lord in Matthew 7:13,14 where he speaks of a wide road and a narrow gate, and of the few and the many. It is true that with regard to most of human history there has been a small proportion that are saved. But our Lord here is pressing home the reality of discipleship, which he did on many occasions. He is not closing the door on any being saved, no more than Paul did on the ship carrying 276 on board (Acts 27). Paul's aim was to save every one of those on the ship. Paul did not suggest a law of necessity that only a tiny number on board would land safely on Malta and that the rest would have to drown! In some large Christian families we know we rejoice to observe that every member maintains a credible profession of faith. Yet in many others there is the dreadful reality of division. The New Testament is

not a numbers game. We should not set up one text against another. The Lord saves by few and sometimes he saves by many.

There have been times when the gospel has been powerful and pervasive and there is no reason to believe that such times cannot be repeated on a large scale. A massive effect takes place in any society when ten per cent of a population consist of earnest believers who are well taught and act as salt and light.

We could think that Isaiah seems also to forget the terrible reality of apostasy. That is odd, since he himself was living in just such a time. We see that from the appalling nature of his call described in chapter six. Isaiah faced a barren ministry. Paul warns of evil times to come. We observe today evils of horrendous kinds. Evil men like Saddam Hussein seem to get worse and worse. While evil will gain ground, that does not automatically mean that that evil will extinguish the gospel. Indeed great evils such as the cruelty in Indonesia by the Muslims against the Communists in the 1960s only served to add significant numbers to the Christian Church. There is a worldwide movement of Iranians moving from Islam because their minds have been opened to the gospel by the barbarity of the system in which they were reared. When they see Christian love, the Holy Spirit uses that reality to draw them to Christ. The battle for the Iranians is only beginning. Unless the Lord raises up reformers and sound teachers for them, it is possible that most will be lost to charismania and to shallowness.

A further factor in our reckoning today is the difference between revival and revivalism. Some areas have reported revival but sadly there has been excitement without teaching. In all the statistics of *Operation World* we have to take account of

shallowness. Yet even when we have allowed for superficiality, the picture is by no means all sombre. There is a wonderful hunger for the truth in many areas. I can name areas of the world where there is a greater appetite to read doctrinal books than there is here in the UK. Jonathan Edwards predicted a time when there would be divines in Africa, and if in Africa why not in China? And why not all over the world?

It is not acceptable when we are perplexed by Isaiah to say that the prophet is simply using poetry to describe heaven. There are too many present continuous participles for that. A participle has an 'ing' at the end. They are not beat'ing' their swords into ploughshares in heaven. There are no swords in heaven. Now is the era that the transforming takes place. To get justice on earth seems impossible. But Isaiah says 'he will not fail or be discouraged until he establishes justice in the earth' (Isa.42:4). There is no discouragement in heaven. And there is no easy way on earth. To overcome evil involves a mighty battle. Isaiah is assuring us of eventual victory. Whenever victory is attained, vigilance is needed because while we are in this world we have a terrible propensity to backslide. Messiah, as I have shown, is depicted in the concluding chapters of Isaiah as a worldwide conqueror. Let us not view our Lord as the perpetual loser, a wretched failure. Let us not place the crown of triumph on Satan's head. Let's remember that while battles may be lost the war will be won. In the last great war, 1939-1942, there were no successes until 1942. It was only then that there was a gradual change. Then came D-day and the storming of the beaches of Normandy. That was the beginning of the end for Hitler. We look for a time when we will see much more of the truth that Jesus came to destroy the works of Satan (1 Jn.3:8).