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THE BOOK of ISAIAH

Some introductory comment is surely necessary in beginning a study such as this prophecy, which extends to sixty-six chapters and spans almost half a century. The controversial aspects of the book, viz. those relating-to-authorship, will not specially concern us. Whether there was one Isaiah, or two, or three, does not materially affect the message of the book for today! What is more important for us than the problems of authorship is the word of the Lord that surely comes to us in what is written in this considerable prophecy - much more considerable and significant than is often realised, for Isaiah towered over the troubled and turbulent scene in 8th century Judah like a colossus. One thinks of the half-century of Spurgeon's ministry in 19th century London, and Churchill's domination of the political scene in the first half of the 20th - this is the kind of comparison we need to make to get some kind of idea of the stature of this man whose book we are about to read and study. On any estimate he was a great man, a spiritual statesman of great integrity and immense influence as we shall see.

It is very significant that the most intense prophetic activity in the history of the people of God - Isaiah was but one of many who prophesied during these troublous times - took place during the period that could be called the decline and fall of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. No revival was the message of God through him. Is there a word for us in this today?! What if the raising up and renewing of evangelical ministry should lie for judgment, not grace - or grace through judgment?

I) I:I

A general examination of the book reveals a threefold division, as follows:

I Prophetic (i-xxxv)

- a. 1:1-31 Introductory: The Great Indictment
- b. ii-v Judah and Jerusalem - reign of Uzziah
- c. vi-xii Judah and Jerusalem - reign of Ahaz
- d. xiii-xxiii Judgment on the nations
- e. xxiv-xxvii Isaianic apocalypse
- f. xxviii-xxxv Doom of nations and redemption of Israel

II Historical (xxxvi-xxxix)

- a. xxxvi Hezekiah's Trouble
- b. xxxvii Hezekiah's Prayer
- c. xxxviii Hezekiah's Sickness
- d. xxxix Hezekiah's Folly

III Messianic (xi-lxvi)

- a. xl-xlviii Deliverance from Babylon. The greatness and majesty of Jehovah
- b. xlix-lvii Redemption through suffering. The suffering servant of Jehovah
- c. lviii-lxvi Triumph of the Kingdom and Jehovah's universal dominion
Fulfilment of divine purposes

The outline is not original, but combines what seems best in several suggested analyses given in various commentaries, bible dictionaries and handbooks. It is sufficient to provide a useful guideline to our study and reference should be made to it as we proceed.

2) 1:1

Isaiah ministered, as we see in the opening verse, in the reigns of Uzziah (or Azariah), who was king from 791-740 BC, Jotham, 751-736, Ahaz, 736-721, and Hezekiah, 727-693 (the dates are approximate, but accurate to within a year or two; and the overlapping of some of the dates means that a king sometimes acceded to the throne before his predecessor had died). If a table of the kings of the Northern kingdom, Israel, and of Judah in the south, from the time of Solomon's death to the Captivity is consulted, it will be seen that the northern kingdom had no good kings in its entire history, and was finally overrun and brought into captivity in c 722 BC. The Southern kingdom, Judah, however, had several, interspersed periodically among the evil monarchs, and their reigns and influence served to delay the final judgment on Judah until 586 BC. This is the context of the prophetic word, so far as the chosen people's history is concerned and, we must seek to see Isaiah's ministry against such a background. There is also a wider context however, that needs to be remembered - the power-politics of 'the Middle East' of that time. During the reigns of these four kings, the powers surrounding and threatening Judah were, in the main, the Assyrian emperors Tiglath Pileser III (745-727), Shalmaneser V (727-722), Sargon II (722-705), and Sennacherib (705-681). During the lifetime of Isaiah three invasions of the land by the Assyrians took place, one in 734, by the Syro-Ephraimite coalition in the north; one in 711 by Sargon, in connection with the revolt of Ashdod, and the third in 701. Further historical references are the relevant passages in 2 Kings 15/16 and 2 Chronicles 26ff.

3) 1:1-31

The devastation in vvs 7-9 seems clearly to refer to an attack by the enemy. Since nothing of this nature is recorded as having happened in Uzziah's or Jotham's time - it probably refers to the invasion of 701 BC. The question arises why reference should be made to it at this opening juncture. The answer to this is that chapter 1 stands as a general introduction to all the prophet's writings, and not as referring to events in chronological sequence. When it came to setting down his message at the end of his ministry, it is surely natural that he should choose apt, and suitable 'word' as expressive of, and summarising, the theme and substance of his whole ministry throughout a lifetime. And after 701 BC when the danger to Jerusalem had receded, and his ministry was finally vindicated by God, it is easy to imagine him looking over the war-torn land, thinking back over the long years in which he had wrestled and agonised with and for his people, and beginning to formulate what just such an essence of these years had meant and signified as finally became the introduction to his great and wonderful prophecy. As the eminent expositor, G. Adam-Smith says, 'Chapter 1 is a clear, complete statement of the points which were at issue between the Lord and His own all the time Isaiah was the Lord's prophet'.

4) 1:1-9

The chapter has aptly been entitled 'The Great Assize or Arraignment', for it is so set out, with God as the Plaintiff and Judge; heaven and earth are the assessors (or jury); the defendants are the people of Judah, and the witness for the prosecution is Isaiah himself. The defence plea is: 'the multitude of their sacrifices', which the Lord dismisses witheringly in 11ff, and draws the 'trial' to its conclusion in the famous words of 18, which modern renderings change from the familiar AV meaning to one equally graphic and pointed, 'Come now, and let us bring our reasoning to a close (bring our case to a conclusion)'. We shall turn in more detail to specific issues in later Notes, but in the meantime it is helpful to see in outline form Isaiah's plan and purpose in writing. It is significant that in 18ff he speaks of judgment to come upon continued impenitence - a judgment that, alas, came only too truly and faithfully upon them from their offended and outraged Lord - and the emergence of a purified remnant of the people. These themes intertwine throughout his book, as for example in chs 24-27, while the latter part of the prophecy, chs 40-66 deal exclusively with the remnant that was to return from Babylon. Such is Isaiah's 'theme and variations' to be unfolded in the sixty-six chapters of his work.

5) 1:1-9

The plaint of God against His people begins immediately (2), and the personal nature of the Lord's controversy with them is seen in all its starkness. It is the revolt against God and His covenant, and the breach of fellowship and relationship that heaven and earth are called to assess. The well-known words in 3 are worth close study: they not only underline graphically the meaning of what is said in 2, but bring out with awful clarity the real nature of Judah's failure. The emphasis is on the two verbs 'know' and 'consider'. Theirs had become an unknowing and unthinking religion. They abounded in ritual and multiplied sacrifices, but their hearts were far from God. Religion had become for them a meaningless performance instead of a fellowship to be enjoyed, instead of a reasonable intercourse between the Creator God and His creatures. God works on man first through the conscience and mind, and when prayer, sacrifice and solemnity can exist without any real thinking fellowship with God, a tragic and fatal misunderstanding of the true meaning and purpose of true religion has taken place. We may not have the multitude of sacrifices today, but so often religion has just become the same sort of empty 'performance', something to be got through - and therefore got through as quickly as possible, preferably by 9.30 on Sunday morning, so that the rest of the day may be enjoyed (not 'got through' this time) at the beach, the golf course or in the country. One wonders what the living God thinks as He glances through the Church Notices and sees the re-timings of morning services and the cancellation of the evening ones. 'My people doth not know, My people do not consider'.

6) 1:1-9

One of the penalties of this unthinking religion is, of course, that men are incapable of discerning moral and spiritual trends and issues. The people of Judah could not put two and two together about themselves and their situation and see what was happening. Even in the midst of desolation that had come upon them, they could not think clearly enough to associate the disaster with their moral declension. Men saw a golden age of peace and plenty - up to that time and for many years now, especially during the reign of Uzziah, they had 'never had it so good' - but God saw the whole head sick and the whole heart faint (5). One does not require much initiative or imagination to draw a modern parallel there! Men saw security - how easy it is to be deceived by trade surpluses and credit balances - but God saw desolation (7). Men saw ceremonial solemnities by the hundred - ecclesiastical protocol observed on all possible public occasions, and the Church, always well represented - but God saw iniquity. These were the contrasts Isaiah dealt with. Then, finally, when men saw only natural calamity, Isaiah saw divine judgment and prophesied redemption. There is nothing more true or characteristic of empty, worthless religious life than this blindness, and it is sometimes awesome in its crassness. To think that, in all sorts of differing human circumstances, men should be so unaware of what is happening to them, when to spiritually discerning people it is as plain as a pikestaff that the hand of God is upon them!

7) 1:10-20

The vehemence and absoluteness of the Lord's condemnation of sacrifices and offerings in this passage have led some scholars to suppose that what we have here represents an anti-priestly and anti-sacrificial tradition which denied any God-given validity to the sacrificial system per se. But this is too sweeping a verdict, and it is not necessary to make it. The protest which the prophetic insight made was not against the sacrificial system as such - within the economy of divine revelation that system had its own particular function to fulfil - but against its abuse and adulteration. It was this that had rendered it meaningless and offensive and that called forth the condemnation of these verses. The peculiar genius of the sacrificial ritual was that it bore witness to the truth that salvation comes from outside man, not from within him. But the great danger in this is, of course, that it is open to abuse. Abuses came in those far-off days - as also abuses have come in modern times in the development of sacramentary religion with its sometimes frightful perversions of the truth of the gospel. The prophetic protest is therefore always a timely and necessary one, to recall men to the real heart and essence of religion, and to the truth that salvation by the grace of God lays profound ethical responsibilities upon those who are called by His Name.

8) 1:10-20

'It is perfectly clear here, as it is in all the Scriptures, that the strong warnings of God are filled with mercy, and His one desire is to turn men from their sins that they might be saved. Having stated the case against Judah and marshalled the undeniable facts of national experience, God now cries, 'Come, bring your reasoning to a close, though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow'. What a gospel of resounding good news to people who have blighted their lives, wasted their chances, lost their way and well nigh forgotten their spiritual address. This is total and instant forgiveness and restoration by the grace and undeserved mercy of God. Why, then, do sinners refuse such a call and offer? Is it because they are too proud to acknowledge their sin and need? When the Jews were finally carted off to Babylon, there was little left to be proud of. Do men sit lightly to the gospel because they do not believe God really means what He says about the punishment of sin in this world and the next? Or is it the claim of obedience and discipleship that holds men back from God? The gospel is no empty 'believism', and God states the alternatives very clearly in 18-20, 'Be My people and live by My Word and be blessed indeed in the life of salvation; or refuse Me and My mercy and, by going your own way, destroy yourselves'. God calls every man everywhere to repent. Come, let us return to the Lord with contrite hearts, and at least start the business of getting our lives reconciled to God: 'He that hath ears to hear, be he worldling, professing Christian or backslider, let him hear, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. God is in earnest. He has much to do, and gets tired waiting for His foolish children.' (Revelation. G.M. Philip).

9) 1:21-31

The last verses of the chapter announce a time of affliction, through which the nation shall pass as through a furnace; rebels and sinners shall be consumed, but God will redeem Zion, and with her a remnant of the people. The relation of these words to the offer of mercy in 18-20 is probably closer than at first appears. The forgiveness of God does not always annul the consequences of sin. Pardon is often experienced in the crucible of chastening, and it is sometimes the chastening alone that brings it. The Psalmist's word (Psalm 99:8) assumes a solemn significance in this connection: 'Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions'. It is sometimes forgotten that it costs to make bad men good, and it is hardly surprising that when injustice and corruption had eaten so deeply into the public life of Isaiah's day, it should require fire to burn it out. And since God's forgiveness is never merely a pronouncement of grace but also a declaration of intent, it must necessarily be accompanied by a drastic, and radical activity on God's part in which the recipient of His forgiveness learns to his cost how seriously God takes sin. The Divine Love has both comfort and terror in it - on the one hand it is a love that will not let us go, but on the other it is a love that will not let us off.

10) 2:1-5

After the introductory first chapter, in which we are given as it were in summary form, the 'message' of the prophet, we are now told of the 'Word' which Isaiah 'saw' concerning Judah and Jerusalem (1). An examination of what follows will show that this extends to the end of chapter 5, after which we have an historical statement (6:1) 'In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord ...'. Then, in 7:1 a new introductory statement, '... in the days of Ahaz ...'. Thus, chapters 2-6 really belong together as one section of the prophecy. It is interesting to compare the 'saw' in 2:1 with the 'saw also' in 6:1. There may be a significance in this, and it may mean that the prophet 'saw' the two things together, or that the second explains or conditions the first. The whole section divides into three, (i) 2:1-4:6; (ii) 5:1-30; (iii) 6:1-13. In (i) the pattern is 'what Jerusalem might be' - this is the point of the well-known words at the opening of the chapter. Then, in contrast, Isaiah sees Jerusalem as it really is (6ff) and this leads the prophet to speak of what must happen to Jerusalem in order that it might be what it ought to be. This is again expressed in a different way in the parable of the vineyard (5:1ff), in which what is stressed is the election of God and its purpose, and the failure of Israel to rise to it, and be a light to lighten the Gentiles. Then, finally, in 6:1ff, Isaiah, perhaps pondering the mystery of this failure, reminds himself that this is only what the Lord had warned him to expect in his ministry. Thus we have the account of his call and the terms of the divine mandate given him. It will be seen from this analysis that there is one theme underlying the whole section. We shall now turn to a detailed examination of it.

11) 2:1-5

There are two approaches to this magnificent and well-known passage, first of all its interpretation in context, then its wider messianic significance. We deal with the former first of all. G. Adam Smith speaks of the idealization of Jerusalem, and one has no quarrel with this view. It is unsatisfactory, however, to suggest, as he does, that it is simply the optimistic and rosy-coloured picture conjured up by a young, enthusiastic prophet, and that he changed his tune later, in the light of events. For this would make Isaiah 2 a false picture, with no real relevance, as if Isaiah were saying, 'I used to think the kingdom would come quickly, but now I am a sadder and a wiser man'. It is better to take it as portraying Jerusalem as it might have been if it had been true to its calling, with the following vision (6ff) portraying what came upon the city because it had been false to that calling. This is what gives meaning - and message - to Isaiah's words in this chapter, for it is the disparity between the 'ideal' and the 'real' that makes the divine judgment so certain. Yet, paradoxically, it is this judgment that will purge the nation and bring forth the remnant from the crucible that will inherit the promise and fulfil the calling of God. This, then, is an explication of one of the themes unfolded in the introductory chapter. And it is not fanciful to look ahead to the second half of Isaiah, and see this principle of grace through suffering unfolded in all its glory.

12) 2:1-5

The immediate application of these verses does not exhaust their meaning, for they still have a future-pointing significance about which something must now be said. The fact that this vision is recorded by both Isaiah and Micah (4:1-7) in days of darkest crisis bears witness to their unshakeable faith in the ultimate triumph of the sovereign purposes of God in the world and in the establishment of His ideal kingdom. The phrase 'the last days' is ambiguous prophetically, and may refer both to the period of our Lord's first coming and also that of His second. The promised kingdom of God 'came' with the coming of Christ to the earth, yet that coming was but in embryo, so to speak, and the kingdom will not 'come into its own' until He comes again. But is it to be thought of in terms of the ancient people of God, or as a purely 'spiritual' conception related to the Church as the new people of God? This question marks a major divergence of view as between the main streams of prophetic interpretation, but one cannot but feel that the insistence of the one that the promises in the Old Testament relating to Israel's future will be literally fulfilled, and of the other that these promises are all fulfilled spiritually in and to the Church, may do less than justice to the real truth of the matter. Paul's teaching in Romans 11 makes it impossible for us to dismiss the stubborn fact of Israel's continuance as a people in the purposes of God, and since this is so, some place must be found for them in the economy of the final victory of God. More light is needed on what is admittedly a difficult and controversial subject, and that light needs to be sought humbly, not dogmatically, through patient study of God's Word rather than of the schemes of men.

