

ISAIAH

A TOOLBOX FOR SPIRITUAL



GROWTH

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by H. Michael Brewer

ISAIAH

A Toolbox for Spiritual Growth

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

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Isaiah

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introduction

Men's BIBLE Study

The Reasons for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life. . . .
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through
Scripture . . .*

These words from “A Brief Statement of Faith,” adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God’s Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word” to each of us (*Book of Order*, PC(U.S.A.), G-14.0516e(2)).

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says, yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its president, Dr. Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men’s breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study cells in homes, and many others. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion, it assumes a small group of men (no more than twelve), one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to do study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective.

1. We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2. We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The group has gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas are.

3. We will regard the leader(s) as “first among equals.” Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning.

4. We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit that spoke to the biblical writers now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5. We will listen for “the question behind the question.” Sometimes a man’s gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6. We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7. We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes in the spaces provided for your own answers to questions relating to the study and from time to time sharing with others your answers, even when you worry that they are not the “right” answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of the foregoing seven “rules.”

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes to has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. The leaders might also alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of worksheets. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the student think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis for this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. If a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword. During the session the leader may call attention to things in the Afterword when they seem appropriate.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak without

pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle or around a table rather than in straight rows with the leader up front.

Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study together God's word, in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study you will find Scripture quotations. These are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout this study guide, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. A clock figure has been placed in each study to suggest where it might be divided into two sessions. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson exactly as suggested in this study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, “Remember, we are not alone!” The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

Isaiah

INTRODUCTION

A Toolbox for Spiritual Growth

It is hardly coincidental that Isaiah is one of the most well known among the Old Testament prophets. His book is deeply beloved by both Jews and Christians, and New Testament writers often use passages from Isaiah as they seek to interpret the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For example, Matthew illuminates the miraculous birth of Jesus, using Isa. 7:14: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel” (Matt. 1:23). And Paul turns to Isa. 11:10 to prove that Jesus came for all people, whether Jew or Gentile: “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope” (Rom. 15:12).

First Isaiah (Chs. 1—39)

The book of Isaiah is actually composed of several books, and in some of our discussions, we will treat the book as a whole, not concerning ourselves with textual issues. In other discussions, the historical context of a passage will make a difference in our understanding, and a working knowledge of Isaiah’s sections will be helpful to the reader.

Chapters 1—39 are sometimes called First Isaiah. This section contains teachings and stories from Isaiah’s life and ministry. The prophet Isaiah served God in the second half of the eighth century B.C., prophesying from 742 until 701 B.C.

First Isaiah deals with the events of Isaiah’s own day, especially the invasion of the Southern Kingdom of Judah by the combined forces of Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the later invasion by the rising empire of Assyria. In both cases, Isaiah counseled the Jewish people to place their faith in God alone rather than in military might. Isaiah’s counsel was sound, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah survived both attacks, while the Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians.

Isaiah simultaneously pronounced scathing judgments on the Jews of the Southern Kingdom. The prophet denounced their sinfulness and disregard for the oppressed, and warned of God’s impending judgment—the destruction of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. First Isaiah ends with an ominous visit to Jerusalem by the ambassadors of Babylon, and Isaiah’s prediction

that the Babylonian forces will one day bring utter annihilation to Jerusalem. (See table on page 6.) This finale to First Isaiah serves as an introduction to Second Isaiah.

Second Isaiah (Chs. 40—55)

Jerusalem was indeed conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C., and many of the Jews were carried away into forced exile in Babylon. The prophecies and sermons in Second Isaiah (chs. 40—55) seem to be addressed to these exiled Jews, perhaps shortly before their release in 528 B.C.

The anonymous prophet of Second Isaiah aims to give hope and encouragement to a people nearly broken by adversity. The opening words of ch. 40 set the tone for this entire section: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term . . .” (Isa. 40:1–2).

Among the great themes of Second Isaiah is the restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem, the victorious procession of God’s people as they cross the desert to return home, the futility of Babylon’s phony gods, and the calling of the Jewish nation to accept its role as God’s servant people. Second Isaiah leaves no doubt that there is only one God; the God of the Jews is the Holy One, the Creator of the universe, and the Judge of the nations.

Third Isaiah (Chs. 56—66)

As we turn to Third Isaiah (chs. 56—66), we once more “fast forward” to a later time in Jewish history. Now the setting is Jerusalem, and the exiles have already returned to their homeland. However, their return has not been as glorious as they had hoped. The rebuilding of their ravaged homeland has been slow, and poverty persists. Many of the returning Jews are so discouraged that they imagine God has forgotten all about them. Once again a prophet arises to speak to the people on God’s behalf. We do not know this prophet’s name or life story, but his message is clear enough. If the Jewish people will repent of their persistent sinning, God will bless them. Their hardships are not a sign of God’s indifference, but rather a judgment upon their failure to live up to God’s standards. Behind the sometimes harsh words of

ISAIAH 1—39*

Warnings of Judgment and Hopes for Peace, Justice, and the Messiah

“The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is your houses” (3:14).

“In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (30:15).

<p>1 Oracles of Isaiah, the Son of Amoz, about Israel and Judah Introduction: A plea of justice, 1 Prophecies about Judah and Jerusalem, 2—4 The Song of the Vineyard, 5 The prophet’s call, 6 Prophecies using a child as a symbol: Immanuel, sign of hope, 7 Maher-shalal-hash-baz and warning to the enemy, 8 The Prince of Peace, 9 A remnant shall survive in spite of Assyria, 10 The son of David’s lines, 11 A joyful day is coming, 12</p>	<p>13 Oracles against Various Nations Prophecies against: Babylon, 13—14 Moab, 15—16 Damascus, 17 Egypt, 18—20 Babylon, Damascus, Arabia, 21 (Isaiah condemns Judah’s defense preparations), 22 Prophecy against Tyre, 23</p>	<p>24 Three Groups of Oracles An apocalypse of cosmic judgment, 24—27 Oracles against various sins, 28—32 Postexilic prophecies of restoration, 33—35</p>	<p>37 Assyria Is Thwarted, but Babylon Threatens Three chapters, largely repeated from 2 Kings, that tell how God, by a miracle, saved the city who Assyria invaded, but how Isaiah warned of the Babylonian captivity, 37—39</p>
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Author and Date: Many of the oracles of Isaiah 1—39 are from Isaiah the son of Amoz, who prophesied between 742 and 701 B.C., though these chapters also include some prophecies from a later time (most of Isaiah 40—66 comes from an anonymous poet—or poets—from the time of the exile and later).

Setting: Isaiah, the son of Amoz, lived in Jerusalem at the time of the fall of the Northern Kingdom and the invasion of Judah by enemies, including Assyria.

Theme: Isaiah preached judgment upon Judah for social injustice and trust in arms, but he promised that a remnant would survive if they would trust in “the Holy One of Israel.”

One Relationship to the New Testament: Isaiah 1—39 includes promises of a coming son of David. New Testament writers believed these were fulfilled in Jesus (see the outline of chapters 40—66 for the “servant” concept).

*William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 185.

Third Isaiah lies a loving heart that aches for the poor and the downtrodden. The people must not lose hope! God still loves the covenant people.