I 3) 2:6-22

The picture changes sharply at this point from one of the ultimate vision of the kingdom to that of devastation and judgment. Isaiah announces that God has abandoned His people, and all must therefore perish and collapse. In thus addressing himself to the actual situation of which he was a part, Isaiah renews God's charge against His people in 6-9. They have lost the spiritual values of life and have become preoccupied with trade ('they had never had it so good'), armaments, horses and chariots, and abounding idolatry. It would be difficult to think of a people who had more completely 'lost the place'. We should note how this has happened. It is by the importation of all sorts of foreign worship and heathen prophets (6) that had corrupted their earlier simplicity and faith. And always where religion becomes adulterated, the springs of action are thereby tainted and corrupt practice results. It is the history of every decline of nations; it is the melancholy and monotonous pattern of the judgment that falls on such a decline, and Judah proved to be no exception to the rule.

We note in passing how the Apostle John quotes from this passage (19-21) in his description of the final judgment in Revelation 6:14-17. The principle is the same, whether the judgment of God is interim or final.

14) 3:1-15

The only word that can be fitly used to describe these verses is anarchy. They unfold the breakdown of law and order in society. This, we need to see, is the end-product of the trend of godlessness and unrighteousness that had obtained in Judah over the years. But it is also more: it is God's own judicial pronouncement upon a nation's sin. Having refused Him and His law, they are made to do without Him and His law - with these fateful consequences. The passage has a strangely topical ring about it. What it describes is not so very different in essence from the incipient breakdown that we are witnessing in our own land and in other parts of the world today. We need to take note. History does repeat itself. The imagery in 13-15 is startling, portraying as it does the living God standing up, towering over the situation in stern judgment upon the nation. It is perhaps salutary for men to realise this: denying God does not banish Him from the affairs of men. He is there, inexorably there, waiting His time to strike, and when He does, it fares ill with men and nations. How little the men of Judah believed this, yet how truly and grimly were the prophet's words to be vindicated in their midst!

15) 3:16-4:1

The prophet now turns his attention to the women of Jerusalem, and with scathing, biting scorn he lashes them in the name of the Lord. How are we to understand this outburst? Does it brand Isaiah as a gloomy woman-hater, in much the same way as Paul is alleged to have been? This is hardly the point. What lies behind Isaiah's condemnation is that the idolatry of fashion in Jerusalem, with its relentless 'rat-race' and endless social climbing and all the ugly, vulgar snobbery it entailed, was the expression of the sickness unto death of Jewish society in these decadent days. As G. Adam Smith rightly says, 'If the women are corrupt, the state is moribund'. Is it, after all, surprising that the open sore thrown up by the hidden disease should appear just here? The world of fashion is a much more accurate moral index than most people are prepared to admit, and when womankind begin to go wrong allowing themselves to be swept along by the tides of vanity and immorality, something sinister happens to the very structure of society itself, and the foundations begin to rot. This is the explanation of Isaiah's devastating broadside against the hard-boiled fashion-plates of Judaeon society. How it must have cut them to the heart, and how it must have made them writhe and fume with rage and mortification and undying hatred! Yet, unacceptable as the prophet's word must have been to their proud hearts, they lived to see the fulfilment of the judgment pronounced against them. This is what happens when it is a man of God who speaks such things.

16) 4:2-6

Here is the prophet's third picture of Jerusalem - as it will be after God has dealt with it in the crucible of judgment referred to in the previous chapter. The participants in this new blessedness, however, are the remnant that escaped - which implies the finality of the judgment God was to bring upon His people. For the generality of the people, it was really the end of the road; from hence forward God was to have dealings only with the purged and purified remnant. 'Branch' in 2 is translated 'the spring' by G. Adam Smith, and 'green growth' by J.B. Phillips. It is not fanciful to think forward to the Christmas narratives and to such words used in them as 'dayspring', which speaks of the dawning of a new day, for this is the idea Isaiah has in mind in this word, and it is fulfilled finally for God's 'remnant' in the coming of Christ as Saviour. The words in 5 clearly recall the experiences of the children of Israel in the wilderness under the protection of the pillar of cloud and fire. Is one of Isaiah's thoughts in this the return of the remnant to its original status as a pilgrim people, pure in faith and life? Certainly this is implied in the purging by fire of which he has spoken. To be brought back to this is a salvation in itself, and it has implicit within itself most of what is of final importance in the spiritual life.

17) 5:1-7

The parable of the vineyard follows upon the teaching of the previous chapters as an illustration to bring home the prophet's point. Isaiah has asserted that the Lord would judge and destroy Jerusalem and its people, and to counter the very natural incredulity his hearers would express he makes use of the well-known symbol of the vine as the national emblem of the people of God. And he does so to compel the people to see the justice of his pronouncements and to pass judgment on themselves. It is ironic that such a beautiful simile should bear such a grim and terrible message. If everything possible has been done by the vine-dresser, and the vine still prove unproductive, bringing forth only wild grapes, what is there left to do save leave it alone and allow it to revert to its former wild state? What indeed? Isaiah's hearers would surely understand - as our Lord's hearers certainly did when He used the same image with the same purpose in His parable of the vineyard - as he introduced to them the vinedresser himself with his appeal to the men of Judah and Jerusalem to judge between him and his vineyard. They could not but acquiesce in the justice of the verdict expressed in 5, 6. With what devastating power, then, must the prophet's final thrust in 7 have come home to their hearts and consciences, convincing them of the sober realism of his earlier - and to them hitherto fantastic - words.

The message of the parable for today is just the same. God has no vested interest in His people. They are not indispensable to Him. The Church that 'loses the place' can never hope to remain inviolate in the divine favour. His purposes go forward unhindered, for our God is marching on. But any particular company of His people may be set aside if they prove unproductive and unfruitful.

18) 5:8-24

Having spoken of the degenerate vine, Isaiah next proceeds to describe its wild grapes. The writing is very graphic, brutal almost, but it was a brutal time and brutal things were happening in society, with the restraints of law and order at a discount. Exploitation in property and land (8) - Rachmanism is not a modern phenomenon, it is as old as the Bible - the giant mergers that squeeze the little man out of business, the terrible problems attendant upon chronic drinking - these were some of the fruits of Israel's degeneracy which called down upon the nation the woes pronounced by the prophet here. We shall turn to more detailed comment on these verses in later Notes. We content ourselves for the moment with noticing how utterly unsparing and fearless Isaiah is in his denunciation of the nation's sins. Yet withal, one does not have the impression of morbid or extreme fanaticism as one reads his words, only a growing awareness of the incisiveness of his discernment as he penetrates to the heart of the nation's sickness. It is all so credible and compelling that it would not be surprising to learn that even his most critical and contemptuous hearers conceded - however unwillingly - the truth of the charges he laid against them. When a big man speaks like this - and Isaiah was big in moral and spiritual stature - it is time for men to listen.

19) 5:8-17

The following detailed Notes on this passage are from the pen of George Philip, of Sandyford Henderson Church, Glasgow. The thrust of them is considerable. 'The woe against the landlords is specifically against those who by fair means or foul gathered great tracts of land and thus ousted the crofters, just as modern combines strangle the small trader. When you rob a man of the dignity of work and independence of life, making him virtually a slave dependent on charity, you destroy him. The whole life of Israel was based on the idea of small proprietors, and the Levitical laws of land tenure were enacted to guard this manner of life. But greedy men were heedless of God and of their fellows, and might became right, and if men became redundant they were cast on the rubbish heap while their oppressors enjoyed their estates (cf 1 Kings 21:1-22). No nation can long prosper if that which was intended for the satisfaction of many is reserved for the indulgence of the few. But there are take-over bids that deal in bodies and personalities as well as in land and property, and they too are an offence to God. No man has the right to make use of another who is made in the image of God. God, Who sees, will recompense.'

(Revelation. G.M. Philip)

20) 5:8-17

'In all levels of society and all areas of industry the spirit of greed which is concerned to grasp and acquire, but has no thought of giving end service, is never unrequited. It will know God's retribution, not least when wages and salaries that have been drawn but not worked for bring economic stagnation and collapse. But as such a society seems also to have the curse of strong drink it is a constant amazement to us how so many people can afford to spend so much money on this indulgence and still have the effrontery to moan about the cost of living. You will note in the passage that for all their indulgence of both food and drink, the people remain hungry and thirsty. Why? It is because men cannot live by bread alone, not even when it is accompanied by the jollifications of many kinds of circuses. Look at the picture; late nights and kindled cravings, an ever-deepening morass of bondage from which there is no escape; and above all a deadening of the moral and spiritual conscience until men become less and less able to register let alone grasp, the significant things of the Spirit and the Word of God. Is this not a picture of modern society? Isaiah's word to it was one of inevitable judgment unless a spirit of repentance became evident.'

(Revelation. G.M. Philip).

21) 5:18-20

'Here is the mockery of contemptuous worldly sinners, jeering and saying, "If there is a God let Him do something". This is the voice which shouts (usually a sign of uncertainty) to Christians, "Your God is out of date, dead, and your church is finished. Where is your God? Produce Him." But what kind of society has this spirit produced? Isaiah tells them in 18. They are drawing guilt (iniquity) upon themselves, and confirming their self-judgment and self-destruction. The progression from cords to ropes in that same verse tells the pitiful story of the progression of bondage that evil brings. When youngsters have experimented with all simple forms of drinking, they may go on to elaborate forms of the same thing in the realm of drugs. When they have explored the normal avenues of sexual experience they venture into excesses and perversions. They must, for the enlarging mouth of hell is insatiable (14). The gambler, the miser, the would-be public idol, in whatever realm, are all in the same boat. And so much does their particular bondage hold them that they reach the stage when moral distinctions disappear. Moral confusion becomes complete, for not only are men incapable of distinguishing things that differ, they see black as white and evil as good, and any thought of an absolute standard of behaviour coming from the Word of God is absolutely anathema. The desolation is complete when ecclesiastical leaders seem content to concur with the world's standards of valuation. This is the beginning of judgment.'

(Revelation. G.M. Philip).

22) 5:21-24

'The society we have been describing always produces a crop of arrogant know-alls who, although they have made an utter mess of their own lives and situations, are always at hand to offer advice in spheres they know nothing at all about. Read your daily newspapers and you will find many people, whose acquaintance with the Bible and the inside of a Church is infinitesimally small, strident in their denunciations of the Church's doctrine, and lordly in their advice as to how to make the Church successful and attractive to a modern generation. They should mind their own business (Ezra 4:1-3, 6:6, 7). Whenever mere human wisdom is found preening itself in its supposed superiority, we need to confront it with the Scriptures, e.g. Romans 1:21, 22, 12:16; Proverbs 3:1-8; and especially 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5; 3:4-23 and 2 Corinthians 10:12. Finally, in considering true wisdom that gives a man a right to speak, consider 2 Timothy 3:15 and Psalm 111. That will be an abundance of Scripture to ponder for one day. Pray God it will make you begin to think balanced thoughts about life.

'The upper classes and the judges of the nation are lashed because their might or heroism lay in feats of wine-drinking, the cost of which they met by bribes and fees they received in the course of perverting justice. But here, as in all previous "woes", the visible moral declension and corruption that is bringing God's judgment to the nation has a spiritual root. They have rejected the imperishable moral law of God's commandments and have despised the prophetic word addressed to them and pressed in upon their consciences by God-commissioned men. They knew the ageless truth of God ... but they counted it as nothing. This is what happens Sunday by Sunday as God speaks to congregations.... Perhaps men feel they could not take the preaching as from God and still go on living as they do. In the end they choose to adjust the Word of God rather than change their lives. That is to make out God a liar, and men may have to tell Him to His face one day that that was their policy of life.'

(Revelation. G.M. Philip)

23) 5:25-30

The judgment promised by the Lord upon the sins of His people is now described, first in terms of an earthquake devastating the land (25). Is this the same earthquake referred to by Amos? Then in terms of an Assyrian invasion. The Lord is represented as standing up to signal the awaiting forces of the enemy, who came immediately upon the divine summons with relentless force and unwearied vigour, like a flood upon the land, leaving nothing but ruin and distress behind them. We should note particularly Isaiah's words at the end of 25. They are eloquent of a situation which has been repeated often down the years. Calamity, either in the natural order or in war, is the warning voice of God to a people; it is God speaking in emphasis. But His people proved insensitive to His voice, and therefore invited further chastisement. This is the point that Isaiah is making; it is one which is repeated several times in 9:8-10:4, a section which some scholars suggest should be fitted in between 25 and 26 here. When chastisement after chastisement fails to awaken the people to a sense of awareness and of penitence, God is left no option but to increase His dealings in severity. And it was to this terrible crisis of invasion that Isaiah was to see Him bring them, during his ministry. How literally the prophet's warnings here were in the end fulfilled upon Judah.

24) 6:1-13

On any estimate and on any interpretation, this is a tremendous chapter, full of profound spiritual instruction, not only in relation to its original context of the prophet's experience, but for Christian experience in general. We have already suggested, following G. Adam Smith, that Isaiah, perhaps meditating on the mystery of Judah's failure, and the certainty of the judgment to come upon her, and discouraged doubtless at the results of his own preaching and ministry, reminds himself, by going back to the call he had received from God, that this after all is what God had told him to expect (9ff). It is not, of course, necessary to interpret the chapter as the first call of Isaiah. Calvin thinks that Isaiah had been prophesying for several years before Uzziah's death before having this experience. This may well be so; this would then be a fresh and deeper experience of the grace of God, in which his ministry was given new direction and impetus, given indeed its definitive empowerment. Whichever way we look at it, it is clear that Uzziah's death was a significant point for the prophet, and some background is necessary for a true appreciation of Isaiah's experience. This shall occupy us in the next Note.

25) 6:1-13

The year that King Uzziah died was a time of crisis and convulsion, when old values were challenged and threatened. The days of Uzziah - fifty-two years of them - were days of peace and prosperity, and suddenly the false peace and well-being they engendered ('never had it so good') began to crumble and what was thought to be stability was seen to be hollow mockery and sham. It was into this turmoil that the vision of God came - the vision of the Lord upon His throne. Furthermore, Uzziah had died a leper, for his sin of intruding into the priestly office (2 Chronicles 16:16-21), and it may well be that it was in Uzziah's death that Isaiah saw the holy God Who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity in that awful judgment which showed in an unmistakable way that all was not well in Judah. If, then, as Calvin suggests, Isaiah had been prophesying before Uzziah died, this experience would mean that he had got an awful glimpse into the holiness and majesty of God, in such a way as to deepen his understanding of the things of God, and in a way he had never hitherto known. Is it possible, one wonders, that Isaiah, called by God as he was, had in some measure at least, been beguiled by the pleasant conditions of Uzziah's reign, and had received a rude shock in the judgment of the king? Is this the explanation of his heart-rending confession 'I am a man of unclean lips'?

26) 6:1-4

One of the things that Isaiah's vision underlines is the contrast between Uzziah, in whom so many had pinned their hopes, and the Lord of glory. G. Adam Smith speaks of the transition from hero-worship to the dawn of faith, from trust in princes to trust in the living God. But more. It was essentially a vision of the Throne, a reminder to the prophet in a time of crisis and convulsion in the nation that God was in control. That this must have been a comfort, assurance and encouragement to Isaiah goes without saying, but 'seeing the Lord' in this way for encouragement is a painful business, fraught with costly transformation for all who do so. To see that God is in control has as a necessary corollary the realisation that He has control over, and claims upon, our lives. Also, that when He decides to act to demonstrate His control, it involves controlling us also. It is not a light thing to 'see the Lord'. It is a vision needed in our day and age also, with all its confusions and turmoil, but we must remember the implications of seeing it. Furthermore, the vision of the Throne reveals God as high and lifted up in holiness, more concerned with holiness and righteousness than with favouring His chosen people, manifesting the sublimity of the divine presence to a generation that had trampled irreverently the courts of the Lord, and the reality of His burning wrath against sin, to men who multiplied sacrifices with hearts that were far from God. Above all, it was a revelation of His sovereignty to men who presumed to take their own way with Him.

27) 6:5-7

The effect which the vision had on Isaiah was overwhelming. An instantaneous and overpowering sense of sin assailed him, making him cry out in distress and terror. The experience had two elements: on the one hand he was conscious of his involvement in the sin of the people, and on the other, of his own personal sin. It is probable that what brought about the first was the contrast which the vision afforded between the pure and worthy worship of the heavenly host and the hypocrisy of the nation's religious observances when their social and political life made their worship an abomination to the Lord. The personal feeling of the prophet was that he was part of this abomination and that he needed to confess his own shame at being part of it. But there was more than this in Isaiah's confession. Being a prophet, he necessarily felt his mortal weakness most upon his lips. And here is a word for all who speak for Christ. Who among us has always spoken cleanly and truly for Him? When one thinks of the carelessness with which we have betrayed our calling as ambassadors for Christ, or been untrue or less than faithful to the word of reconciliation, one can easily understand the depth of the prophet's feelings expressed in his cry of woe. For God to commit a message to a man, and for that man to be unfaithful to it - it is this that needs cleansing, whether the reason be that he is afraid to declare it or that he seeks an easier way, or something else. It is recorded of John the Baptist, 'John did no miracle, but all that he spake concerning this Man (Jesus) is true'. Can this be said of our testimony? Does not such a word rebuke and challenge us all, and show us our need of just such a cleansing that Isaiah became conscious that he needed?

28) 6:5-7

Two things need to be noted in relation to the cleansing that Isaiah experienced here. The first is that, it was not the live coal, as such, but the word of the Lord that cleansed Isaiah. The coal was the symbol of the divine fire that cleanses men's hearts, but the fire operates in and through the word of the Lord. 'Now ye are clean', said Jesus to His disciples, 'through the word which I have spoken unto you'. An interesting parallel may be found in the story of the cleansing of the leper in Mark 1:40ff. It is recorded that Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth His hand and touched him, saying, 'I will, be thou clean'. But it was not the touch that cleansed him; it was the word of power, 'I will, be thou clean'. The touch was for the man's comfort, to welcome him back, to reinstate him, into humanity. So with Isaiah. The prophet was cleansed by the divine word; the live coal was but the symbol of that cleansing. The second point is that this cleansing was necessary in relation to the need for a new message, for the recovery of the message of grace in the prophet's experience. It was after the cleansing that the word of commission came to him that defined - nay, more, re-defined - his whole ministry. It is significant that there was enacted in Isaiah's own experience the reality of the true worship, of which the multitude of sacrifices in chapter 1 were such an empty travesty. In this sense, what is recorded here is an acted parable relevant to the whole nation and its needs at that time.

29) 16:8-9a

When sin is cleansed, ears are opened to hear the voice of God and His Word. This is the simple message that stands out from these verses. And their implications are truly tremendous. If a true word is not being spoken, or discerned by the Church as needing to be spoken, may it not be an indication that there is a crying need for purging and cleansing in the Church? We may recall the dark days recorded in the opening chapters of 1 Samuel where it is recorded that the word of the Lord was precious (i.e. a scarce commodity) and there was no open vision. Why was this? It was because the moral and spiritual declension of the time had grieved the Spirit of God away. This is what blots out the voice of God. There is a real challenge here to the Church today, if she will receive it. We hear much today of the lack of candidates for the ministry and the mission field; people do not seem to be hearing the call to service. May not the reason lie just here? Is not the answer only too often that men are not standing within earshot of the voice of God, and that there is a barrier that needs to be removed, that can be removed only by the cleansing and purging of the fire of God? At all events, when Isaiah's sin was purged, he heard in a new way and to some purpose. And his response was instant: 'Here am I, send me'. He made himself available to the Lord. This is the greatest privilege and responsibility of all - availability. Paul could say - with the same heart-attitude as Isaiah - 'I am ready', because he too had known the mighty cleansing of the Word and Spirit of God. Can we?

30) 6:9b-13

These verses give the terms of the ministry to which Isaiah was called - solemn, heart-breaking terms. For Isaiah was called, not to success, but to faithfulness. It was to be his lot that the people would not listen to him - that was the cross he had to bear. 'Some scholars suggest that from the moment of his call Isaiah had forebodings about the issue of his ministry, and that the opening years of it, as recorded in chapters 1-5, served to confirm his apprehensions and etch them more clearly on his tender heart. It is interesting to note how much use the New Testament makes of those verses from Isaiah. Christ uses them (Matthew 13:14, 15; Mark 4:12), John uses them (John 12:40), and Paul uses them (Acts 28:26, 27) as finding fulfilment in their own work and generation. In the context of the living word and work of God history repeats itself, and wherever men are sent to proclaim the saving truth of God there is always a twofold reaction. This is inevitable, because the manner and attitude of men's lives turn the gifts and blessings of God into judgment' (G.M. Philip). The question that arises from this is whether we can face such a challenge. What if God were preparing His Church today for judgment, not blessing, for testing rather than awakening? It may be that our generation will not see the kind of spiritual awakening and renewal that many of us have longed for years to see until fire and purging and judgment have done their cleansing work in the Church and produced a purified remnant. This was Isaiah's vision, and his stewardship, and it was required in this steward that he be found faithful. God help us also so to be!

31) 6:9b-13

'The prophet is awed by his commission and asks how long this desolating reaction to his ministry will last. The focal point of the answer is the word "until". It speaks of an unerring purpose proceeding through the devastation and dereliction of national judgment into a day when the holy remnant of God's people shall be His in truth and righteousness. But first there is a great cutting down until only a stump remains (13). The last verse reads "And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump." The tree will yet be stripped of leaves and branches until a bare, dead-looking stump is all that remains; but from that seemingly finished stock, pruned down by the chastisements of God, there will yet stem holy fruit, a people consecrated to God who will carry forward His holy purposes. No matter how deeply submerged the work of God may seem at any given time we are not to be deceived, for the line of continuity is unbroken and vital with God's own power. His ways of advancing His work may not be ours, but they are exceedingly effective. If this lesson is applicable on the general level of the work, it is equally so, on the personal level. We are all too quick to pass judgment to devaluate, and write off someone as sub-quality. But it is by fruit men are judged; and not by green fruit. And ripeness takes time to mature. It sometimes needs a touch of frost! Ponder John 15:1-8 and 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.'

(Revelation. G.M. Philip)

32) 7:1-9

After Isaiah's retrospect in the previous chapter, we now turn to the events of his day, and his encounters with king Ahaz. A word or two is necessary about the background of the passage if we are to understand aright the significance of Isaiah's message here. The immediate historical situation is unfolded for us in 2 Kings 16:1-9. The date is approximately 734 BC only a little time before the eclipse and captivity of the northern kingdom, Israel. Rezin of Syria, and Pekah, king of Israel have entered into a coalition against Judah, to attack the southern kingdom. Ahaz, as we see from 2 Kings 16, appealed to the Assyrian emperor, Tiglath-Pileser, for help, and this fateful decision was to affect the whole course of politics for the next thirty years. It is in this situation that Isaiah sought to intervene, exhorting the king against any such hazardous alliance. The prophet could see, as apparently the foolish king could not, that such an alliance, even if it brought short-term relief from the threat of Resin and Pekah, could in the long run prove disastrous for Judah, for if Syria and Israel were conquered and brought into subjection by Assyria - as they were - then the oppressor would be right on Judah's border, and contemporary history was proving that lesser states were receiving scant respect as to their sovereignty when the ruthless northern invaders chose to extend their sway through the ancient world. Isaiah's message to the king and the people was to trust in the providence of God. Could Assyria help them if God had ordained their defeat? And if God had ordained their preservation, what was there for them to fear?

33) 7:10-16

But Ahaz is not disposed to pay heed to the prophet's message. Isaiah therefore, seeing that the king was determined to seek the help of Assyria, appealed to him to seek a sign from the Lord. Isaiah's offer of a sign was one which the prophets of Israel used to make when some crisis demanded the immediate acceptance of their word by men, and men were more than usually hard to convince. Such signs are offered only to weak or prejudiced persons. The most real faith, as Isaiah himself tells us, is unforced, the purest natures those that need no signs and wonders. But there are certain crises at which faith must be immediately forced, and Ahaz stood now at such a crisis (G. Adam Smith). And the king was placed in an intolerable dilemma. His mind was already made up about what he was to do, and a sign from God, which would certainly have made him refrain from calling in the help of Assyria, was the last thing he wanted. On the other hand, to refuse the sign which would make known God's will as being against Assyrian help for His people, would be deliberately to refuse the divine will and bring condemnation upon him. It was in this consciousness that Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, and this means that he deliberately refused the way of God. It was an act of rebellion against the divine will. And it brought a swift pronouncement of judgment upon him by the prophet. God would give him a sign, of judgment instead of grace, which would be a token of just how terrible his failure had been. We shall discuss the meaning of the sign in the next Note.

34) 7:19:25

The sign given by God would be simple enough to interpret but for the fact that the name of Immanuel is involved in it. A child was to be the divine sign, and by the time he is come to years of discretion he will be eating butter (curds) and honey, the food of privation and desolation, the food of a people whose land, depopulated by the enemy, has been turned into pasture. Before the child could grow up, Syria and Ephraim were to be laid waste, and Judah herself made desolate: This is the picture that is portrayed in the remainder of the chapter. This much is clear and straightforward so far as exposition goes. But what of Immanuel? Why should this wonderful Name be associated with judgment and desolation, when it is so inseparately associated with the promised Messiah? The link seems to be this: The Child will become an innocent sufferer, a Man of sorrows! This is what Ahaz's sin leads to. There is a marvellously mysterious interweaving of events here to produce the picture of a Suffering Servant. G. Adam Smith refers to Ahaz as the Judas of the Old Testament who sells the Messiah by wilfully seeking to bring about the kingdom in his own sinful way. The name Immanuel, 'God with us', must surely have pointed the true way to Ahaz. Trust in Him, cried Isaiah, not in Assyria. But Ahaz was intent on going his own way, and as such stands as the symbol of a people of God whose continued faithlessness caused the Christ to be born into a subject race. Here is the beginning of the rejection of the Messiah by a people who knew not the time of their visitation.

Did the sign find its immediate fulfilment in the birth of Hezekiah? This is probable, but it reaches out beyond him, to a greater than Hezekiah. And the instinct of the New Testament Church was surely right when it saw in these words a Messianic hope and regarded them as fulfilled in the birth of Christ.

35) 8:1-10

The teaching of this chapter runs parallel to the previous one, with 1-4 taking place before Ahaz had called in Assyria, and 5ff after. The first verses contain another prophetic parable. The Hebrew name Maher-shalal-hash-baz means (in J.B. Phillips' rendering) 'quick-pickings-easy-prey', and the prophet's child was to be so called because before he was old enough to call father or mother by name the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria would be carried off to Assyria. It is a prediction, that within little more than a year Syria and Israel would be devastated, a prediction that was only too accurately fulfilled when in 732 the northern kingdom went into captivity.

From 5 onwards, the prophet confronts the people with the results of their disastrous choice. The metaphor of the waters is a striking one. The 'waters of Shiloah' constituted the main water supply of Jerusalem, which came through the conduit (7:3) to the city. It was a sparse and feeble supply, compared with the bountiful and well-organised canals and reservoirs of Judah's surrounding nations, Syria as well as Assyria. The point however that is being made is that water-supplies were symbols of a nation's material prosperity, and Judah was more attracted to material prosperity than to the things that make a nation truly great, namely its spiritual resources and heritage. In refusing therefore the waters of Shiloah, Judah was turning from God in favour of the heathen world-power that was Assyria. And this was to open the floodgates to the swirling waters of judgment which would sweep down on the hapless and stricken land. The way of the transgressor is always hard, as Judah was to find out to her cost.

36) 8:9-10

The mention of Immanuel at the end of 8 seems to have brought a gleam of hope into the darkness of Isaiah's grim prediction of doom, and enables the prophet, as G. Adam Smith has it, to pull together his distraught faith in his country and fling defiance on her foes. It is rather wonderful to read this lonely figure's testimony of trust in the living God, when all around him the people were proving so faithless. But this was the basic heart of Isaiah's message in the midst of all the doom he pronounced. 'God is with us, and all will yet be well if only we trust in Him'. We need to pass over many intervening chapters and read the account of Sennacherib the Assyrian's assault on Jerusalem in 701 BC to see how unerring and authentic the prophet's confidence proved in the end to be. As G. Adam Smith says: 'The challenge (made here by Isaiah to Judah's enemies) was made good. The prophet's faith prevailed over the people's materialism, and Jerusalem remained inviolable till Isaiah's death'. 'God-with-us' became the one certain, unchanging reality in the midst of all the complex and confusing pattern of events of these momentous years. How wonderful - and how needful - to have such a voice ringing out amid the turmoil and uncertainties of modern power politics, and to be reminded that this is the one great circumstance that can change despair into hope, and hope into realisation.

37) 8:11-15

The picture in 11 is a very graphic one. In the midst of the confusion and convulsions of the time, Isaiah is steadied by the mighty hand of God upon his shoulder, so to speak, and exhorted to stand firm and not be carried away by popular feeling towards the alliance with Assyria. Does this mean there was a time when he was tempted to wonder whether, after all, he was wrong and the king right? Perhaps. Who among us has never doubted, in time of stress and strain? Whatever may have been the case however, it is clear that it was this steadying Hand that enabled the prophet to speak with such confidence in 9, 10 and assure the distraught people that God was with them. God's message to the prophet (12) is very unclear in the AV, and the RSV is to be preferred, 'Do not call conspiracy all that this people call conspiracy'. J.B. Phillips renders it, 'Pay no attention to the rumours of this people, and do not be afraid of what they fear or be in dread of it. It is the Lord of Hosts Whom you should honour, it is he whom you should fear and he whom you should dread'. We see in 9, 10 just how fearless and steadfast he was in this time of crisis. G. Adam Smith interprets 14, 15 as follows: 'Here is a man running in his panic in the wilderness, seeking the Lord. He comes to this rock and finds in it a hiding place. But here is another man, also running in panic, running he knows not where, with no thought of the Lord; to him the rock is but a rock on which to trip, stumble and fall.' As another scholar puts it, 'divine justice is something which is either observed, desired or attained, and is then man's weal, or on the other hand, is overlooked, rejected, or sought after in a wild, unintelligent spirit, and only in the hour of need, and is then their lasting ruin'.

38) 8:16-22

All is not dark, however. God is a stumbling block to both houses of Israel, but there is a little group of individuals responsive to Isaiah's ministry and to the word given him from God. This is the remnant, who now become the hope for the future. This is the theme of 16-18. The word of the Lord, having been refused by king and people, is withdrawn (16), and the Lord hides His face from them. The initiative now passes to the remnant (18), and they feed quietly and faithfully on the Word while the convulsions of the land drive the people to distraction, despair and panic. The picture is a very dark one: in their extremity, with the storm clouds of crisis swirling around them, the reference in 21, 22 is to the fall of Samaria in 732BC. They have recourse to spiritism for help (19), becoming unhinged with hope of real help and comfort departing from them, and cursing king and God as they are driven into darkness. G. Adam Smith adds, 'The shock and the pity of this rouse the prophet's great heart. He cannot continue to say that there is no morning for those benighted provinces. He will venture a great hope for their people. And so to chapter 9, with its wonderful messianic hope: 'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.'

39) 9:1-7

Hard upon the picture of the doom of Israel's captivity there comes the development of the vision of the Messiah, which expands the hopes expressed by the prophet in 8:16-18. The translation of 1 is difficult. J.B. Phillips' rendering is helpful: 'But there shall be no gloom for her who was once in misery. There was a time when he brought contempt upon the land of Zebulon and the land of Naphtali, but there will come a time when he will bring glory upon the road to the sea, the land beyond Jordan, the Galilee of the nations'. The thought is a contrast to the closing verses of the previous chapter. Israel, that was afflicted, should have no more affliction. The future would be in striking contrast to the past. Zebulon and Naphtali and the road to the sea, the land beyond Jordan refer to the same terrain, and the meaning is that the same region that had been devastated was to be, in the future, the source of a glory greater than Israel had ever known before. G. Adam Smith says that no part of Israel had been so given to idolatry as Zebulon and Naphtali, and now the horrors of captivity had passed upon them. Being the most northerly part of Israel they would naturally feel the first fury of the Assyrian onslaught and be longest under captivity. In connection with the long-term fulfilment of this prophecy (to which we turn in tomorrow's Note) is it not wonderful to think that it was to the places that had suffered most that our Lord's public ministry was so largely given?