At the same time, there is a growing sense that God’s love is larger than Israel and Judah and that God has a plan that will eventually include the Gentile nations. (See table on page 7.) God’s covenant is open to all who will embrace that covenant!

A Portrait Gallery of the Holy One

Isaiah is a lengthy and rich book that might be approached from a variety of perspectives. In this study guide, we will focus on the diverse ways in which God is pictured in this book. The prophets often used bold and surprising ways of talking about God. This is especially true in Isaiah, perhaps because more than one prophet, over several centuries and in different cultural settings, contributed to this book.

With Second Isaiah, we categorically affirm that there is only God! Yet that one God is so vast and incomprehensible that we need a whole range of

portraits to help us come to know that God. Consider yourself. A snapshot of you at your workplace will reveal something about who you are. Even more will be revealed if we lay a second picture of you engaged in your favorite hobby or sport beside the first photo. We will learn still more about you if we have additional snapshots of you with your family, at church, on vacation, and in your car.

Isaiah offers us an impressive exhibit of divine snapshots or portraits. Each one is accurate but incomplete. Only when we stroll through the whole gallery do we begin to get a larger picture of God. Our goal, in these discussions, is to explore the gallery of divine images in the book of Isaiah.

Some of these images will be comforting, while others will be troubling. Some will be attractive; others may leave you cold. But each image that we approach openly and reverently becomes a potential tool for our growth in prayer, worship, and friendship with God. That’s why we have called this guide *A Toolbox for Spiritual Growth*. If you’re ready, let’s take a look at some of the tools Isaiah has laid out for us.

ISAIAH 40—66*

Promises of Restoration and Redemption and Calls to Righteous Living

“Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea” (48:20).

“I will give you [my servant] as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (49:6).

40

“Second Isaiah”—Prophecies of the End of the Exile and a Summons to Return Home

The Creator-Redeemer Is Coming to Liberate Judah from Babylon

Get ready! The Creator-Redeemer is coming, 40

The nations will stand trial, but Israel will be set free, 41

The servant, though blind, will be a light to those nations, 42

So “fear not!”, 43:1—44:8

Not Babylon’s idols but God will redeem Israel, through Cyrus, 44:9—46:13

Babylon will be destroyed, so leave it, 47—48

49

A Call to Return Home and to the Servant Mission

The twin calls: to return home and to the servant mission, 49

God has not abandoned the suffering servant, 50:1—11

Instead, God will comfort and redeem Zion, 51:1—52:12

The servant will redeem humankind, 52:13—53:12

Zion will be restored, 54

So joyfully return to God and to the covenant mission, 55

56

“Third Isaiah”—Postexilic Prophecies

God promises blessings to *all* who keep the Sabbath, 56:1—8

But both leaders and people are sinning, 56:9—57:21

The fast that brings blessings is to help those in need, 58:1—14

So repent, for God is going to bring a glorious day, 59:1—60:22

A call to mission to those in need, 61:1—13

God will vindicate Zion and punish its enemies, 62:1—63:6

A prayer to the God of grace and God’s severe answer, 63:7—65:16

New heaven, new earth coming, 65:17—25

Miscellaneous closing oracles, 66:1—24

66

Time and Setting: While much of Isaiah 1—39 was addressed to people in the eighth century B.C., Isaiah 40—55 was addressed primarily to the exiles in Babylon shortly before their release in 528 B.C. Many of the oracles in Isaiah 56—66 are addressed to the Jews after their return to Jerusalem, and some may even be from a later century.

Theme: This second half of Isaiah focuses on how the one holy God will restore the captives to their homeland, the mission of the servant of the Lord, and the renewal of living according to the covenant when they have returned.

Special Significance for the New Testament: Though there is debate as to whom the prophet understood by the suffering “servant,” the New Testament writers saw these prophecies as fulfilled in Jesus.

*Ibid., p. 194.

Resources

If you wish to do further research on Isaiah, several excellent commentaries and studies are available. Here are a few that I have found helpful:

Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40—66*. Interpretation.

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1—12*. Old Testament Library.

Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972.

C. R. North, *Isaiah 40—55*. Torch Bible

Commentaries. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1964.

David Rosenberg, *Lightworks*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

John F. A. Sawyer, *Isaiah*, Volume 1. Daily Study Bible. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984.

John F. A. Sawyer, *Isaiah*, Volume 2. Daily Study Bible. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986.

Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1—39*. Interpretation. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 13—39*. Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974.

Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40—66*. Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969.

Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1—12*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

session

Isa. 1:25; 14:23; 22:17-18;
30:19-21; 30:26; 31:4-5;
42:10-17; 44:6; 49:8-9

Toolbox SPIRITUALITY

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

How do you think of God? Light of the world? Infinite father? Too often we settle into one or two cherished pictures of God and we never stretch ourselves beyond those ideas. The result can be a very small God and an anemic spirituality.

We may find comfort in thinking of God as our "Shelter" from the storm. But if that's the only way we think of God, we will be tempted to live passively, merely surviving our passage through life. Where is the inspiration that will send us into the world waving the flag of God's new order?

Or perhaps we think of God primarily as the Judge of the universe. This will encourage us to seek holiness and morality in our lives. But will such an image of God teach us mercy and forgiveness for those who do not live up to our standards?

No single image of God is adequate to capture the vastness and immensity of the One we love and serve. Indeed, to enshrine any one picture of God in the highest place is to flirt with idolatry. The more we cultivate a variety of ways to imagine God, the more deeply we come to appreciate the fullness of God.

Perhaps you've had the experience of suddenly seeing a familiar person in a totally new light. Such discoveries often herald a new level of friendship and understanding. How long has it been since you last discovered an unsuspected aspect of God's personality? When was the last time your friendship with God took a healthy step forward?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite a volunteer to read Isa. 42:10-17 aloud while the group follows along in their own Bibles.

Recall your earliest recollections about God. Where did you learn to think about God in this way? How has your thinking changed?

What is your customary way of thinking about God? Try to write down a specific name, title, or image. What is helpful to you in this way of thinking about God? Are there any drawbacks in this image?

The prophet invites the Jewish people to sing a new song to God as they grow into a new understanding of the greatness of God. Do you see any value in seeking new ways to appreciate God? Explain in your own words.

In verses 13 and 14 the prophet offers wildly different images of God. In worship services, have you ever heard God compared to a furious warrior or a woman in labor? If not, why do you think this is?

What images of God are most prevalent in the worship of your congregation?

The last verse of this passage warns of the folly of worshiping idols. Can a mental image of God be an idol? Explain your thinking.



* THINKING IN PICTURES

Give a piece of paper to each one in the group. (Scrap paper with one clean side is adequate.) Also make sure each person has a pencil, pen, crayon, or marker. Allow a few minutes for each participant to draw a picture of God. No one will have to defend his picture! These are reflections of our own thinking about God.

After a few minutes, invite volunteers to show and/or describe their particular drawings. Those who wish may explain what they have drawn, and any personal meanings attached to the drawing.

You may invite the group to discuss the drawings. Was this exercise easy or difficult? Is there a wide variety in the drawings? Are visual pictures a helpful way to think about God or a distraction? As a child, how would you have drawn God? If you were asked to do this again in ten years, do you think you would draw the same picture?

Reaching into the Toolbox

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Try as we might, we find that people cannot be shoe-boxed into neat categories. Neither can God. Instead of a shoe-box theology, what we need is a toolbox theology!

For a moment, think about a typical toolbox with a variety of tools. The right tool is essential for the right job. One doesn't drive nails with a socket wrench or tighten bolts with a wire cutter. The tool must match the need, and a good toolbox has a variety of tools ready at hand.

Our ways of thinking about God can be compared to a spiritual toolbox. At times of various needs we require different images of God.

- When life runs into a dead end, we may wish to think of God as the Banquet Giver, spreading a rich feast of possibilities before us.
- In the middle of the night when we think there's an intruder in the house, we want the Shield of the faithful at our side!
- When we are trying desperately to break a bad habit or forge a new character, we would do well to ask for help from the Potter.

Each of the above images of God is provided by the Bible. The scriptural toolbox has more ways of imaging God than most of us have ever dreamed. The psalms are a particularly rich source of overlooked images of God, and so are the prophets, especially the book of Isaiah.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Here are a few ways of thinking about God that are offered in the book of Isaiah. Read each passage, and jot down what that image teaches you about God.

God the Athlete (22:17-18)

God the Teacher (30:19-21)

God the Lion / Hovering Bird (31:4-5)

God the First and the Last (44:6)

God the Sweeper (14:23)

God the Liberator (49:8-9)

God the Metal Worker (1:25)

God the Healer (30:26)

Review the list above. Which image might be helpful to someone

suffering from a life-threatening disease?

troubled by injustice in the world?

burdened with guilt?

longing for guidance?

If you were going to “try out” one of the above images in prayer this week, which one seems to hold the most promise for you personally?

Concluding the Session

Some people may feel threatened or undermined by the ideas in this session. Go around the circle and invite each person to share one sentence describing their feelings concerning thinking about God in new ways. Some of the expressed feelings may elicit responses from the group. If so, allow time for those reactions.

You may close the session with this responsive prayer:

Leader: God, you are older than time.

Group: You are bigger than space.

Leader: Your ways are higher than our ways, and you are more than we can imagine.

Group: Nothing is like you, and yet you are like a Rock, a Doctor, a Fountain, a Light in the dark, a Midwife, an Author, a Counselor, a Sower of seeds.

Leader: You are the only God, but many things remind us of you and help us to understand you.

Group: Teach us to broaden our vision, to deepen our love, and to sing new songs to you, in the name of Jesus.

Afterword

Remember the story of the blind men who got the chance to touch an elephant? They each came away with a different picture of what an elephant is like: a pillar, a wall, a spear, a snake. Each of those pictures reveals part of the elephant, but only when you put them together do you get a true understanding of an elephant.

Each picture we have of God reveals something of who God is, but also leaves other things unrevealed. So if we try out different pictures of God in our prayers, pictures that are faithful to our Scriptures, we will get to know God better, more fully. And getting to know God better is not only the goal of Christian prayer, it is the goal of Christian life.¹

Looking Ahead

In the beginning of time, God built the universe and everything in it. But God’s creative work is not finished. The master Builder is still at work! How is God building in your life? What is God building in the world? If you wish, you may read Isa. 40:12–31; 45:9–19; and 54:11–14 in preparation for the next meeting.

1. From “How Do We Think About God in Prayer?” an unpublished sermon by Dr. Ben Samson. Permission granted.

session *two*

The BUILDER

Isa. 40:12–31; 45:9–19;
54:11–14

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

The passages in this session are drawn from the second section of Isaiah. You may recall that Second Isaiah (chs. 40–55) contains poems and prophecies delivered to the Jewish people during their exile under the Chaldeans or Babylonians.

This was a period when Jewish hope was at a low ebb. The city of Jerusalem was a charred and weed-grown heap of ruins. Most of the Jewish population had been deported to Babylon. The promised land had been ravaged, and the Jews were torn by conflicting emotions as they tried to understand their own downfall. Had the God of Judah been defeated by Bel and Nebo, the gods of Babylon? Or had God, disgusted by their continual disobedience, abandoned the Jewish people once and for all? The choices were equally demoralizing: Either God no longer loved Judah, or God was not powerful enough to help the chosen people.

Proclaiming a message of good news, the nameless prophet of Second Isaiah waded fearlessly into this “nothing and emptiness” (40:17). God has not abandoned you, promises the prophet. God is at work, even now, preparing your salvation, and no power in heaven or on earth can thwart the saving purpose of the only true God!

We are not surprised to find that Second Isaiah repeatedly depicts God as the Creator—the Builder of the universe and the Architect of human history. The idols are no challenge to the Maker. Neither the nations nor their rulers nor their gods can stand in the Lord’s way. “I am the LORD, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who by myself spread out the earth . . .” (Isa. 44:24).

Like a skilled carpenter, God is building Judah’s destiny according to the divine blueprints. Even when God’s workings are not apparent to human beings, the Builder is still at work. From the womb to the distant stars, the Creator is still creating!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite the group to read Isa. 40:12–31. This poetic passage lends itself to responsive reading. Perhaps a leader can read aloud the even numbered verses and the group can read aloud the odd numbered verses.

God the Creator is incomparable! For instance, verse 12 says that the Creator has “marked off the heavens with a span.” A span is the distance between the thumb and the little finger of an outstretched hand. God’s span is great enough to measure the galaxies! Which phrases in this passage speak most vividly to you about God’s greatness?

How does the prophet express God’s superiority over the nations? the rulers of the nations? the gods of the nations?

The Babylonians, who held the Jews in captivity during the time of this prophecy, worshiped gods of the stars. What does the prophet say about God and the stars in verse 26? What is the point of this message?

The passage moves from the cosmic to the personal in the closing verses. The “everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth” (40:28) also “gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless” (40:29). Can you recall a time when you felt that the Builder was building you up in strength and power?

What does it mean to you to “wait for the LORD” (40:31)?

going to turn out properly.” If you’ve ever been with a woman during labor, perhaps you can imagine how such criticism would be received!

Only a foolish creature questions the workmanship of the Creator!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite the group to read silently Isa. 45:9–19.

Have you ever questioned God’s workings in your own life?

The prophet asserts that the Lord is a “God who hides himself” (45:15). Why does it often seem to us that God is hidden? Why is it so hard to see God at work in the world?

Can you think of occasions in your experience when God has acted unexpectedly, bringing good from unlikely situations?

If God is the Builder of the universe and the Architect of human history, is God responsible for everything that happens in your life? Why or why not?

Even though the Builder is beyond our understanding, God is not arbitrary or chaotic. What do verses 18–19 say about the nature of God?



* THE CREATOR AND THE CREATURE

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Isaiah 45:2–19 will not make sense unless we understand the reference to Cyrus. Half a century after the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and deported the Jews, the Babylonian Empire itself was conquered by the Persian ruler Cyrus II. Perhaps the Jews viewed this change with fear and trepidation. Maybe they wondered why God was allowing them to be passed from hand to conquering hand.

In fact, Cyrus was the unknowing servant of God. Cyrus was a benevolent and enlightened conqueror. In due time Cyrus would allow the exiled Jews to return to their homeland and would authorize the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple. Unsuspected by the Jews, God had raised up Cyrus for a purpose, and Cyrus was carrying out the will of the Creator of all the nations.