40) 9:1:7

There are two perspectives in view of this vision, the near and the far: first of all deliverance in terms of being set free from the Assyrian yoke (4, 5); but also Isaiah speaks in such terms as can only properly be applied to Messiah's future reign. This is a prophecy about the Immanuel of chapter 7. The Church's instinct has been right when it has associated this passage with the gospel, and the light and joy it brings. The important thing to see is how this wonderful song of hope rang out in the midst of such dire darkness and oppression. Here was a man of God who in the midst of such crisis had a sure word of hope from the Lord for the people. He did not try to invent a new theology, or a new morality, to suit the new age in which he lived, but gave a resounding word about Christ the Messiah. Would that this were the pattern and practice in our times of crisis today!

Alternative translations should be consulted to make 3 and 5 more clear. The 'not' in 3a is wrong. J.B. Phillips reads 'You have made them exuberant with rejoicing and filled their hearts with joy'. This follows naturally upon the thought expressed in 2. 5 should read (with J.B. Phillips) 'For the trampling boots of battle and the garment stained with blood shall be burned as fuel in the fire', the meaning being that all such signs of war will become things of the past, since the Messiah will establish His reign of peace, and war shall be no more. With these re-translations, the passage achieves a wonderful beauty and harmony, all the more so against the dark backcloth of impending captivity and doom. And is it not benediction and beatitude even to read 6 and 7, with its picture of the 'Prince-of-four-names' (Wonderful Counsellor is one title not two)? How much food for thought, and what inducement to worship and adoration here!

41) 9:8-10:4

The vision fades and the grim notes of judgment sound out once more in Isaiah's prophecy. There are four sections in this passage, each ending with the phrase 'For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still'. The prophet's point is to 'show how often the Lord has already spoken to His people by calamity, and because they have remained hardened under these warnings, there now remains possible only the last, worst blow of an Assyrian invasion' (G. Adam Smith). God has tried everything short of this, and it has failed. Now only this remains and it shall not fail. In 8-12 the judgment was loss of territory. The people had shown a spirit of bravado in face of misfortune, they were not humbled, nor did they see the hand of God against them. So God increased the pressure upon them, and enemies filched their territory from them. In 13-17, it is war, which dismembers the nation in one day and cuts off the cream of the nation's youth. In 18-21 it is internal anarchy. Even with war the people did not repent, so worse was to come. Is there a lesson in this for us today? In 10:1-4 it is the threat of captivity. All warnings had gone unheeded, the people were blind to the dispensations of a frowning providence, and their sin and shame continued (1, 2), hence the threat of visitation (3) and the 'desolation that cometh from far' - i.e. Assyria. All appeals are alike in vain: the divine anger is still not turned away and His hand outstretched still, because they have refused to repent. In terms of Isaiah's arraignment in the introductory chapter to his prophecy, one can see the force and thrust of his words here. The case against them was unassailable. What could there be left for them but judgment, when all possible appeals to them to turn had gone unheeded?

42) 10:5-19

These verses clearly belong to a time considerably later than the reign of Ahaz. Samaria has already fallen, as we see from 11, and this took place about 721 BC, in the reign of Hezekiah. The threat of a similar doom is made against Judah and Jerusalem, and the Assyrian is represented as evilly and unscrupulously boasting about what he will do to Jerusalem. In effect, God is saying two things here. In the first place He is saying to His rebellious people, 'Where is your treaty with Assyria now?' Look at your 'ally' bearing down upon you, intending destruction upon you. Where is your promised help now? The second thing is this: The Assyrian's intention is to destroy you. But he does not realise that he is but an instrument in My hand to punish you. He cannot do as he likes. And because he does more than I intend him to do, I will punish him when I have finished using him to punish you (12). The arrogance of Assyria's boasting is very graphically delineated in 13 and 14, but the realism of God pricks the bubble in 15. The axe does not boast itself against its wielder with impunity, as Assyria found to its cost. This is a lesson that needs to be learned by nations today also.

43) 10:20-34

The gist of this passage is that the remnant of Judah, spared and left after all that the Lord does to them through the rod of His anger, Assyria, will become the seed of a new life for His people. Because Judah trusted in Assyria, she received the stroke. But now, she would lean on God alone. J.B. Phillips translates 22b, 23 as follows: 'Destruction has been determined, to prove beyond doubt the righteous purpose of the Lord. For the Lord, the Lord of hosts, will complete the destruction He has determined, for all the world to see'. Skinner comments, 'An extraordinary judgment, reducing the teeming population of Judah to a mere remnant, will be a convincing manifestation of Jehovah's judicial righteousness, and of the moral ideals on which His government of the world is based'. In 24-27 there comes the promise and assurance of God concerning Assyria's destruction, as He arises to vindicate His people. In 28ff, Isaiah gives a dramatically imaginative description of the advance of the Assyrian army upon Jerusalem, with the aggressor on the point of falling on the distressed city (32), when the Lord intervenes at the strategic moment on behalf of His people (33), and in a moment Assyria's might is set at naught. J.B. Phillips renders 33, 34 thus: 'Yet see, the Lord, the Lord of hosts, will lop Assyria's boughs with fearful force. The tall trees will be hewn down, and the high and mighty will be brought low. He will cut away the thickets of the forest, and the majestic cedars of Lebanon shall fall'. Thus swiftly are the enemies of the people of God dealt with and set at naught, when He chooses to deal with them. Not even the moment of victory is too late for Him to turn the tables and transform the situation. Who would not trust such a God?

44) 11:1-16

Such, then, the fate of Assyria. When the axe is laid to the root of the tree, it falls without hope. But with Judah, it is different. She also falls, but from out of her fall, life rises again. Out of the fallen stump a shoot springs up (1). It is the idea of the Remnant again, and out of it in particular comes the Branch, the Messiah (Chapters 11 and 12 belong together and form a fitting climax to this whole section of the prophecy. Chapters 13-23 introduce a new subject altogether, a series of judgments pronounced on the surrounding nations, perhaps spoken at different times during Isaiah's long ministry). The chapter divides naturally into three parts, with a portrait of Messiah in 1-5, the redemption of nature in 6-9 and the return and sovereignty of Israel in 10-16. Let us think first of all, and in general terms, of those to whom these words were first addressed, the little group of faithful disciples gather round Isaiah, despised and spurned by the people. They give a wonderful picture of the secret comforts given to those who stand firm in a day of adversity and declension. They are fed on the finest of the wheat, so to speak, and given to gaze on the Redeemer, kept by the power of God through faith; they endure as seeing Him who is invisible. How relevant this is for our own day, with its declension spread far and wide! And what comfort to know that even if national judgment were to fall, this kind of hidden ministry would still be possible to those who 'had not bowed the knee to Baal'.

45) 11:1-9

Now to a more detailed examination of the sections of the chapter. If we compare 2 with 61:1ff and Luke 4:18, 19, we may see, by association of ideas, that the true equipment for gospel work is the anointing of the Spirit in these terms: wisdom, insight, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord. These all lay emphasis on intellectual qualities rather than emotional. Not that mere intellectualism can ever be vindicated from the Scriptures, but the fact remains that here, and in the New Testament generally, tremendous emphasis is laid upon the necessity of thought. 'Think on these things', 'be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind'. The appeal of the gospel is first to the mind, and in Acts 17 we find Paul reasoning with his hearers out of the Scriptures. This is interesting and significant in the light of some present day tendencies in evangelical life towards emotional evidences and manifestations of the Spirit. It is as well to remember that 'the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets' (1 Corinthians 14:32). G. Adam Smith thinks it significant that Isaiah should emphasise these aspects of the Messianic spirit in relation to the lawless and backslidden state of the nation. In a similar situation facing us in our twentieth century society, it is a message that commands the minds of men, not something that stirs their emotions that is needed - less spectacular, perhaps, but more important, effectual and lasting.

A word about 6-9. The two advents of Christ blend in the prophetic, forward look. Here it is the final consummation that is in view, and the effect of completed redemption upon nature and the brute creation (cf Romans 8:19-22). This is not poetry, but theology. In the regeneration man will come into his own as true overlord of the created order, and the animals will be subject to him and recognise his authority over them.

46) 11:10-16

The immediate reference of these verses must necessarily be taken to be to Israel's return from exile in 538 BC, and we should link them in our thinking with 6:12, 13. Judah must pass through captivity before she tastes of this blessed future which the prophet here sets before her. The 'second time' (11) refers to another great deliverance similar to Israel's deliverance and redemption from Egypt under Moses. As God had done this once, so now He could do it a second time. But once again, as so often in prophecy, the 'near' and the 'far' mingle and blend. There is, on the one hand, the return from the Exile, under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah: but this does not and cannot exhaust the meaning and significance of the prophet's words for, as we have seen, 6-9 refer to the final consummation of all things when nature itself will be redeemed at the coming of Christ to take His power and reign. Isaiah's words must therefore have reference to the final ingathering of Israel at the end-time mentioned by Paul in Romans 11. In this connection, compare the language of 12 with Matthew 24:31 and Mark 13:27. It can hardly be accidental that our Lord's words referring to the end-time echo so clearly those of Isaiah in this passage, and we must therefore conclude that the prophet was speaking more deeply perhaps than he himself could know, and seeing in vision beyond the restoration of the chosen people from Babylon to the final climactic consummation of history itself.

47) 12:1-6

As Israel sang songs of deliverance after their redemption from Egypt, so the redeemed Israel will again sing the praises of their God. Here is their song in these verses. A careful study of the associations of this psalm of thanksgiving, with the song of Moses in Exodus 15 and the reference to the latter in Revelation 15:3ff will tend to confirm our interpretation in yesterday's Note that there is a 'far-off' fulfilment of the prophet's words at the end time. The association of ideas in these passages is very remarkable. The reference in 3 to the 'wells of salvation' is also illuminating when we recall the use of this verse in the ceremonial of the Feast of Tabernacles. There was a point in the feast at which the priests left the Temple in procession to the Pool of Siloam to fill the golden pitchers with water and returned singing these words. The feast commemorated Israel's sojourning in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land, and reminded the people both of their pilgrim days and of the divine provision of water out of the rock to quench their thirst. It was in all probability at this point in the feast ('on the last great day', John 7) that Jesus stood and cried, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink'. We may see therefore the link between this verse (3) and the reference to the coming of the Messiah in 11:1-5, and indeed with the teaching on His second coming also, for it is then that we shall drink fully from the living fountain of waters and never thirst again.

48) 13:1-22

This chapter begins, as we have already indicated, a new section of Isaiah's prophecy, and for the next eleven chapters we have a series of oracles of doom pronounced on the surrounding nations. The existence of this section reminds us that the man of God has a word not only for God's own people, but also for God's world. The first of these woes is pronounced on Babylon (13:1-14:23). Critics have maintained that this passage could not be by Isaiah, since it speaks of a time when the people of God are in exile and captivity. But the question is whether predictive prophecy is a reality or not. Why should it not be? It is true that in Isaiah's day Assyria was the dominating power and that Babylon's star was not in the ascendancy until considerably later than this. But this is hardly a reason for denying the possibility of predictive prophecy. The present day analogy of Germany and Russia, and Russia and China, serves to bear this out. Have not even our secular prophets looked beyond the immediate tyrant to the rise of the next one, and the next after that? Why should a similar insight be denied to Isaiah? Also, in chapter 11, Isaiah prophesies a return from exile. Does not the 13:1-14:23 passage substantiate this promise?

The picture Isaiah presents is very dramatic, and this is brought out even more graphically in the modern translations, especially J.B. Phillips. The armies of Jehovah (who, we see later, are the Medes) muster in the north-eastern mountains. All is bustle and activity (2, 4) and as from afar Isaiah seems to hear the noise of the gathering multitudes. In 5-8 the avengers approach, spreading terror and dismay throughout the world. This is something one feels in the pulse of the passage. So much for the pride of Babylon, and her arrogant assumption of invincibility. God is not mocked, Nebuchadnezzar!

49) 13:1-22

The meaning of the visitation is unfolded in 9-16; it is the day of the Lord. Isaiah describes this - and its first reference is of course to Babylon in apocalyptic terms, and speaks of it as being heralded by physical convulsions in earth and heaven. It is not surprising that the prophet should do so, not only because he was living in a day of crisis, with apocalyptic signs only too credible, but also because ultimately it is not possible to speak of any judgment of God without seeing it as an illustrative foretaste and adumbration of the final day of doom. Little comment is needed on the passage, as the message, especially when read in the modern translations, is quite plain. Two points however may be noted in particular. The first is the reference in 17 to the Medes' indifference to silver and gold. This has an immense significance. It would be true to say that the curse of every great empire and the cause of its eventual degeneration and fall has been its love of luxury and affluence. Every great power becomes great by force of arms as Babylon did so, through great soldiery and wise generalship. But having done so, she gathered to herself all the tribute of the oppressed nations and lived in luxury until all her moral fibre had been sapped. She was thus an easy prey for the Medes who had no greed for gold and the things gold can buy but were disciplined and hardened into conquerors. This is something that still holds good today. One thinks of the puritanism (in the ethical, not religious, sense) of world powers like Russia and China as compared with Britain and the West. Love of luxury and affluence does not tempt the ascendant powers; these things are the mark of the declining and decadent ones. It is a simple fact that Russia and China have very little of the vice and moral decadence that are corroding the heart of our great cities. History has an ominous lesson to teach us here, if only we will listen. The second point, in 20-22, is that the literal fulfilment of these verses has been confirmed by archeological excavation. Today, the area that was once ancient Babylon is absolutely barren, inhabited only by the wild beasts.

50) 14:1-23

Having dealt with the proud kingdom of Babylon, the prophet now turns to its king. The first four verses, however, provide a connecting link between the two pronouncements. G. Adam Smith says that 'they give the religious reason of so much convulsion'. It is for the sake of God's people! This is the impressive thing. Nations and empires are manipulated by the hand of God for the furtherances of His purposes in the world. How different it looks from the human point of view! There, it is God's people who are insignificant and of little moment. But from the divine viewpoint it is the other way round. World cataclysms shape the destiny of the Church, and are meant to do so. This is a variation of the idea of His sovereign control over the world. He raises up tyrants, uses them to chastise His people, and casts them down for their wickedness, in order to fulfil His will for His people. If this be the biblical interpretation of history, we must learn to interpret the events of our time in relation to the furthering of the divine purposes for the people of God. Viewed in this light, for example, it is not difficult to see that one of the most important results of the two world wars of the twentieth century has been the emergence and establishment of Israel as a nation in the modern world. The convulsions of Europe and the grim horrors of Belsen's gas chambers proved to be the birth-pangs of a new nation.

51) 14:1-23

Once again the modern renderings of this chapter present the message so clearly that little comment is needed by way of explication. Two points however need to be mentioned. As the passage proceeds, one becomes more and more conscious that it assumes almost apocalyptic proportions and that it depicts a power greater than merely human. Isaiah's words here have in fact for long been interpreted as having a deeper meaning than merely to refer to the king of Babylon, and are taken to adumbrate the personal power of evil himself, i.e. Satan. In Jewish tradition Lucifer, son of the morning, is a fallen angel, one of those who 'kept not their first estate' (Jude 6) but rebelled against God and became the 'source' of evil in the world (for a similar, not to say parallel, passage, see Ezekiel 28:11ff). The most we can say about all this is that these things are hinted at rather than expressed in Scripture, but the hints, such as here, are significant, and reverent expositors may be more right than is sometimes thought when they see the shadowy form of Satan in such a passage as this. At all events, the sin represented in these verses is certainly satanic, for this is the essence of all evil. The refusal to be subject to God and the arrogant challenge to Him and emulation of Him necessarily lead to the determination to overthrow Him and topple His kingdom. This is always of the pit, and when it appears in men, as it did in the king of Babylon, its origin is readily discerned. This is why his fall was so great and so final.