But the Jewish people could not yet see God’s hand at work. To them it seemed that God was indifferent or uninvolved. They questioned God’s methods and doubted God’s faithfulness. The prophet compares this situation to a clay pot that criticizes the potter who is shaping it. Surely the pot knows better than the potter! “Give me handles,” cries the pot. “Enlarge my mouth! Flatten my bottom! Do what I tell you!”

An even more laughable image emerges when the prophet mentions a woman in labor. Judah’s doubts about God’s methods might be likened to someone saying to a birthing mother, “I don’t think you’re doing this right. I don’t believe this child is

The City of Jewels

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Isaiah 54:11–14 dates from a time when Jerusalem was utterly ruined, a blackened example of war’s devastation. No doubt, many Jews doubted that Jerusalem would ever be rebuilt. In their despair they were afflicted, storm-tossed, and forlorn. But the forlorn exiles had not reckoned with the determination of the Master Builder.

The prophet promises that Jerusalem will rise from the ruins. God will rebuild the walls and spires of the Holy City, and the glory of the rebuilt capital will shame the former city. The walls will be constructed of precious stones, and the building will glisten with gems. The new Jerusalem will shine with fabulous wealth when God is finished.

Does the prophet indulge in poetic exaggeration, or do these verses point to the heavenly city that God promises to the faithful on the other side of human history? (Compare Rev. 21:18–21.) In either case, we are reminded not to sell God short. What appears to be broken forever by human standards is not beyond the mending of God. The Creator can bring order from chaos and new life from apparent death.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask for a volunteer to read aloud to the group Isa. 54:11–14. If different translations are available, ask for readings from other versions. The names for precious stones are often unclear in Hebrew, and different translations may render this passage in quite different ways.

The rebuilding of Jerusalem in this passage symbolizes the fulfillment of Judah’s greatest hope. What hopes have you entrusted to God? Are there hopes you have given up on? Do you think Christians should ever give up hope? Why or why not?

What area of your life is most in need of rebuilding by God? What can you do to help in the rebuilding?

Have you ever asked for something from God and received far more than you expected?

Why do we sometimes not get what we ask for from God?

Can you ask God for whatever your heart desires, or are there things you should not pray for? Explain your thinking.

Concluding the Session

You may conclude this session with the following prayer.

Leader: God our Builder,

Group: Build our lives according to your own plan.

Leader: God our Builder,

Group: Build our world as you see fit.

Leader: God our Builder,

Group: Build our salvation through your Son the carpenter.

Leader: God our Builder,

Group: Build us into the temple of the church so that we may serve you and praise with all your people. Amen!

Afterword

By a deep, wide river [God] sat down;
With his head in his hands,
God thought and thought,
Till he thought: I'll make me a man!
Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the
night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image;
Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.¹

Looking Ahead

If you've ever pruned a rose or planted a tree or cultivated a vegetable garden, you will be able to identify with God the Gardener. How does God cultivate our growth? What fruit does God look for from us? Those who wish to prepare beforehand may read Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2-6; and 35:1-2.

1. James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 20.

session *three*

The GARDENER

Isa. 5:1–7;
27:2–6; 35:1–2

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

In a key passage (5:1–7), the prophet sings a love song about the experience of his “friend” who planted a vineyard at great effort. Choosing a fertile location, the Gardener cultivates the ground and removes the stones that infest the soil. He plants the garden with the choicest vines and builds a watchtower in the vineyard so he can protect his vines from predators and thieves. In a gesture of optimism, the Gardener even hews a wine vat in the solid stone in preparation for making wine from his anticipated harvest.

But when the time comes for the harvest, it becomes clear that the Gardener’s efforts have been wasted. Although the Gardener has spared no effort, the grapevines inexplicably yield wild, bitter grapes instead of rich, sweet domestic fruit.

The disappointed and affronted Gardener declares that the protective hedge around the vineyard will be removed so that the worthless vines may be trampled and despoiled. The Gardener has done all that could be expected; it is the garden that has failed.

This prophetic parable may be explored at several levels. The vineyard was a standard symbol of the lover in Israelite romantic poetry. The vineyard also commonly serves as a metaphor for God’s people in Israel’s poetry and prophecy. But what begins as an alluring love poem becomes a pointed indictment of unfaithful Judah and a touching story of God the disappointed Gardener.

Gardening is no occupation for sissies! Problems with the soil, burgeoning weeds, ravenous insects, scorching sun or torrential rains, and fruit-stealing animals are only a few of the challenges that the average gardener takes in stride. Like a patient gardener, God planted a people and nurtured them over the centuries, giving them everything needed for their growth and health. After countering every threat and setback, imagine the divine Gardener’s frustration when the crop itself rebels!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite the group to read Isa. 5:1–7. Perhaps individuals can read aloud each of the sections of the poem, while the group listens.

If God is the Gardener of your life, can you name five things for which you are thankful to your Gardener?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

According to verse 7, what fruit did God expect from the garden of Judah? What fruit do you believe God expects from your life?

In verses 3–4, God calls on bystanders to judge between the vineyard and the Gardener. How would you judge between them?

How would you answer the question in verse 4b? Why do you think Judah yielded wild grapes in spite of God’s care?

Do you think the threats in verses 5–6 are too harsh? Why?

Are there weeds in your life that have frustrated the Gardener's plans for you?

The Vineyard: Take Two!

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

A few chapters later we return to the parable of the vineyard (Isa. 27:2–6), and we discover that the Gardener's severity was never intended to destroy the vineyard but to rehabilitate, to give a second chance to the wayward vine. All that God does is done in love, and even when the covenant people rebel, God does not abandon the covenant.

Sometimes ailing, injured, or misshapen plants must be cut back harshly in order to make healthy growth possible. Every time I trim a tree, I cringe at the "damage" I must do with saw and clippers. But the end result justifies the cutting. The health and beauty of the tree is enhanced by the cutting.

Jesus appealed to a similar image when he said to his followers, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit" (John 15:1–2). We may imagine that the pruning seems hurtful from the perspective of the vine, but the plant is thereby allowed to better fulfill its purpose by bearing more fruit.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask for one reader to read Isa. 27:2–6 aloud to the group.

Look back at Isa. 5:1–7. In that passage several negative statements seem to be reversed in our present passage. In Isa. 27:2–6 can you find statements that reverse the negatives from the earlier parable? Write the reversals below.

The vine bears bitter fruit.

God acts in anger.

God shuts off the rain.

God knocks down the protective wall.

The Gardener promises to guard the vineyard both day and night. In what ways do you most need God's protective care by day and night?

Grapevines are often trained to cling to a trellis. What do you think it means to cling to the Lord?

In what ways do you see the church—the people of God—filling the world with fruit?

In what ways are you personally bearing fruit in the service of your Gardener?



* A GARDEN OF GLORY

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

In Isa. 35:1–2, the prophet looks beyond the loving discipline of God, beyond the exile in Babylon, to the promised return of God’s people to their beloved homeland. As the people pass through the barren wilderness on their way home from the exile, the dry and deadly desert will be transformed into a well-watered garden!