52) 14:1-23

Lest the interpretation given in the previous Note seem fanciful, we should remember - this is the second point of importance in the passage - that Babylon has become in prophetic and apocalyptic literature the symbol of all that is evil. It is certainly no accident that in the Book of Revelation Babylon the great is associated with the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. The fact that John makes this kind of association is sufficient ground for us to recognise that inspiration is at work, and although we must be careful lest we allow imagination to run riot, we are at liberty to 'put two and two together' and to see in this prophecy, as doubtless Isaiah may well have seen also, something deeper and more sinister than the then king of Babylon, see beyond him to the evil genius who inspires all kings of Babylon down the ages, the prince of darkness himself who aspires to be as God. This insight is confirmed to us in the strange and weird tenth chapter of Daniel, where the archangel speaks to the prophet of battling with the unseen power behind the kingdom of Persia. It is perhaps our own generation in particular, and more than most, that can appreciate the truth of this concept, for it is upon the twentieth century that truly demonic powers have been unleashed. It is no longer fantastic to think that we have seen dark, malignant principalities behind the monstrous totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Stalin, for this is the only adequate explanation of them.

53) 14:24-32

The prophet's attention now passes from Babylon to Assyria (24-27) and Philistia (28-32). The prophecy against Assyria is said to have been uttered during the early years of Sennacherib's reign. It is the announcement of Jehovah's purpose to destroy the Assyrians on the soil of the Promised Land. This visitation is to have significance for the whole earth (26). In this connection we may recall what was said in an earlier Note about world events shaping Israel's destiny. The plain truth is that what happens on the soil of Palestine has generally tended to have worldwide repercussions. This is supremely true, of course, of the coming of Christ. The religious future of mankind is in the sovereign hand and control of God. But it is true also of the people of God, as witness the profoundly critical events of the Middle East today, in which all the great powers of the world are so deeply and inextricably involved.

In 28-32 the Philistines, who are rejoicing at the fall of some cruel oppressor, are warned that the dreaded power will soon be re-established in a more terrible form than ever (29). The situation referred to is probably the death of an Assyrian monarch (Tiglath Pileser in 727, Shalmaneser in 722, or Sargon in 705). Any death of a reigning conqueror was the signal for active conspiracy among the vassal states of Palestine, but Isaiah declares that not thus easily will they escape the retribution of God. At that very time representatives from Philistia were in Judah seeking alliance with the Jews (32), and intending to entice them into joining the rebellion against Assyria. Isaiah's answer is unhesitating: the people of God must trust in God, not in secular alliances, for deliverance from Assyria.

54) 15:1-16:14

The next foreign nation to occupy the prophet's attention is Moab, and two chapters are devoted to the oracle pronounced upon this neighbour state. In 16:13, the words 'since that time' should read 'in time past' and indicate that this prophecy was probably something revealed to Isaiah some considerable time previously, and was now spoken when its fulfilment was imminent - i.e. within three years (14). The description in 15:1-9 is very graphic. It is a picture of sudden disaster overtaking Moab, 'in the night' (1). It is a chapter full of confusion and consternation; 5-7 are a grim reminder to us of the familiar trail of refugees in European countries during the 1939-45 war, carrying their salvaged possessions with them. Moab flees to Edom (Sela in 16:1 is a city of Edom), and is represented as sending to Judah and appealing for help from Zion. 3-5 can be taken either as the appeal made by Moab to Judah for help, or as Isaiah's exhortation to Judah to help them, and his counsel to Moab as to how to come by the deliverance they need. If this latter alternative is right, 5 points away to the coming King, and Moab is invited to share in the blessings of the Messianic reign. Moab's pride, however (16:6), is the chief stumbling block to any such help forthcoming. Sorrow at distress is not the same as sorrow for sin. It is one thing to be beleaguered, but quite another to be humbled under the mighty hand of God. The pride of Moab was proverbial, as we may see in the writings of Jeremiah and other prophets (Jeremiah 48:29, 42; Zephaniah 2:10). This is what held back help and blessing from them. And as with nations, so it is with individuals. A proud heart never knows the blessing of God.

55) 15:1-16:14

There are two points in particular to note in this prophecy. The first is the very marked note of sympathy and compassion present in the heart and mind of the prophet, and expressed throughout these two chapters (cf 15:5, 16:9, 11). It is well to remember this, when we tend to think of Old Testament prophecy thundering out grim and terrible warnings of doom. Isaiah did not enjoy saying these things. He was not a bloodthirsty man. He had a heart that felt the woes of men, and it was, Peter points out in his epistle (1 Peter 1:11) the Spirit of Christ that was in them as they bore their testimony, which Spirit is gentle, loving and compassionate. Love, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, rejoices not in iniquity - or, as Moffatt renders it, 'is never glad when others go wrong'. There are two opposite dangers here: one is to sympathise with the victims of judgment in such a way as to take sides with them against God; the other is to be glad and gloat in harshness over their misfortune. Christ did neither, and He is our example in this, as in all else. Nor did Isaiah; and the tears of the prophet are some indication of the greatness of his heart towards the children of men.

The second point to note is the remarkable way in which Judah and Zion are pointed to as the source of life, help and succour (cf also 14:32). It is as if Isaiah were saying, 'There is only one source of help, only one hope. The hope of the world for all peoples is here in Zion and in Zion's king. Everything else will fail'. This is Isaiah's central message; only in the Lord is there hope and grace.

56) 17:1-11

The next nation to come under the prophet's pronouncement of doom is Damascus, but we do not read very far into the chapter before we realise that Israel, the northern kingdom, is involved in it. The reference must therefore be to the alliance Israel made with Resin of Syria which is mentioned in 7:1ff, and the prophecy probably dates from the early days of that ill-fated coalition. The important verse is 10 - an alliance founded on practical rejection of God is bound to come to grief. This has something very telling and significant to say to us. No association that leaves God out can ever hope to prosper. But something else also follows. Not only did Israel suffer from her association with heathen Damascus, but Damascus also suffered from her association with Israel, when Israel was out of joint with God. The harm was done on both sides. This is very telling. If I, as a child of God, enter into an unhallowed association with others, I know that I am playing with fire. My conscience would trouble me very deeply, and I may tremble at the harm I am doing my spiritual life. But what of the harm I am doing to the others? Israel brought judgment upon Damascus through this unhallowed alliance, and doubtless Damascus lived to rue the day that the alliance was ever made. An out-of-joint believer is a dangerous hazard to anyone with whom he associates. Remember rebellious Jonah and what his did to the ship's company.

57) 17:12-18:7

Some scholars take 12-14 as a separate prophecy referring to the Assyrians, in one of their attacks on Jerusalem, probably Sennacherib's in 701. Others take it as continuing the oracle against Syria and Ephraim in the earlier part of the chapter. Whichever interpretation be right, the message of the verses is plain: all events are in the control of God, and at His word the pressure will ease, and clear away. At evening time, trouble; and in the morning the enemy is not! As quickly and as effortlessly as that does God deal with His foes!

In the next oracle Ethiopia is thrown into excitement and turmoil by the news of the Assyrian advance. An emissary is sent to Jerusalem from the king of Ethiopia, either proposing an alliance with Hezekiah against Assyria or offering support in the event of an attack. Isaiah tells the Ethiopians that God is resting quietly till the Assyrian is ripe for destruction. He is calmly viewing the situation until His appointed time and then, in answer to the faith of Hezekiah, he will turn back the invasion and drive Sennacherib back to Nineveh (2 Kings 19). The moment of Jehovah's decisive intervention will come, and Assyria will be no more. Then the Ethiopians, seeing the miracle, will pay homage to the Lord. Isaiah is, so to speak, seated in his watchtower, like Habakkuk, and sees the moving hand of God. Amos could 'see' like this, 'from the desert fastnesses of Tekoah.' But Isaiah was thus detached in the capital itself, surrounded by government and politics, yet quiet and serene in the faith of God.

58) 19:1-15

Now it is the turn of Egypt. The first 15 verses of the chapter, dealing with the doom and judgment of Egypt, are in poetic form, and comprise 3 stanzas, 1-4, 5-10, 11-15. In the first (1-4), the collapse of Egypt's religion is described, leading to anarchy and civil war, and consequent recourse to magic arts, and finally a harsh and cruel despotism. Two points stand out here. One is that in time of crisis, it is precisely false religion that does show up its deficiency. This is the ominous thing for any country. Where an empty shell of religion has been held to, what other could be expected than this kind of collapse? The other is that this affords a striking parallel to the history of Germany in the late 19th and 20th centuries: the false religion of higher criticism, its collapse, the anarchy, the cult of the German myth of the superman, and finally the harsh despotism of Hitler. The second stanza speaks of physical calamities coming in the wake of the collapse of order (5-10), the drying up of the Nile, with the consequent failure of the prosperity based on its waters. Finally, in 11-15, it is the failure of the boasted wisdom of Egypt, with the nation reeling like a drunken man under its misfortunes. The implications of this prophecy, and the problem of its fulfilment, are best dealt with after we study the second half of the chapter in the next Note.

59) 19:16-25

The first two verses of this passage form a 'bridge' from 1-15 (which is in verse in the original) to 18-25 (which is in prose). The Egyptians will recognise Jehovah as the author of their calamities, and this will be the beginning of new hope for them. Here, as elsewhere, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This leads to the promise of blessing for Egypt (18ff). What is promised is that five cities of Egypt will speak the language of Canaan (18), an altar to the Lord will be set up in the centre of Egypt (19, 20), and there will be a triple alliance between Israel, Egypt and Assyria. It is when we try to assess the precise significance and intent of this prophecy that questions arise. Perhaps the key to an understanding of Isaiah's words lies in noting the significance of what he actually says. We should bear in mind that traditionally Egypt had always had sinister associations for the people of God. This was a matter of history for Israel. Turning back to Egypt was synonymous with backsliding from God. Egypt had ever been an influence for evil on Israel, dragging her down. But now this situation was going to be reversed, and Israel on the contrary was going to be an influence for good on Egypt. We note also that whereas hitherto Israel had been in the unhappy position of being the battleground on which Egypt and Assyria had settled their differences, now the situation was to be reversed and they would be in harmony together. This twofold emphasis on reversal seems to indicate that there is a touch of the apocalyptic in this prophecy. It is pointing away to 'the restoration of all things', i.e. to the Messianic reign. More of this in the next Note.

60) 19:16-25

To interpret Isaiah's words thus apocalyptically seems more important than to think of partial fulfilments in more immediate history, as some of the commentators suggest, e.g. as that in the time of Manasseh a body of Jewish settlers were invited by Psammetichus to station themselves on the frontiers of Upper Egypt, or that under Ptolemy I large numbers of Jewish immigrants fixed themselves at Alexandria, with full toleration of their faith and worship, or that under a later Ptolemy the intercourse between Jews and Egyptians led to the translation of the Old Testament into Greek (the Septuagint, LXX). The reference to the Messianic age is more important, both in relation to Christ's first coming and His second. In relation to the first, there was a fulfilment of this, at least in part, when the Christian Church became established in Egypt, in Alexandria and elsewhere, in great strength and power. With regard to the second coming of Christ, it may envisage part of the worldwide influence of the gospel and the ingathering from every nation and kindred and people and tongue in the multitude that no man can number. It may also, in this connection, have association with the idea of the fulfilment of the real purpose of the Jews' election, to be a light to lighten the Gentiles (cf Romans 11:12, 15).

We should not miss also the picture the passage gives of the 'small beginnings' that lead to great things in the gospel. Five cities speaking the language of Canaan, and one altar - this is all that is needed for a bridgehead of grace. Paul had less than this when he crossed over from Asia to Philippi, but it opened all Europe to the gospel.

61) 20:1-6

This rather strange and unusual passage has a simple and straightforward message. It is an acted parable bearing the warning message of the Lord against trusting in Egypt. The historical situation needs to be known. Sargon is king of Assyria. Egypt is instigating intrigues among many of the tribute states. Ashdod, a city of the Philistines, had refused to pay the Assyrian tribute. Sargon sent his commander in chief ('Sargon' is not a proper name but a designation of rank, somewhat like the German 'Kaiser') to deal with the revolt. This only temporarily quashed the spirit of rebellion among these tribute states, and Egypt continued to foment trouble. And protest was needed. This is the background of the protest that Isaiah made. It was a public protest against the false hopes then entertained of a speedy deliverance from Assyrian tyranny through the help of Egypt and Ethiopia. In 3, the prophet looks like a humiliated captive, about to go into exile, and this was a picture of what would happen to Egypt and Ethiopia. What then, of trust placed in such broken reeds? Assyria did in fact lead Egypt captive - not in Sargon's day, or in his son's (Sennacherib), but in Esarhaddon's, the son of Sennacherib (cf 2 Kings 19:37). How consistently faithful and far-seeing was Isaiah in his warnings to his people! We shall see further warnings against Egyptian intrigue in chapters 29-32, particularly 30.

62) 21:1-10

This passage contains another oracle of doom upon Babylon. Once again it is necessary to recall something of the historical situation of the times. The revolt of Ashdod and its quashing, mentioned in chapter 20, took place in 711 BC. Sargon was king of Assyria then (Sargon was murdered in 705, and his son Sennacherib succeeded him. At the time of the murder, revolt against Assyria became widespread, and Sennacherib had his work cut out to cope with it). Egypt was one main rival for Assyria's position as world-ruler; Babylon (Chaldea) was the other. This is the emergence of the Babylon which at the last was to eclipse Assyria altogether and assume world power. But at this stage, Babylon was only an emergent power and first Sargon, then his son Sennacherib, sought successfully to subdue her. This chapter probably refers to her subjection by Sargon when Merodach Baladan was king of Babylon. This is not the only interpretation that has been placed on the passage, some have thought that the reference is to the much later fall of Babylon to Cyrus which heralded the Jews' return from their exile. However, the earlier event seems more likely, especially when we take into account Isaiah's distress voiced in 3 and 4. For the fall of Babylon at that point would mean that Assyria was still a potential threat to Judah and all the other kingdoms around her. The prophet is in his watchtower, anxiously watching the development of events in the world, and is pained when the major enemy, Assyria, succeeds in throwing off a challenge which might have overthrown its power and thus brought a measure of peace to the vassal states.

63) 21:11-17

This is an interesting and thought-provoking passage. The idea of the watchman runs through the entire chapter, and here Edom, who is in darkness under the Assyrian oppressor, sends to the prophet and asks, 'Watchman, how much of the night is still left?' (she is finding it very long!) The reply is ambiguous: 'Morning cometh, and then the night, i.e. a brief dawn will come, but following after it more oppression. Ask again, however, and I may have more hopeful news for you later'. In the meanwhile, however, it was to be a dark time for Edom. The burden upon Arabia is that in the time of insecurity arising from the Assyrian invasion, the travelling merchants have to leave the main trading routes and take to the forests. It is a picture of the disorganisation of trade and commerce by war and invasion - a dislocation, we may say, that often seems to persist long after the war is over and peace is declared, if the experience of our own land is any criterion. More, however, was to follow, and new devastations were to come to the children of Kedar. All of which prompts the reflection that distress over the dislocation of trade and commerce - the modern term is 'balance of payments deficits', is it not? - is not the same thing as repentance from sin, and God does not let up simply because a nation gets into the red, if real signs of a new obedience are lacking. What do we take Him for?

64) 22:1-14

This chapter divides naturally into two sections, 1-14 and 15-25. The second of those gives the key to the historical context, as we may see from the references to Shebna the scribe in Isaiah 36:3, 11, 22 and 37:2 (cf also 2 Kings 18:13ff). It is the time of the invasion, and repulse, of Sennacherib of Assyria. There are two slightly different views as to its interpretation however. Kirkpatrick thinks that the invasion is over and the enemy away, yet there is no real change of heart on the part of the people. 'The temper of the nation was as frivolous, as secular, as insensible to the divine as it had been before'. G. Adam Smith thinks that it is only the first onslaught of Sennacherib that is over (2 Kings 18:15, 16), Sennacherib having been bought off by Hezekiah. And he has come the second time and the people go to pieces. Word came that Egypt, in whom Judah trusted, had fallen to the enemy, and this was the last hope. And having lost hope, the people become hysterical, and became a city of revelers (13). Of the two interpretations, the second seems more likely than the first.

While the city abandons itself to revelry in its hysteria, Isaiah looks on in inconsolable anguish (1-4). 2 and 3 seem to indicate the collapse of government; there is no battle or fighting, only capitulation. 5 to 7 describe the Assyrians at the gates of Jerusalem, and 8-11 the people's trust in their fortifications and their forgetfulness of God. Perhaps most significant of all, in 12-14, their misreading of the signs of the times. God was calling for sackcloth and ashes, but the people had abandoned themselves through very fear doubtless, to revelry and feasting. One final fling before the awful crunch, what could be more cynical or despairing than this?

65) 22:15-25

Commentators have pointed out that this is the only occasion on which Isaiah makes a personal attack on an individual in his whole prophecy, and this is perhaps some indication of how strongly he felt that Shebna had to be removed from office and replaced by a man of integrity. It is perhaps characteristic of Isaiah's spiritual optimism and of his faith in the idea of a remnant that he should turn to practical means for the improvement of the situation. Within the context of the judgment of God it is still necessary that right men be at the helm. Shebna was the advocate of the Egyptian alliance, and as such was an unwholesome and indeed dangerous influence in the nation. Isaiah's challenge about such leadership was heeded, and Eliakim, son of Hilkiyah, was appointed in his stead. There are several New Testament passages that prove able commentaries on this incident, such as 1 Corinthians 4:2 and John 15:2. Privilege always implies responsibility, and where responsibility is neglected, God does not spare, for He is no respecter of persons. Many commentators think that the last two verses indicate that the new steward, at first so promising, also failed God, and was dismissed. We should remember what Paul says in Romans 11:19, 20, 'The branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.... Be not high-minded, but fear'.

66) 23:1-18

Tyre was the great mercantile power, the hub of the commercial world, and the doom that is pronounced here is a judgment upon the spirit that leaves God out. One commentator compares Tyre with its mercantile brilliance to the Jews in Europe from the time of the Middle Ages until the present. This is indeed what the Jews are known as today, heading up our great trade and commerce houses. But the significant thing is that in biblical history they were not especially noted for their trade and commerce at all. It is only since they rejected the Messiah and were rejected by God that this has been true of them. We should not miss the association of ideas: when God is left out, commerce becomes God. And the lesson here in the story of Tyre's judgment is surely plain. A nation that bases its wellbeing and prosperity on trade and commerce is a nation that will ultimately ripen for the judgment of God. When one thinks of the stock-in-trade of our own politicians, of whatever party, in recent years, 'We have never had it so good', one begins to see the ominous lessons this passage has for our own day. The last verses of the chapter contain a promise of restoration for Tyre, but it is by no means a return to the status quo. Her new prosperity was to be used and dedicated to the Lord for the provision of sufficient food and durable clothing for the needy. This is the vision that the materialistic West so sorely needs in our time. Without it, the doom of Tyre will eventually become her doom.

67) 24:1-23

This chapter begins a new section of the prophecy (see Analysis in Note 1), which reaches to the end of chapter 27 and has been called Isaiah's Apocalypse. It comes as a climax to the past ten chapters, and forms a fitting conclusion to them, for the woes upon the nations lead naturally in thought to the final judgment and consummation of all things. The writing is apocalyptic in tone, with the general characteristics of most biblical apocalyptic convulsions in the natural order (1, 3, 6, 19, 20, 21, 23). At first glance Isaiah seems to be on the same theme that has occupied him in the 'woes' chapters we have just finished studying, but the difference is significant: no particular nation is mentioned here. It is the earth itself that is to be made void and waste (1). The association of natural convulsions with divine judgment is in line with our Lord's own teaching in Matthew 24 and with the teaching of Scripture generally. The sin of man which brings the judgment also affects the natural order (cf 'Cursed be the ground for thy sake', Genesis 3). In the same way, the New Testament speaks of the reconciliation of humanity to God being followed by the restoration and rejuvenation of nature (Romans 8:19ff). The solidarity of the created order, both in sin and in grace, is one of the richest concepts in the biblical revelation.

68) 24:1-23

In the midst of this apocalypse of doom a new note suddenly rings out in 13, whose meaning J.B. Phillips captures when he renders it 'The people who remain on earth will be few, few as the olives left when the tree has been beaten, few as the gleanings of grapes when the vintage is done'. This is the remnant, and it is remarkable that they are conceived of as seeing the bright side of the convulsion and are able to rejoice. This rejoicing is not so much that they are not involved in the experience of cataclysm, as that they see it to be but the birth-pangs of the new creation. They sing because at last God is bringing in His kingdom and ushering in the new world wherein dwells righteousness. All this has a double message for us today. On the one hand, the whole concept of apocalyptic is so much more conceivable for our day and generation, living as it does in the midst of incredible technological expertise and formidable cosmic probes. It is highly conceivable to us that our planet should be made to stagger and reel in its orbit like a drunken man. On the other hand, when our hearts sometimes tend to fail us for fear as we see the ugliness of our world's turmoil, we should remember that the concept of travail bringing forth a new thing is God's word to us in such a crisis, and take comfort in the knowledge of the divine sovereignty that controls and directs - yea, ordains - all disorder and cataclysm for His glory.

69) 25:1-12

To read this chapter after all that we have been reading is to pass from a wilderness of doom and judgment into a land of pure delight. It is a song of praise by the redeemed and contains some wonderful thoughts. The phrase in 1, 'thy counsels of old' has been rendered 'Purposes long since considered and revealed have come true', 'Plans formed long ago have been perfectly fulfilled', and means that in the establishment of the new order (spoken of in the previous passage and Note), God's proper purposes for His universe are at last brought to fruition. 'City' in 2 does not refer to any particular city, but is better taken symbolically as representing the hostility of the world against the kingdom of God (as in the book of Revelation). In 4 the prophet looks back over the earthly pilgrimage and praises the faithfulness of God. 6 and 7 describe the rejoicing of the day of salvation in nuptial terms reminiscent of the idea of the Lamb's great bridal feast of bliss and love. It is the coronation festival inaugurating the reign of Jehovah on Mount Zion (cf 24:23). The covering in 7 is said to refer to the cloth people placed over their heads when in mourning, and its taking away signifies that mourning is now at an end. Paul and John both quote from 8 in 1 Corinthians 15:54 and Revelation 7:17. One scholar very beautifully links 7 and 8 together, 'When Jehovah removes the veil of sorrow He sees the tears and He wipes them away'. The most moving verse of all is 9. It is the language of love: 'we have waited for Him'. Here expectation turns to realisation. One detects almost a breathless awe in the words 'Lo, this is our God', as if to say 'We knew, and have been taught, that this meeting would be wonderful, but this is unspeakable, far beyond our thinking and expectation'. The old hymn is right when it speaks of 'the soul-thrilling rapture when we view His blessed Face'.

70) 26:1-13

Here is another hymn of praise from a restored people. Moab is to be destroyed (25:10), but Judah will be preserved and restored. There is, as often in prophetic utterances, a mingling of the near and the far, and the restoration here may refer both to Judah's restoration from captivity and the final restoration at the end time. In 1 the city is represented as empty, while in 2, the gates are opened for the restored people to enter in (cf Revelation 22:14, which unites the historical return in 538 BC with the end-time consummation). The glorious words of 3 express the new attitude of the restored people, and in 4 they are exhorted to continue in this new attitude. The NEB translates 3 'You keep in peace men of constant mind' and J.B. Phillips, 'You keep the steadfast man in perfect peace'. The reference may well be to what God was to do to them and in them through the fires of captivity. Only thus did they become firmly established. 'Uprightness' in 7 is rendered 'smoothness' or 'level', and means not that the way of the just is easy (there is no denial here of the fact of tribulation in the believer's experience) but that God makes the way plain ('I will make all my mountains a way'). It is an assertion that God's way is the best way, and the shortest way, home. In 8 and 9 Israel, in retrospect, looks back to her exile and her woe and rejoices that her longings are now over, and God's judgments have been realised. Indeed, it is only by the coming of the divine judgment that the world will be brought to the practice of righteousness; the withholding of it seems only to serve to make people insensitive (11) to the hand of God. Israel, however, chastened and restored, has finally learned her lesson (13) and will cleave to the Lord.

71) 26:14-21

A new thought begins in 14. NEB renders it, 'The dead will not live again, those long in their graves will not rise; to this end you have punished them and destroyed them, and made all memory of them perish'. The meaning is that Israel is suddenly confronted, even in her restoration, with the reality of all she has lost in the loss of her dead, in war and captivity. Yet (15), God has enlarged and established His people. And the contrast between this enlargement on the one hand and the fact of their dead on the other, is a source of grief and distress, which is expressed in 16-18. The cry in 16 seems to be the expression of the longing of the heart in distress for a word of true consolation and comfort, a word from God that will effectually answer and solve the mystery and finality of death. The image of 'travail' in 17 is interesting. The travail and crisis of the captivity and the prospect of it proving to be the birth-pangs of a new day are as nothing, if after all their dead are not to live. Then, in 19, comes the great assurance, ringing out like a clarion of triumph: 'Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall arise. They that sleep in the dust shall awake and sing for joy'. It is a marvellous passage, perhaps the clearest statement about resurrection in all the Old Testament. The answer to the finality of death is - Resurrection!

72) 27:1-13

We are still dealing with 'that day' (1), and consequently may expect to find the same twofold reference in what is said to the 'near' and the 'far'. The last two verses of the previous chapter really belong to 1 in thought. The people of God are counselled, as before, to hide in God till the time of wrath passes over (cf the thought of refuge in chapter 25, also the story of the judgment of the Flood in Genesis, when the faithful were taken into the Ark for protection and safety). The monsters in 1 will likewise have a twofold reference: on the one hand, scholars think that three distinct powers are referred to here, the serpent who flies, the elusive one being Assyria, the serpent who crawls, the tortuous one, being Babylon, and the dragon in the sea being Egypt - the three major world powers of that age. On the other hand, however, we should not exclude the apocalyptic element in these descriptions, or miss the marked similarity these monsters have to the horrific trinity of evil described in the Book of Revelation, the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. Who shall say that there can be no possible reference to the powers of darkness in these words? If 'Lucifer' in chapter 14 has this deeper meaning, is the likelihood not as great here?

73) 27:1-13

We resume our readings in Isaiah once more. Following upon the pronouncement of judgment on the leviathans and the dragon comes the song of the vineyard (2-6). This speaks of the restoration of Israel to the state in which Isaiah spoke of her in 5:1ff, secure in the care of their God. The briars and thorns in 4 refer to Israel's enemies and what God would do to them if they again sought to injure His people. 5 speaks of a gracious alternative to destruction for those enemies: they are exhorted to lay hold of God's strength, i.e. avail themselves of his mercy and be reconciled to Him. J.B. Phillips translates 6 as 'The day will come when Jacob shall take root' and G. Adam Smith adds, 'In such a peace Israel shall spread, and his fullness become the riches of the Gentiles'. It is remarkable to see how Paul makes use of this thought in his teaching in Romans 11:12, 15. For 7ff, a modern translation should be consulted in order to get the real sense of what Isaiah is saying. The prophet is maintaining that God's dealings with His own people in punishing them are not the same as His dealings with their enemies. With the latter, it is judgment unto doom, but with His own people it is judgment unto restoration and purifying (9). Two points are to be noted in 12 and 13. In the end time, there will be a one-by-one gathering of His people by God - does not this underline His personal care? - and secondly, the reference to the trumpet links Isaiah's words to our Lord's words in Matthew 24:31 and Paul's in 1 Corinthians 15:52 and 1 Thessalonians 4:16. How deeply grounded in the Old Testament Scriptures were our Lord and His apostles!

74) 28:1-29

We begin with this chapter another new section of Isaiah's prophecy, comprising chapters 28-35, in which warning and promise, doom and redemption, judgment and grace alternate as the main subjects. Indeed, if we link to these chapters the four historical ones (36-39), we have a major section divided into three sets of warnings:

28, 29 - warning against complacency

30-35 - warning against intrigue with Egypt

36-39 - warning against compromise with Assyria

Scholars think that chapters 28-35 belong to rather different periods of Isaiah's ministry, and that they have been gathered together at this point in his prophecy in much the same way as 'collected pieces' tend to be gathered together when a prominent man's writings are published, with more emphasis on subject matter than chronology. This chapter is said to date about 725 BC, i.e. a few years before the fall of Samaria in 721. It has four sub-sections, 1-6, 7-13, 14-22, 23-29, which we shall proceed to study in the following Notes.

75) 28:1-6

This is a prophecy concerning the northern kingdom Israel (Ephraim). Isaiah is addressing Judah on the subject of Ephraim, bidding Judah look at the situation in the north and see doom is about to come on that land for her sins. Samaria is pictured as a wreath of flowers on the head of a reveller. The wreath is already fading and the carousel about to end, and it will be dashed to the ground (4). This took place a few years later, and must even then have been seen from Judah to be inevitable. Then in 5, 6, in complete contrast, a brief vision of the Messianic age beyond the judgment. Isaiah is looking beyond the whole series of national judgments, and the promise of the true glory that shall endure is set over against the false glory of the northern kingdom that was even then about to vanish. It is a word about the remnant once again, surviving the storms of judgment and being taken up by God for a new beginning. Isaiah is suggesting that the role of the remnant in time of judgment and doom is to stand firm, and in so doing be an example and an inspiration for the future. This is surely the role of the faithful also at the present time, and by faithfulness maintain the testimony of the Lord. Isaiah found ultimate vindication in the costly stand he took, and so may we, in the goodness of God, if we stand firm as he did.

76) 28:7-13

Jerusalem is bidden take stock of herself. Ephraim's sin is your sin, O Judah, and her punishment will yet be yours also (7, 8). The commentators represent Isaiah forcing his way into the banquet chamber to challenge the besotted rulers of the people. And in 9-13 we have the record of the conversation that ensued. The revellers mock the prophet, saying (9), 'Who is he trying to teach? Who is he trying to instruct? Are we schoolchildren that he treats us with his endless platitudes and repetitions - precept upon precept, line upon line?' To which the prophet replies (11), 'I tell you God will one day speak again to you in a tongue that will indeed sound stammering to you. Once (12) through me God spoke to you and offered you rest, but you would not hear. So now He will speak in a strange tongue - i.e. by actions and by the terrible simplicity and slowness of deeds till, step by step you will stumble backwards and be broken'. G. Adam Smith. Others think, however, that the strange tongue refers to the harsh, barbarous accents of the Assyrian invaders. Both interpretations are surely possible. Isaiah had sought to point the true way of rest (cf 'the waters of Shiloah', 8:6), and they had refused it. So now, it was to be judgment. 'God speaks twice to men, first in words, and then by deeds, but both times very simply and plainly'.

77) 28:14-22

This passage refers to Judah's league with Egypt (or, alternatively, Ahaz's treaty with Assyria). It is as if the rulers of the people were saying to the prophet, 'We have bought destruction off, and made ourselves safe by our alliances, and we need not fear your warnings of doom'. Others suggest that what may be referred to in the covenant with death and hell is their having recourse to spiritism (cf 8:19) by which they had invoked spells or charms to protect them from every kind of evil. Put either way, Isaiah devastates their false trust and exposes it for what it is, assuring them that their covenant with death and hell would be disannulled, and declaring that in the storm of judgment that is fast approaching every false refuge will be swept away, and those alone will escape who put their trust in Jehovah's immutable purpose of salvation for Zion (16.ff). This is the one true hope and stay for the people. There will be no need for haste (16) - i.e. panic, rushing to and fro seeking alliance with this one or that - if only they place reliance on God (cf 8:14). This is the foundation on which the religious community of the future shall be built - the new Israel, composed of the remnant who shall turn and be saved. It is in this light that the prophet earnestly appeals to the rulers against their mockers (22). The sureness and strength of the Lord's word to him was unmistakable: they were in grave danger.