The Christian reader might be reminded of Jesus’ promise to give living water to his followers (John 4:7–15; 7:37–39), a symbol of God’s life-giving presence through the Holy Spirit. In the dry climate of the ancient Near East, the Jewish people fully understood the necessity of water for physical life and the necessity of God’s presence for spiritual life.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask for a leader to read aloud Isa. 35:1–2 one phrase at a time. After each phrase is read, the group will repeat the phrase with feeling in order to experience the joy of the passage.

As you review your own Christian life, what areas of your existence do you believe God is currently watering and calling to blossom into new life?

What can we do to improve the “flow” of gracious living water in our own lives?

The prophet proclaims that the desert lands will actually grow trees of such stature that they may be compared to Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon, areas renowned for their lush woodlands. If the prophet predicts the growth of forests in the newly blossoming desert, what does that suggest about the time frame of your spiritual growth?

In these lovely verses, the passage through the dangerous desert becomes a garden experience. What dreaded passages in your life turned out to be occasions of growth and blooming?

Concluding the Session

If we are paying attention, we will always be aware of areas of our life in which growth is stunted or fruitless. Perhaps we are going through a dry time in our family life. Maybe health problems are confronting us with an apparent desert. Maybe job-related or financial issues are in need of cultivation and pruning. Give the participants a few minutes to consider one area in which they want to pray for the touch of the Gardener. You may allow a few minutes for sharing thoughts aloud, but make this voluntary so that no one will feel forced to confide intimate feelings.

When there has been adequate opportunity for everyone who wishes to share, invite the group to spend a few moments in prayer. After a period of silence, the leader may close with this or any appropriate prayer:

Gentle Gardener, you kneel down beside us to plant and cultivate, to weed and water. Pull our roots deep into the rich soil of your love, and lift our branches into the life-giving light of your presence. Help us to grow strong and to bear thankful fruit in the name of Jesus the true and living Vine. Amen.

Afterword

The Church the Garden of Christ

We are a Garden wall'd around,
Chosen and made peculiar Ground;
A little Spot inclos'd by Grace
Out of the World's wide Wilderness.

Like Trees of Myrrh and Spice we stand,
Planted by God the Father's Hand;
And all his Springs in Sion flow,
To make the young Plantation grow.

.....

Our Lord into his Garden comes,
Well pleas'd to smell our poor Perfumes,
And calls us to a Feast divine,
Sweeter than Honey, Milk, or Wine.¹

Looking Ahead

In our next session we will discuss a controversial image of God that has been banned in some churches. In preparation for the session, the leader will need to gather paper and pens. Those who wish to read ahead may look at Isa. 9:1–7; 27:1; 51:9–11; and 59:14–20.

1. Isaac Watts, in Donald Davie (ed.), *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 148.

session *four*

The WARRIOR

Isa. 9:1-7; 27:1; 51:9-11;
59:14-20

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

The picture of God as the Divine Warrior is a powerful image, yet also a troubling one. We would do well to remember that every image of God is a comparison and never a perfect match with the full reality of God. For instance, when we say that God is a Gardener we mean that like a human gardener God plants and nurtures possibilities in the world; but we do not mean that God is at the mercy of the soil or the weather!

While the image of God as Warrior is deeply embedded in Scripture, we must view this metaphor in the light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Unlike some human warriors that we might encounter, the God of Jesus is not bloodthirsty or vindictive or hateful.

Yet, in spite of the risks of misinterpreting such an image, there is considerable value in the Warrior metaphor. To speak of God as Warrior is to affirm God's great power, God's commitment to morality and justice, God's defense of the weak and oppressed.

Sometimes in Scripture, God is the Dragon-slayer. In Old Testament thinking, the dragon (sometimes called Leviathan or Rahab) is the great sea monster that represents the powers of evil and primordial chaos. The Hebrew thinkers did not literally believe that God defeated a dragon in order to create the world, but the dragon was a handy symbol of the powers that oppose God in the universe. One way to affirm God's great strength was to tell stories of how God crushed the dragon. (For examples of divine dragon slaying, see Ps. 74:13-14 and Job 26:12-13.)

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask one participant to read aloud Isa. 27:1 and a second to read aloud 51:9-11.

Literally speaking, we know that God has neither arm nor sword. In these poetic verses, what attributes of God are represented by references to sword and arm?

jot down key words from these verses that show God's superiority to the dragon / serpent.

For the desert-dwelling Jews, the ever-shifting sea was a symbol of chaos and evil. For instance, in John's vision of the new heaven and earth there is no more sea (Rev. 21:1). In this passage how does the prophet express God's power over the sea?

When the Israelites escaped the Egyptian army by marching through the "depths of the sea" (Isa. 51:10), God was providing safe passage for the people through the very midst of evil and destruction. Have you ever experienced God's strong protection in the presence of threat or danger?

As you read of God's defeat of the sea monsters, do you feel it was a difficult battle or an easy victory? Explain your thinking.

War on the Home Front

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Isaiah 59:14–20 is from the third section of Isaiah, that part of the book that emerged from the community after the return from exile. An understanding of the historical setting will clarify the meaning of the text. In spite of high hopes (and prophetic encouragement), the former exiles returned to deplorable conditions in their homeland. The bitter poverty that awaited them and the arduous task of rebuilding their ravaged country left the Jews disenchanted and doubtful about God’s goodness.

The prophet, however, offers a different interpretation of their plight. The fault lies not with God, but with the people themselves. By their own sins and moral failings they have separated themselves from God’s gracious intentions. Indeed, the culture is so permeated by sin that the one who seeks to repent is set upon by vicious neighbors.

In vain, God looks for someone (Jewish leaders?) to stand up for righteousness, but finds no one. So God acts alone, and God’s solitary strength is more than sufficient for the challenge.

Notice that in this passage the Divine Warrior is not battling against foreign foes, but against sin and unfaithfulness among God’s own people. The Warrior of heaven is not a watchdog to sic on our enemies. The Divine Warrior is on the side of righteousness, and sometimes *we* are the enemy.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask for a volunteer to read aloud Isa. 59:14–20. It would be helpful to have other translations available in order to compare different shades of meaning. For instance, in verse 17 “vindication” is probably more accurate than “vengeance,” and “zeal” or “jealousy” capture the Hebrew meaning better than “fury.”

What is God’s motivation for going into battle?

Do you see any evidence that “truth stumbles in the public square” (59:14) in our own society?

The prophet promises wrath to those who oppose God; how will God approach those who turn from their sins?

Compare this catalog of God’s armor with the description of the Christian’s armor in Eph. 6:14–17. Apparently God’s own breastplate and helmet have been made available to Christians. What does this mean to you?

God is clearly able to fight alone against injustice. As you review this passage, do you feel that God wants to fight alone? Explain your ideas.



* A GENTLE WARRIOR

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Isaiah 9:1–7 may have been written originally to celebrate the coronation of a Jewish king. The geographical areas mentioned in the opening had been annexed by the Assyrians, and this coronation song assures us that God will deliver these provinces from the darkness of oppression and restore them to their rightful place.

The son who has been given to the nation as a Prince of Peace and Wonderful Counselor is probably the newly crowned king, perhaps Hezekiah. He is given such titles because in Hebrew thinking the king is God’s adoptive son. For many centuries, Christians have read a deeper

meaning into these verses, finding here a prophetic ideal that came to pass in Jesus Christ. In Jesus the Jewish hopes were both fulfilled and overturned. Jesus does indeed deliver his people, but not with bloodshed and burning. Jesus does indeed make peace, but not the kind of peace procured by the ax and spear. In the conclusive battle with sin and death, the Divine Warrior won the victory not with a sword, but with a cross.

After the group has had an opportunity to read Isa. 9:1–7, invite each participant to write a haiku (high-KOO) poem that expresses their feelings about Jesus the Peaceful Warrior. What does it mean to be a warrior without weapons? How do we fight for the right without resorting to violence?

Haiku is a nonrhyming form of poetry written in three lines. The first and third lines contain five syllables each, and the second line has seven. Haiku poetry evokes feelings and hints at ideas. For example:

Gracious Warrior
Shedding no one else's blood
Rising with love's scars

Have paper and pencils available, and allow time for participants to read their work aloud if they wish.

Concluding the Session

Allow a few minutes to go around the circle, inviting each person to share one lingering idea that they will carry away from today's discussion. As a closing prayer you may wish to read portions of the Song of Moses (Ex. 15:1b–3, 13–18).

Afterword

In C. S. Lewis' fairy tale *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Jesus is depicted in the guise of the great and terrible lion Aslan. Although Aslan is never vicious or brutish, the symbol of the lion communicates the sheer power of God as well as God's determination to save those threatened by evil.

After Aslan has liberated the captives from the castle of the evil White Witch, he rushes to the battlefield to save his followers who are about to be destroyed by the White Witch and her army.

“Off my back, children,” shouted Aslan. And they both tumbled off. Then with a roar that shook all Narnia from the Western lamppost to the shores of the Eastern sea the great beast flung himself upon the White Witch. Lucy saw her face lifted towards him for one second with an expression of terror and amazement. Then Lion and Witch had rolled over together but with the Witch underneath . . . The battle was all over a few minutes after their arrival.¹

Looking Ahead

In the next session we will turn to a joyous and celebrative image of God—the Banquet Giver! Can you fit your ideas of God into an eternal party? Is your life a spiritual feast or a famine? Those who wish to read ahead may look up Isa. 25:6–10 and 55:1–13.

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 174–175.

session *five*

The Banquet

GIVER

Isa. 25:6–10; 55:1–13

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Jesus was a favorite at parties, at least judging by the number of stories set at banquets, feasts, and dinner parties. Jesus initiated his public ministry at a wedding feast (John 2:1–11), and Jesus so thoroughly enjoyed a good meal and a glass of wine that his enemies branded him “a glutton and a drunkard” (Matt. 11:19).

In his fondness for convivial gatherings, Jesus reflected the nature of God, the great Banquet Giver. Entering into the presence of God is not like passing through the doors into the local funeral home. “Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing” (Ps. 100:2). Our God is the fountain of joy, and God is eager to share that joy with us. As the old creedal confession has it, the chief purpose of humankind is “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”¹

The joy of the Lord is the strength of the people of God. No wonder the central act of Christian worship is a celebrative meal. Our worship is not the mournful remembrance wake of a dead martyr, but an exuberant rehearsal of God’s mighty acts of salvation in Jesus Christ, the risen Lord.

Following the lead of prophets like Isaiah, the visionaries of our faith often visualize the delights of heaven as a great feast hosted by God (Rev. 19:9). To imagine God as the Banquet Giver is to find ourselves invited to the eternal party where all the children of God are welcome and the wine of joy never runs dry.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite the group to read silently Isa. 25:6–10. Allow a few moments for each person to speak aloud one word or phrase that caught his attention. Then read the section aloud to the group.

The mood of this passage is exuberant and joyful. Are your prayers characterized by joy? What about your congregational worship?

What do you think is meant by the shroud or sheet that God will remove from the nations?

There was a Canaanite myth in which death swallows up all things. Perhaps the prophet had this story in mind. What does it mean to you that God will swallow up death?

God’s banquet gathers people from all races and nations. How well do you think the church has lived up to this vision?

We would expect the nations to be gathered on Mt. Zion in order to serve God, but instead God sets the table, serves the food, and pours the wine. What do you make of this reversal?

1. The Shorter Catechism, *The Book of Confessions* (New York: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1983), 7.001.

This party is clearly a celebration. What is being celebrated?

Stuffed and Starving

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Well-meaning friends of mine were feeding bread scraps to the wild birds during an unusually cold winter. When the temperatures dipped even lower, my friends discovered several dead birds in their yard, apparently frozen to death. A little research revealed that bread lacks the oils birds require for insulation during the winter. Rather than seeking out the hard-to-find seed that would have kept them safe, the birds filled themselves with easy bread. They ate their fill, but what they were eating couldn't sustain them.

When my friends related that sad story, I was reminded of our consumer society. It is easy to build an apparently full life without God, but during a crisis or a moment of soul-searching, we often discover that we are deeply unsatisfied or even starving. Our culture invites us to consume as much as we can afford, but while glutting ourselves on luxuries, gimmicks, and status symbols, we may succumb to spiritual anemia.

A dieting folktale has it that digesting celery uses more calories than celery yields. Supposedly, one could starve to death while eating celery. The more one eats, the faster one starves! Whether or not that food tale is true, it offers a powerful metaphor for our age. If we're not careful, the more we consume the faster we will starve.

We need to hear again God's gracious invitation to fill up on that which truly satisfies our deep needs. We need to respond anew to the Banquet Giver who sets before us without cost the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask the group to read Isa. 55:1–9, reading aloud around the circle a verse at a time.

Can you recall a time in your childhood or youth when you worked and saved for something that turned out to be disappointing? Can you recall a similar circumstance in your adult life? Why do we sometimes pin high hopes on material things?

Is the consumer mentality of our culture unhealthy or merely a necessity in a healthy economy? Explain your thinking.

Do you think all people hunger and thirst for God? Why or why not?

To prepare for the feast, the wicked and unrighteous are commanded to forsake their former ways of living and thinking. What lifestyles or attitudes might get in the way of our coming to God's banquet table?

The prophet mentions covenant in this passage. What role does commitment play in a healthy and well-fed spirituality?



* FEASTING ON GOD'S
UNFAILING WORD

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

This chapter (Isa. 55:1–13) is the finale for the second section of Isaiah. Second Isaiah ends on a note of joyful promise and confidence. God's word of grace—God's invitation to the banquet of love—cannot fail. Like the water that softens the earth

and quickens the seed into life before returning to the clouds, so God's word cannot return to God without first accomplishing the divine purpose.

In the beginning, God the Builder spoke the universe into existence. Now, God the Banquet Giver speaks the creation toward its destiny, the gathering of God's faithful ones at the table of peace and rejoicing. Hearing God's inviting word, the exiles, the lost, the strangers and sojourners upon the earth will burst into song along with creation itself. The mountains will sing the refrain and the trees will clap in time as the whole world celebrates the goodness of God. What a party that will be!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask a volunteer to read 55:10–13 aloud. If different versions of the Bible are being used by participants, allow time for others to read passages that are translated differently.

Does it ever seem to you that God's plans for the world are being defeated? How do you account for this?

How would you sum up God's purpose for the world? God's purpose for you?

Do you feel your life is moving closer to or farther away from God's purpose for you?

God's word brings nourishment for life just as rain brings bread from the earth. What does it mean to you to feed on God's word? How do you put this into practice in your life?