78) 28:23-29

The message of this parable is: Just as the husbandman is not always harrowing and breaking the ground, but also sows and then reaps, so also God's dealings with His people will not always be harrowing. He also works with a view, with method in his dealings. The parable is in two parts, 24-26 and 27-28, the latter referring to the difference in treatment of Ephraim and Judah. In the latter, there is a remnant, in the former, none. Therefore the latter will be handled with greater, discriminating care - and gentleness - even in judgment. Behold, therefore, Isaiah seems to be saying, the goodness and severity of God. 'The harvest is carried out with great care and different methods with different instruments. The fitches are thrashed with a staff, for they are delicate; the cumin with a heavier rod; bread corn needs the heavy roller, but it is not crushed to dust. When all the chaff is gone there remain the basic elements of bread, which is life. "All corn must go through the mill before it can become the bread of life to others", said a wise missionary. This is a word that comes from the God Who is wonderful in counsel, excellent in wisdom and most sure in all His ways. With His eye on the harvest, He is prepared to deny us the pleasures of the present in the interest of the more enduring delights of the future.' (G.M. Philip)

79) 29:1-14

This 'woe' opens with an announcement by Isaiah that in little more than a year ('add a year to the present year') Jerusalem would be besieged. There is a play upon words here. 'Ariel' means either 'Lion of God' or 'altar-hearth of God'. What the prophet is saying is that Jerusalem is soon to become like an altar reeking with the blood of countless human victims. It is a prophecy of disaster, followed however by restoration, when Israel will be a true altar-hearth to God. God will besiege His own city (3); before He can make her truly His own, He will have to beleaguer her. 5ff describes the Lord's intervention against the enemy He brings up against Jerusalem. This was literally fulfilled, as we see in chapters 36-39, when Sennacherib was mysteriously repulsed at the gates of Jerusalem and vanished with his army overnight. Isaiah's message of coming doom dazes the people. 'They were like men suddenly startled from sleep, who are too stupid to read a message pushed into their own hands'. They cannot, will not, take it in. This spiritual insensibility is itself the outcome of their whole religious attitude, insincere, formal, traditional (13). Nothing shows up the inadequacy of an empty religion more graphically than the hour of crisis. In 14 the message is that because of their inability to understand His Word from the prophet, God will act in a way that will prove unmistakable even to them. This then, is what neglect of, and resistance to, His word comes to in the end. Well might our Lord say 'Take heed how ye hear'.

80) 29:15-24

There may be a reference in 15 to the intrigues of the 'Egyptian party' in Judah hiding their counsels and intents from Isaiah and from the Lord. But the words have a general application. We cannot hide our plottings and schemings from God; He sees everything we do, and to suppose otherwise is, as Isaiah says in 16, to get things the wrong way round. How foolish to pit their foolish plans against the purpose of the Almighty, as if the clay could usurp the place of the potter! Yet this is so often what we are tempted to do when we plan apart from God. In 17ff, Isaiah seems once more to be looking into the far future, and his thought assumes apocalyptic forms. Ere long, he says, the Lord will prove His power by a marvellous transformation of nature and society; the word of the Lord will be received by the people, now deaf and dumb to spiritual things; the poor and oppressed shall rejoice in their God (17-19). In that glorious age there shall be neither tyrant nor scoffer - neither oppression from without, nor injustice within the state (20, 21). The time of Israel's humiliation shall soon pass away, never to return; and those who at present are perplexed and discontented shall accept the instruction of true religion (22-24). It is a measure of the strength of Isaiah's faith that he can speak with such confidence and hope for the future at a time when the dark storm clouds were rolling so menacingly upon stricken Judah. But then this is what real faith does for a man. Does ours do this for us?

81) 30:1-14

The situation is still the same politically as in the previous chapter, but perhaps more developed. Sennacherib will soon come upon Judah and besiege it, as Isaiah has prophesied in chapters 28 and 29. And we may suppose that the leaders of Judah have at last been stirred to some awareness of possible danger. And their reaction is to turn again to Egypt, to seek help and alliance there. This is the counsel they take (1). The first seven verses are therefore addressed to the politicians, and Isaiah, as so often before, insists to them that Egypt's help is worthless (7). The AV rendering of 7b suggests a word of counsel to God's own people, and this would make very good sense if it were a true translation. But the modern versions all take it differently. J.B. Phillips renders it, 'That is why I call her (Egypt) the Spent Whirlwind', and the RSV 'Therefore have I called her Rahab who sits still'. Egypt is depicted as full of blustering, braggart speech, promising much but fulfilling nothing. In 9ff Judah's bad politics are traced to their bad religion. They had refused the word of the Lord in favour of 'smooth things and deceits'. This is ever the road to disaster, and it was a road that Judah was intent, it seems, on walking, determined to let no one stand in her way (11). Hence the metaphor of the bulging wall in 12-42. The picture is of destruction from within, not from outside. It is the swelling up of evil forces inside that brings collapse upon the nation. How true this was of Judah! It was not Sennacherib, but the deadly inward disease of the nation, that brought it to its doom in the captivity in Babylon. The lesson, surely, is plain for our own day also. It is not external circumstances, but internal disorder, that is steadily dragging Britain down. Will we see it in our time?

82) 30:15-26

In this wonderful passage Isaiah spells out the alternative to alliance with Egypt: reliance on God. Isaiah is saying to them, to use G. Adam Smith's words, 'Bring your conduct into harmony with God's reasonable and gracious plan, and all will yet be well'. God is a God of judgment (in the sense of discernment and prudence and method), i.e. He orders events by His own laws, and acts accordingly. He has plans for men and they fall into place when men trust Him as such, and believe in His purposes. This is the force of the well-known words in 15. The rest of the passage (19ff) speaks of the grimness of the coming siege of Jerusalem (20) and the vindication of God, in which eyes (20b), ears (21) and wounds (26) are all alike healed by His grace. The reference in 20b is surely to the restoration of religious ordinances and instruction, and in 21 to a new receptiveness to the divine Word. The recovery of the Word in the life of the Church is always a sign of renewal (cf 1 Samuel 3). What longing there should be in our hearts for a fulfilment of such a passage in our situation today, even if it should mean that it can come only through travail and judgment. Yet even that could be avoided, late in the day as it is, if only 15 could be fulfilled in us. God help us!

83) 30:27-33

The prophet's thought returns now to the grim realities of the present, and he calls on Judah to see, in the massing Assyrian armies outside the gates of Jerusalem, the 'name of the Lord' (27). It is the Lord's doing, this assault from Sennacherib, and it comes like a terrible thunderstorm. Oh that our own nation might recognise the name of the Lord in the economic problems that are threatening to engulf us! But this would never be a popular doctrine for people to accept. They do not like to be told that God is chastising Great Britain for her sins. In 30 there is a remarkable change of emphasis! The Lord Who is in the storm utters His glorious voice (30) and now it is the Assyrian's turn to tremble, be smitten and set at nought. The language of 31-33 seems to suggest, in the sacrificial and ritual language used, that the Assyrian dispersion is a religious act, 'a solemn holocaust rather than one of earth's ordinary battles, and directed by Jehovah Himself from heaven' (G. Adam Smith). When we learn from this just how much God is able to do on our behalf, and how ready He is to do it, we must surely see the folly of having recourse to worldly-wise and carnal alliances. Well might the prophet say in 15, 'In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength'.

84) 31:1-9

This chapter brings us one further step in the story that has been developing in the past chapter or two. Judah's statesmen seem now to be fully committed to the Egyptian alliance, and are seen here congratulating themselves on their astuteness and wisdom in concluding the treaty. But they have forgotten that God is also wise. He also is working according to plan, and His plans will confound theirs. In expressing this, the prophet's words in 3 are graphic and devastating. The meaning of the metaphor in 4 is that the Lord will hold Jerusalem helpless in His power as the lion holds its prey, though the noisy crowd of shepherds (the Egyptians and the politicians, v 3) try to scare Him away. He will never let go what He has made His own. He sometimes deals with His people in great fierceness - this is necessary for our good. We may not presume on His love. Sometimes He delivers us over to destruction. But it is better to rely on the lion-like mercies of God than on the 'weak benevolences and officious pities of the best of human advisers'. When we do, the experience described in 5 becomes a reality for us. One thinks of the words 'Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face' in this connection. G. Adam Smith points out that the word for 'birds' refers to the smaller kind of bird, like the sparrow, and the picture is of these passing backwards and forwards with flapping wings, hovering over the nest where the young fledglings lie helplessly. Also the word 'flying' is feminine in the original, and refers to the mother birds. 'The pity of Isaiah's own heart towards Jerusalem suggested to him a motherhood of pity in the breast of God'. Remember our Lord's own words, spoken of the same city, '... as a hen gathereth her brood ...'.

85) 32:1-8

Here is a remarkable vision that can rightly be called messianic, and the picture it presents is most fully and completely fulfilled in Christ, the Coming One. Yet, some of the force of Isaiah's words is lost if we confine their meaning to that fulfilment, for what the prophet is first speaking of is a reformation of society; with the foundation for a true social life lying in righteous government, and the true values therein the personal influence of character and integrity. This is the force of the reference to 'a man' in 2. The prophet means that even one single man of sufficient stature is able to exercise a profound influence in society for good, by daring to stand against the tide of declension running in the affairs of men. The power of a truly dedicated life is incalculable. Isaiah himself is a case in point: he simply towered over the scene in his day and became, in the words of 2, 'a hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest' to the weak, and inspired the formation of a remnant who became the hope of the future. Should we not pray that God will raise up men like this in public life today? But if a man can thus prove to be a 'hiding place' for the weak, how much more is this true of the Man Christ Jesus: for He is the Rock of Ages, the only ultimate hope and refuge for mankind.

86) 32:1-8

We must spend another day with this remarkable passage. The prophet speaks in 3 of the clearing of eyes to see aright and the opening of ears to hear aright, the coming of knowledge to the hearts of men (4) and the ability to speak plainly. The emphasis here is on moral insight and alertness, and discriminating discernment that is able to call things by their proper names. What need there is for just this in our time, when moral values are being called in question, their validity as absolute standards disputed and repudiated, and life being conditioned by relative and 'situational' ethics! Isaiah has already (5:20) pronounced woe on those that 'call evil good and good evil'. It is when this topsy-turvy reversal of basic ethical standards begins to assert itself in society that the writing has appeared on the wall, and this underlines just how great the need is for the 'man' that the prophet speaks of here, to stop the drift downwards to disaster, and to re-establish true moral values in society, when ugly things will be called by their proper names and drummed out of our system, in private life and in public life alike, and most of all in the mass media - radio, theatre and the paperback industry. 'It will be a great day, in these spheres, when the vile person shall be no more called liberal (5), but named for what he is, a dirty, unclean thing, and rejected by the society he has tried so deliberately and insolently to corrupt and destroy.' This is the vision that Isaiah puts before us, a vision that will be fulfilled when the Man has sway in the hearts of men. Pray ye!

87) 32:9-20

Isaiah turns again to address the women of Judah. He contrasts the false complacency in the land ('it can never happen to us') as the Assyrian invasion seemed to be postponed, with the true confidence that can come only through resting on the Lord. 10 should read 'in days above a year', or 'in little more than a year'. Doom was imminent upon Jerusalem, while they were heedless, and careless of what was about to fall upon them (13-15). Isaiah's point seems to be that the women of Judah could have exercised a potent influence in society if they had not allowed this thoughtless spirit to adulterate their homes and their families. Let us take this illuminating word about women and their potential influence for good at its face value. There can be no doubt that when a woman is what she ought to be her influence on her family can be the making of them. This is true of her husband as well as of her children. But where there is weakness in her, whether manifested in a selfish or self-regarding spirit, or in an unthinking doting and adoration that refuses to see fault in them, the children will surely suffer, and the husband be deprived of the divinely appointed help from the help-meet who was supposed to stand over against him and challenge and summon him to be all he was meant to be and could be. Some women fail their men-folk by worshipping them instead of loving them wisely into wholeness and maturity.

88) 32:9-20

The second half of this passage speaks of an outpouring of the Spirit. Righteousness and peace are to come to the earth by a distinct re-creative act of God. Once again we may take both the 'near' and the 'far' meanings here. It was surely an act of God and a work of His Spirit that brought His people back from captivity in the fullness of the time, and in this sense the 'near' fulfilment of Isaiah's words is readily understood. But the 'end-time' emphasis in prophetic and apocalyptic writing is just as clearly associated with an outpouring of the Spirit (as of the famous prophecy in Joel, quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost but not thereby exhaustively fulfilled at that time). It is significant, in either interpretation, to see the association of true material prosperity in society with righteousness. This is a characteristic note in Isaiah's prophecy. 'Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people'. The sequence in 27 is very wonderful and moving - righteousness, peace, quietness, assurance (confidence) forever. But before this blessed picture can be fulfilled, there must come the hailstorm of judgment, i.e. the Assyrian invasion (19), so far as the 'near' fulfilment is concerned, and Satan's 'little season' before the 'end-time'. It is after the judgment that the blessing comes (20).

89) 33:1-12

Once again the theme is the attack on Jerusalem by Sennacherib of Assyria (for background see 2 Kings 18). The attack was in two parts: first there was the taking of the fenced cities and the tribute paid by Hezekiah, and the treaty of non-aggression based on this; then there was the return of Rabshakeh to the walls of Jerusalem, and the subsequent dismay of the people. This chapter portrays Isaiah's defiance of the Assyrians, his assurance of safety for Jerusalem, and the amazed reactions of joy among the people, following it. In 1 then, the prophet is calling to the enemy outside the walls of Jerusalem, serenely confident in God in the midst of the dismay and terror of the people at the realisation that Sennacherib had broken the treaty he had earlier made with them (8). In 2-6 prayer to God and expostulation with the enemy are mingled, as Isaiah calls on the name of the Lord (2) and recalls the power of God by which the nations have been scattered in the past (3). In 4 he addresses the Assyrians again, assuring them that the people of God will soon gather the spoil of the Assyrians as locusts clear the fields. Well, it is something when a man of God can speak like this when the enemy is at the very gates! In the midst of the general consternation (described in 9) Isaiah gives the confident word of the Lord in 10, 'Now will I rise'. G. Adam Smith thinks the first part of the chapter was written at the height of the crisis and from 13 onwards, the morning after, when God had made bare His holy arm. This is very probable and if so, it may well be that it was at the point when Rabshakeh was mouthing his blasphemous insolence against the name of the Lord that the Lord said, in effect, 'That will be enough, Rabshakeh', and demolished him by the word of His power. The patience of God has often been mistaken for ineffectiveness or remoteness. It is a costly mistake for those who make it.

90) 33:13-24

The fire of the Lord comes down upon the enemy, and the sight of it makes those within the city itself to tremble. This is something characteristic of a true manifestation of God. It is one thing to believe nominally or theoretically in the idea of a living God, but quite another to be confronted by that awesome, living reality. We so often pay lip-service to the notion that God does come to men, often no one would be more surprised than ourselves when He does. The real God is a fearful, as well as a joyful, experience, and His fire scorches as well as gives warmth. The messianic-flavour of 17 has long been accepted, and we would not be disposed to dispute this. The primary meaning, however, is surely a reference to Hezekiah. Bear in mind (to anticipate our reading of 37:1 which is the historical background of this passage) that in this crisis King Hezekiah had been dressed in sackcloth. What Isaiah is now saying is that the people would see no more of the king wandering around in sackcloth, but rather would see him as he ought to be, clad in royal apparel; and as far as eye could see, they would see the land restored to its natural position of peace and prosperity. It is this primary interpretation that adds depth and colour to the messianic application of these words, for when He comes to reign we shall also see Him, not in His humiliation but in His beauty and glory, and as far as our eye shall see, the kingdom will be established in righteousness and peace.

91) 33:13-24

18 should read 'Your heart shall muse on the terror (which is now no more), and say, where is ...'. The divine deliverance will be a source of continuing wonder and unending discussion. They were to see no more of the arrogant people that had lately so beset them (19); instead, they would look on a restored Zion, living in peace and quietness (20). The Lord would be the defence of His people (21, 22). The reference in 21 may be to the natural defences that the rivers of Assyria and Egypt proved to be to their peoples. Jerusalem had no natural advantages of this sort, but Isaiah is saying that the Lord will be this to them: 'The Lord will be unto us instead of broad rivers and streams'. The association between the healing of sickness and the forgiveness of sins is very striking in 24, and brings us into the thought of the New Testament (cf Mark 2, and the story of the palsied man, whom Jesus both healed and forgave). The abolition of sickness in the messianic community is one of the cardinal emphases in the gospels, as we gather from our Lord's healing miracles, and the fact that Isaiah underlines this is an indication that the 'far' as well as the 'near' is within the purview of his prophetic vision here, although the subject is treated more fully in the great 35th chapter. Let us think, however, of how great a vindication of Isaiah's long years of ministry this deliverance must have been. For forty years he had been maligned, despised and unheeded, yet in the hour of supremest crisis it was he who had the word from the Lord, and his word that was fulfilled in the defeat of Sennacherib. God honoured his word in the sight of all the people and owned him as His servant.