When you consider the problems of your own community—addictions, poverty, crime—how might you rewrite the prophet's words as a promise of hope in your own time and place? Use verse 13 as your starting point.

Concluding the Session

You may conclude the discussion with the following prayer.

Leader: God of the banquet, in this world you heap our plates with blessings.

Group: Lord of the feast, you spread our table full of friendships, opportunities, and joys.

Leader: And in the world to come, you promise us a place in the great celebration.

Group: Help us to rejoice each day in the victory of your Son and to fill ourselves with the nourishment of your Spirit.

Leader: Amen.

Afterword

Suffering is increasing in the world today. People are hungry for something more beautiful, for something greater than people round about can give. There is a great hunger for God in the world today. Everywhere there is much suffering, but there is also great hunger for God and love for each other.²

We stand in the midst of nourishment and we starve. We dwell in the land of plenty, yet we persist in going hungry. Not only do we dwell in the land of plenty; we have capacity to be filled with the utter fullness of God (Eph. 3:16–19). In the light of such possibility, what happens? Why do we drag our hearts? Lock up our souls? Why do we limp? Why do we straddle the

2. From *A Gift for God*, by Mother Teresa, as quoted in Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, in *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1983), p. 252.

issues? Why do we live so feebly, so dimly? Why aren't we saints? . . . We have never learned to gather up the crumbs of whatever appears in our path at every moment. We meet all of these lovely gifts only half there. Presence is what we are starving for. Real presence! We are too busy to be present, too blind to see the nourishment and salvation in the crumbs of life, the experiences of each moment.³

Looking Ahead

In our next session we will reach into a grab bag of images for God. Some will be familiar; others will not. If you wish to consider those images beforehand, you may read Isa. 7:10–17; 10:15–19, 33–34; 26:1–4; and 28:5.

3. Macrina Wiederkehr, *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1988), p. 26.

session *SIX*

One Heart, MANY FACES

Isa. 7:10-17; 10:15-19, 33-34; 26:1-4; 28:5

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

In the last few sessions we have looked at a variety of pictures of God: the Builder, the Gardener, the Warrior, the Banquet Giver. Of course, God is constant. God's loving heart never changes, but God reveals different faces to us in different circumstances. Like a finely cut gem, God shows different facets and colors depending on our perspective. The prophetic imagination opens our eyes to some of these perspectives.

In this session we will mine the book of Isaiah for a few more evocative images. We have marked one section that may be skipped if your schedule is constrained. Keep in mind you may use as many or as few of these sections as you wish, and in any order.

The Woodcutter

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Perhaps you can identify with the Woodcutter from personal experience. Something is strong and satisfying in the heft of the ax and the bite of the blade. Even the largest tree must eventually fall before a determined woodcutter.

This passage originally warned of God's wrath against Judah's enemies, the Assyrians, pictured as great trees. But it is a small stretch to imagine God lifting the ax to fell the enemies that tower over you and me.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask each participant to read a verse aloud from Isa. 10:15-19 and 10:33-34 until the entire section has been read.

Do you ever feel trapped in a forest of problems? What are the most persistent troubles in your life?

The Assyrians seemed an unbeatable foe to the people of Judah. Do you think any problems are truly unbeatable? Why or why not?

Given the description in verses 33-34, do you think God is able to handle your problems? Are you willing to let God attack those problems in God's own way?



* OUR CROWN

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Life ought to consist of more than food and shelter. Life should shine with glints of glory and glimmers of heaven. Even in the daily round we can be surprised by grace. This world cannot altogether satisfy us because our hearts long for more than what this world can supply. If we live consciously in the presence of God, we have one foot already in heaven.

Read Isa. 28:5 aloud from several translations.

According to *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, "Among all items of apparel, a person's headgear was perhaps most significant in designating social, religious, and/or political status."¹

If God is your crown, what does that say about your "status"?

A crown or garland can signify honor, authority, or victory. How do these possibilities relate to you?

Does the presence of God add "beauty" to your life? Explain.

Does a crown carry responsibility as well as privilege? How have you experienced this?

The Rock

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

When a company chooses the Rock of Gibraltar as their corporate image, we understand the claim immediately. A rock is solid. A rock is reliable. A rock endures. You can safely build on a rock, like the wise person in the parable.

God is the everlasting Rock, the unshakable assurance, the safe foundation. Those who take their stand on this Rock can face adversity with peace of mind. This is the One you can count on, come hell or high water!

1. "Crown," by Carol L Meyers, in Paul J. Achtemeier (ed.), *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), s.v. "Crown."

Read Isa. 26:1–4.

At what times do you find it most difficult to trust God with a "steadfast mind" (26:3)?

If you wanted to rewrite this passage what different image might you substitute for "everlasting rock" (26:4)? What is the most solid and unfailing thing you can imagine?

The victorious people of God can open their gates without fear. Do you think trusting God makes it easier to be open and trusting in general? Why or why not?

As you review your life experience, do you honestly feel that God has earned your trust?

Immanuel

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Once again we must distinguish between the intent of the prophet and the reading of later generations. In Isa. 7:10–17, Isaiah reassures King Ahaz of God's saving presence by mentioning a soon-to-be-born child whose name will be called Immanuel, which in Hebrew means "God is with us." Isaiah does not seem to have had the Messiah in mind.

However, Christians have seen in the name Immanuel a promise that was fulfilled in Jesus, who is God-with-us in the fullest sense. Whatever

the particulars of Isaiah’s prediction, the prophet would be the first to agree that God is always at our side in times of joy or hardship.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Allow the group to read silently through the familiar words of Isa. 7:10–17.

Do you think about God’s nearness only when there is trouble in your life?

How does it make a difference in your living to believe that God is always with you?

If God is always with you, does that mean you are always with God? Why or why not?

Is God’s presence a guarantee that things will always work out for you? If not, what good is this promise?

Concluding the Session

Allow time for members of the group to name the image in today’s discussion that speaks most powerfully to them. After making time for everyone to share, you may close with this prayer.

Leader: Rock of Ages, the world may shake under our feet, but you are always solid.

Group: Spiritual enemies may overshadow us like redwood trees, but your ax hews them to the ground.

Leader: When the world makes us hang our heads in defeat, you remain our Crown of grace and glory.

Group: Those we trust most may forsake or fail us, but you are Immanuel: God-always-with-us!

Leader: We praise you for your undivided heart and the love that never changes its mind.

Group: We glorify you for the faces you show us, helping us to know you better.

Leader: Amen?

Group: Amen!

Afterword

What can I say to you, my God? Shall I collect together all the words that praise your holy Name? Shall I give you all the names of this world, you, the Unnameable? Shall I call you “God of my life, meaning of my existence, hallowing of my acts, my journey’s end, bitterness of my bitter hours, home of my loneliness, you my most treasured happiness”? Shall I say: Creator, Sustainer, Pardoner, Near One, Distant One, Incomprehensible One, God both of flowers and stars, God of the gentle wind and of terrible battles, Wisdom, Power, Loyalty and Truthfulness, Eternity and Infinity, you the All-merciful, you the Just One, you Love itself?²

Looking Ahead

Does God ever forget us? Does God forget anything? (The answer might surprise you!) In the next session we will consider the God who is Judah’s Redeemer and Rememberer. The leader should have paper and pens available for the group. If you wish to read ahead, you may study Isa. 43:22–44:5 and 49:14–18.

session *seven*

Isa. 43:22–44:5;
49:14–18

The God Who Remembers AND FORGETS

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

We sometimes use the expression “God-forsaken” in a casual way, but the phrase aptly describes the feelings of the exiled Jews who are addressed in the second section of Isaiah. In their bondage and banishment, the refugees from ruined Jerusalem feared that God had forsaken them. Perhaps the plight of the people had slipped God’s mind.

An absent-minded God is a frightful prospect, and the prophet does his best to lay such fears to rest. Just because God’s timetable is different from ours, we must not believe that God has overlooked our needs. Even if our best friends forget who we are in times of trouble, God will never forget us.

My daughter Bethany has a computer puppy. This cyberdog prances across the screen on a half-dollar-sized computer. By touching various buttons, Bethany feeds the dog, exercises, and disciplines him, even gives him shots when he is sick. If Bethany should forget to tend the puppy in a timely fashion, the cyberdog will beep insistently. I hope the battery on this thing runs down soon!

God needs no beeping reminders. It is unthinkable that God should forget to care for us. God remembers us twenty-four hours a day, and to be remembered by God is to be cared for by God.

“Zion” is used here as another name for Jerusalem. Why do you think this passage is addressed to the city?

What was the significance of Jerusalem to the Jewish people?

Why does the writer mention a nursing mother in speaking of God’s love? Can you offer other examples of human love to which God’s love might be compared?

At the time of this prophecy, Jerusalem was in ruins. What does it mean that the builders of Jerusalem will outdo the destroyers?

The prophet encourages the people to “lift up your eyes all around and see” (49:18). In what way might this be good prescription for anyone who feels forgotten by God?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask the group to read Isa. 49:14–18 silently. Invite participants to point out the words or phrases that catch their interest in this passage. Then read the passage aloud together.

Have you ever felt forgotten by God? How can a Christian respond to those feelings in a healthy way?



(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

My daughter Rachel is in the habit of writing reminder notes on her hands in ink. She often returns from school with homework assignments, phone numbers, and appointments jotted on her hands. My wife shudders at this habit, but it seems efficient to me. Unlike the notes I sometimes write on scraps of paper—and then lose—Rachel is unlikely to mislay her hands. These are reminders she cannot overlook!

In Isa. 49:16, God says to the people of the covenant, “See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands . . .” This is usually taken to mean that the architectural blueprints for Jerusalem are etched on God’s hands so that the divine Builder will not forget to rebuild the ruined city.

Isn’t this a wonderful and comforting image? God’s very hands are tattooed with reminders of love and covenant faithfulness. To speak in a very human way, God is reminded to love us every time the divine hands make a move—adding oil to the car, reading the paper, opening the mail, throwing a baseball! Allow your imagination to wander. What reminder keeps you in God’s thoughts? What do you think is tattooed on God’s palms? Your face? Your name? A pithy message? A passage of Scripture? Nail scars?

Give a piece of paper and a pen or marker to each member of the group. Have each person trace one of their hands on the paper, writing the following caption: The Hand of God.

Ask each one to write/draw on the palm of the hand a reminder for God to love us. Creativity and thoughtfulness are more important than artistic talent! What words or symbols are tattooed permanently on God’s palm as a perpetual reminder of God’s eternal commitment to you?

When everyone has finished, allow time for voluntary sharing and explanations within the group.

The Forgetful God

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

Paradoxically, while we affirm that God always remembers us, we can also take comfort in knowing that God is willing to forget. What does the all-knowing God forget? What could possibly slip the mind of the ever-remembering God? Our sins! God “remembers to forget” our mistakes and

transgressions! We have all experienced how difficult it is to forgive and forget. We try to put mistakes behind us—both others’ and our own—but doubts, anger, and hurt tend to linger in spite of our determination to move on.

Because we have so much trouble forgiving and being forgiven on a human level, we sometimes find it hard to believe in the wonderful completeness of God’s forgiveness. But once our Redeemer has forgiven us, God utterly “forgets” our wrongs and our guilt. God doesn’t nurse a grudge, waiting for the chance to dig up the past and throw our failings into our faces. What God remembers—covenant love and grace—is remembered forever. And what God forgets—the sin that separates us from our Lord—is forgotten forever!

God’s loving memory opens the eternal future before us, and God’s gracious amnesia closes the door of the past behind us. Praise be to the God who remembers us and forgets our sins!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask the group to read Isa. 43:22—44:5. After everyone has finished reading, review the feelings that are expressed in this passage. Are there verses in which God seems hurt or angry? Are there verses in which God seems forgiving and positive? God’s love for us never changes, but our own actions may cause God to respond to us in different ways.

Even though the covenant people have forgotten their responsibilities to God, God will not forget to forgive them. When God says, “I am He who blots out your transgressions” (43:25), what do these words make you think of?

If you were preaching this message to contemporary people in our culture, perhaps you would not speak of forgiveness as a “blotting out.” What modern images might express the way God erases/forgets our sins?

Even while assuring the people of forgiveness, God also says that because of the people's sin, the nation was delivered to destruction by Babylon. Can God forgive us and still force us to face the consequences of our mistakes? Why would God act in this way? Can you make comparisons from human life?

Covenant love works in both directions. God chooses us (44:1–2), and we are called to choose God (44:5). In your own life, in what ways have you chosen God?

Ironically, just as God's hands are etched with reminders of God's love for us, here the prophet depicts a person on whose hand is written a reminder to love and serve God. What "marks" in your life serve as reminders for you to love and serve God?

Concluding the Session

In this final session our image of God has been less concrete than what it has been in earlier discussions. Perhaps the remembering and forgetting God might be depicted as the Computer Operator, carefully choosing what to store and what to delete.

You may wish to allow a few minutes for participants to report on whether these sessions have actually prompted them to experiment with different ways of praying to or thinking about God. Those who have "tried on" different images of God can share their experiences. Those who have not

done so might talk about the reasons for their reluctance or discomfort.

Now that the formal discussions have ended, what—if anything—will participants do with these heart-stretching images of Isaiah's God? Has the book of Isaiah added anything to our spiritual toolboxes?

As a closing prayer, you may invite the group to sit in silence with heads bowed and eyes closed. In the silence, each person may name God aloud by some image or title—nothing more, just a name or image for God. When everyone has spoken, the leader may close the prayer in some simple manner, such as, "O God, who is higher than our highest thoughts, we offer these prayers in the name of Jesus, who is closer than our own heartbeat. Amen."

Afterword

In a clever poem, Richard Wilbur compares the forgiving God to an author who is trying to salvage a contrary piece of writing. (In editorial jargon, "stet" means to allow a passage remain in a manuscript.)

The Proof

Shall I love God for causing me to be?
I was mere utterance; shall these words love me?

Yet when I caused his work to jar and stammer,
And one free subject loosened all his grammar,

I love him that he did not in a rage
Once and forever rule me off the page,

But, thinking I might come to please him yet,
Crossed out *delete* and wrote his patient *stet*.¹

1. Richard Wilbur, *New and Collected Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p. 152.

THE WRITER

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