92) 34:1-17

Commentators are right in maintaining that this chapter and the next belong together, and the contrast they present is intentional. They represent the two sides of divine judgment, darkness and light, terror and joy: to the unbelieving, terror and darkness; to the believing, light and joy. The chapters stand in the same relation to 28-33 as 24-27 stand to 13-23, i.e. as a final apocalypse of judgment and redemption, and here Edom, as in the previous apocalypse, Moab, becomes the focal point of the judgment. The first four verses are pure apocalypse, and we are reminded by their language of passages like 2 Peter 3:10ff and Hebrews 1:11, 12 (cf Psalm 102:26). At 5 however, the general picture is particularised as Isaiah focuses attention on Edom and the judgment that is to fall on her. Edom stands here as the symbol of all power that sets itself against God and His Church. J.B. Phillips renders 8b 'a year of requital for Zion's wrongs'. The reference to 'pitch' in 9 reminds us of Edom's proximity to the volcanic areas of the Dead Sea and the cities of the plain, and of Sodom and Gomorrah's judgment of fire and brimstone. The words 'confusion' and 'emptiness' in 11 echo the 'without form and void' of Genesis 1:2, and appear in other apocalyptic prophecies in the Old Testament. It is the utter desolation of the divine judgment that is stressed, and the chapter ends with the solemn assurance that its predictions will be fulfilled literally down to the smallest detail.

93) 34:1-17

There is a deeply interesting reference in 14 to the 'screech-owl'. In the Hebrew this is literally, 'the creature of the night'. The reference is not to an animal, but to a female demon of popular mythology. Jewish belief in this demon (Lilith is the Hebrew word) is said to have come into its own during the Exile. According to the legend, Lilith was a demon especially hurtful to children. She 'plays a great part in Talmudic demonology; the cabalistic Rabbis forged a whole legend in which this spirit is said to have taken a feminine form to deceive Adam and to have united herself to him'. She is said to have been the first Wife of Adam, and to have flown away from him and become a demon. Readers of George Macdonald's remarkable book 'Lilith' will find these details useful. The significance of the picture as Isaiah paints it is to underline the awful restlessness that is hell, with demon meeting prowling demon seeking rest but finding none (cf Matthew 12:43). Hell is the complete antithesis of heaven, in this sense.

94) 35:1-10

Here is the other side of the divine action in judgment. Edom is turned into a horrible wilderness, but the wilderness is changed into a flowering field when the divine restoration of God's people takes place. As in former apocalyptic passages, there is a mingling of the 'near' and the 'far' here also, and we have therefore both a picture of the return of God's people from the Exile and also a picture of final redemption. As to the first of these, the wilderness (1) is the desert that stood between captive Israel and their homeland, and it will become a place of rejoicing by reason of the rejoicing people marching through it on their way home. But as to the second, there is surely the deeper meaning of the rejuvenation and restoration of nature itself that will accompany full salvation (cf Romans 8:19-22). In 3 and 4 there is an exhortation to captive Israel to hope in God and wait for Him, and a promise that God would come both to take vengeance on His enemies and to bring recompense to His people for all the sufferings they had endured. In 5 we are again into the realm of apocalypse. The healing and wholeness are associated with the dawning of the messianic kingdom, and we see the 'token' fulfillment of this in the first coming of Christ, when His miracles of mercy were a foretaste and earnest of the ocean fullness of the consummation of that kingdom to be established when He comes the second time to reign as the King He is. It is the reversal of the tragedy wrought by sin - the abolition of death, and of all that constitutes its shadow on the life of man, all forms of sickness, suffering, pain and woe. This is the hope of all who trust in Him.

95) 35:1-30

The 'near' and the 'far' continue to blend in 6a and 7 where the rejuvenation of nature is emphasised. 'Parched ground' is rendered 'the burning sand' by J.B. Phillips, and commentators take this to refer to the mirage which so often deceives desert travellers. The idea is that the illusion which mocks the thirsty will become a reality, and water shall be as common in the desert as the mirage now is. The word about the highway in 8 and 9 is deeply moving. G. Adam Smith finely sums up its message by saying first, that it will be an unmistakably plain road - and what a change from the trackless wastes of the desert: secondly, it will be perfectly secure - no lions or ravenous beasts will lurk on it; thirdly, it is a road with a glorious end in view: Israel was to come home! It is surely not difficult to see the spiritual application of all this, both as a picture of the final consummation and as an expression of the needs of the human heart. Smith translates 10b, 'they shall overtake gladness and joy' a very significant rendering, since it suggests that hitherto gladness and joy have eluded their grasp, however desperately they had sought them. C.S. Lewis has a famous passage in this connection in which he speaks of the 'homesickness of the soul' as being like 'the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited'. It is this, then, that we shall 'obtain' in that day. 'The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last'.

96) 36:1-10

The next four chapters are purely historical and stand as a kind of appendix to the whole of the first major division of Isaiah's work, chapters 1-35. We have already, in fact, made considerable reference to the historical context which they unfold in dealing with the prophecies uttered during Hezekiah's reign (the corresponding section in the historical books is 2 Kings 18:13-20:19). Sennacherib's invasion of Judah and Jerusalem was a double one; at his first coming the Assyrians took all the fenced cities and probably occupied the city, but withdrew on payment of tribute. This is the reference in 1, which does not, however, mention the matter of the tribute. For this we need to turn to 2 Kings 18:13ff. Soon, however, after the tribute was paid, Sennacherib sent Rabshakeh with a second army against Jerusalem, and it is this that occupies the remainder of the record Isaiah gives us in chapters 36 and 37. Comment has been made from time to time about the general political situation described here in previous Notes and these need not be repeated now. What we can do with profit is to think of what is said here in terms of the illustration it gives of spiritual warfare. The taunts and accusations of Rabshakeh remind us of the voice of the devil as he seeks to dismay and demoralise us in spiritual life, both in the thrust of the attack and in the subtlety of his approach. What Rabshakeh says in 6 is just what Isaiah had so often said to the people, but it is the purpose in saying it that is so different. Isaiah's concern was to draw them from false trust into trust in the living God, but Rabshakeh's - and the devil's - is to lead us into despair. This is one important way of distinguishing between the true and the false in spiritual things.

97) 36:11-22

Rabshakeh's invective is directed in these verses against King Hezekiah himself, as he vilifies him to the people of Jerusalem, and this also has its spiritual parallel in Satan's incessant attempt to vilify and denigrate God to those who seek to trust in Him. It is not difficult to sense the battle 'behind the scenes' and to realise that another, more sinister, enemy than Rabshakeh is intent on attacking a greater king than Hezekiah. But there is another spiritual parallel also, in the contemporary assaults on the faith by modern Rabshakeh's of various kinds. How many abandon the faith of their fathers in face of the plausible and very 'with it' arguments of clever people - the 'new morality' school and the humanists. In this respect, Hezekiah's exhortation was so wise (21). The people held their peace and answered him not a word, and this answers to Paul's own teaching in Romans 16:17. It is not that there is not a satisfactory answer to their confident mouthings, but that they are not really amenable to statements of the truth, and time spent in argument with them is time wasted. What is needed is not argument, but men of faith to hold the people firm in the face of such onslaughts, and Isaiah was such a man. He kept them resting on God until the enemy vanished away. This is the function of the Church in the world today. Be the threat never so serious or urgent, all will yet be well if only faith prevails. Remember Acts 12:5 - '... but prayer was made without ceasing of the Church unto God'.

98) 37:1-20

We now see in the events of this chapter the policy of faith in God so consistently advocated by Isaiah being implemented by Hezekiah. To send, as he now did, a deputation to the prophet asking him to intercede for the nation was in itself a confession on the king's part of the sin of having trusted in Egypt or in any other alliance against the enemy. This is corroborated by the gist of the king's message in 3, 4. The faith and confidence of the prophet comes through with almost monolithic grandeur in 6, 7, echoing the spirit of that great word in Hebrews 11, 'Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen'. The seemingly immediate fulfilment of Isaiah's prediction described in 8 was but the prelude to a still greater wonder later in the chapter. And although Rabshakeh returned again to threaten Hezekiah and Jerusalem and bring alarm to the hearts of God's people, the confidence Isaiah seems to have inspired in the king finds expression in the wonderful prayer that arose from his heart and lips in 16-20. Faith is now working its perfect work in him, as so often happens in time of extremity and crisis. The prayer is simple and sublime in its language and tone, and we should note particularly how faith expresses itself. Over against the magnitude of the crisis Hezekiah sets the majesty and might of the Lord of Hosts, and he is clearly more conscious of the latter than of the former. We are reminded of the apostles' prayer in a not so very different circumstance in Acts 4:24-31; 'Lord, Thou art God ...'. And the same God in both instances made bare His holy arm for the deliverance of His people. Who would not trust such a God?

99) 37:21-29

The magnificent prayer called forth a magnificent response and answer from God through the prophet. It is striking to see how the Lord speaks of His people - 'the virgin, the daughter of Zion' (22). This reminds us of the inviolability of His covenant with them. To Him, they can never be other than this, in spite of their sins, and it is some indication of the love He bears them, even when chastising them with such severity and bringing them to an end of themselves. Indeed, it tells us that although He punishes them, He will not allow anyone else to touch them with impunity. Even in their 'furthest away from Him' moments, they were precious, and a treasure to Him. It is a glorious piece of writing, as Isaiah not only hurls his defiance at the Assyrian but also pronounces doom upon his arrogant and blasphemous resistance against the living God. The metaphor in 29 is very graphic in its description of the sudden check of the enemy as of a wild animal by hook and bridle and his being turned back the way he came. Nothing could underline more clearly the fact of the divine sovereignty and control of the situation. Even in his most headlong and furious onslaught upon the city, he was still in the control of God and when His time came to arrest the invader, it was the work of a moment to change the situation completely. When will we learn that this is what our God is like?

100)37:30-38

A sign is given to the people to assure them of the thoroughness of the Lord's dealing with their enemies (30). The wave of Assyrian war is about to roll away again from Jerusalem and Judah, and the people will be able to resume their neglected agriculture. But it is to be a gradual rehabilitation, as must have been inevitable, for when crops are devastated by an enemy, it takes time for the rotation to come into full swing once more. G. Adam Smith suggests that what Isaiah moans is that it may not be quite at once that they got rid of the Assyrians - and the effect of them - from the land (although they were moved very quickly from the gates of Jerusalem!), but when they do go, they will go for good, and the land may once again be tilled without fear of their return. The metaphor seems to be continued, in different terms, in 30 and 31 - the taking root downward and the bearing fruit upward are things that take time, and the remnant's resettlement as the people of God would be something that would be gradual in its development. There is a spiritual message in these words too, for us. Bearing fruit upwards is dependent on taking root downwards, and it is only as our roots dig deeply into the subsoils of grace in the Word of life that we can draw sufficient nourishment to become fruit-bearing in the spiritual life. The closing verses of the chapter tell of the facts of the dispersal of the Assyrians: in a single night the deliverance miraculously came - as God had said - and Jerusalem remained inviolate, a monument to the faithfulness of the God of Isaiah.

101)38:1-8

This chapter and the next belong together, as we shall see presently, and probably fall, chronologically, before the events of the previous two chapters, if 6 is any indication. This illness must have taken place in Hezekiah's 39th year, for he was given fifteen years more at this time by the Lord (5), and he reigned twenty-nine years altogether, which means that he had already reigned fourteen years. And as he succeeded to the throne at the age of twenty-five, this would place his illness in his 39th year - in the noontide of his days, as the RSV translates 10a. The king's weeping was both natural - for men love life - and patriotic, for his country was in straits, and as yet, he had no heir or successor, being childless (Manasseh, his son, was only twelve when he succeeded to the throne, which means he must have been born during this 15-year respite period (2 Kings 21:1). The divine intervention in answer to his prayer is recorded in 4ff. We should note the striking parallel between the national deliverance (chapters 36/37) and the individual deliverance. Both were effected in the most hopeless circumstances, apparently supernaturally. The sign in 7, 8 is described in greater fullness in 2 Kings 20:8ff, where we are told it was the king himself that asked for the sign, and chose the manner of its working. We shall make further comment on the nature of this sign in tomorrow's Note.

102)38:1-8

On the nature of the sign, G. Adam Smith makes the following comment: 'Such a reversal of the ordinary progress of the shadow may have been caused in either of two ways: by the whole earth being thrown back on its axis, which we may dismiss as being impossible, or by the occurrence of the phenomenon known as refraction. Refraction is a disturbance in the atmosphere by which the rays of the sun are bent from their natural course into an angular one'. It is by no means clear why Smith should assert so confidently that the earth being turned back on its axis is an impossibility. Did not God make the earth's axis and does He not control it day by day? Would this be something that would stretch His ability? The answer to this will depend on the view of God that we hold! However, the fact that 2 Chronicles 32:31 makes reference to the 'wonder that was done in the land', suggesting that it was a local phenomenon, may incline us to think that it was a matter of refraction of the sun's rays. But, one way or the other, it was still a miraculous happening at that moment, and it came, in answer to the prophet's prayer, as a symbol to the king that God had given him his years to live over again.

103)38:9-22

Hezekiah's reflection on his sickness is recorded in this remarkable psalm which has much to teach us. It divides naturally into two parts, in the first of which (10-14) the king recalls his illness, telling of the darkness and sadness that came upon his spirit, and in the second (15-20) underlines the spiritual values of his suffering and pain, and the lessons he learned in it. Obviously, it was a profound experience for the king, drawing forth vows from him (15) as his response to the new sense of God that he had found. It is clear from 17 that he was conscious of more than physical healing in this experience of God's grace. In giving him his years to live over again, God had bestowed on him His forgiveness. As G. Adam Smith puts it, 'The past was to be as if it had never been, its guilt and weakness wiped out'. Well might he make vows to God in the light of such an experience! The phrase in 17, 'Thou hast in love to my soul ...' literally reads, 'Thou hast loved me out of the pit of destruction', and this serves to underline the dynamic present in the love of God. 'Love lifted me' the old hymn sings, and how truly it represents the thought of this verse. But making vows is one thing, keeping them another, and we shall see in the next chapter that this deep spiritual experience of Hezekiah's waned somewhat as time went on. G. Adam Smith comments, 'The hardest duty of life is to remain true to our psalms of deliverance, as it is certainly life's greatest temptation to fall away from the sanctity of sorrow'.

104)39:1-8

It is against what was said in the previous Note that we must understand what is said in this chapter. The historical background is underlined in chapter 21, where the emergent power, Babylon, was a thorn in Assyria's side between 711 and 701 BC, first with Sargon and then with Sennacherib, who did in fact subdue Merodach Baladan of Babylon. The embassy mentioned here was obviously meant to woo Hezekiah into alliance against Sennacherib (and as such was therefore little different from Judah's attempts to ally herself with Egypt, the other rival to Assyria at that time). Hezekiah succumbed, and took lower ground (cf 2 Chronicles 32:25, 31). What of his high promises and vows now? Let us observe the pattern at work here: a great deliverance, vows, and then a falling away. How often, alas, is this the story of our spiritual lives. We should notice the parallel between Hezekiah and the nation in this. Just as the deliverance of Hezekiah was followed by his declension, so also the deliverance of Judah from the menace of Assyria was followed by the declension in the reign of Manasseh, Hezekiah's son, and so much was lost that might have made all the difference to the well-being of the nation. And it prompts the question whether it is wise to ask for longer life, if the extra years are going to bring disaster and dishonour upon us. Manasseh was born during these extra years, years in which Hezekiah fell from the consecration of 38:10ff. How much better for Judah if Manasseh had never been born!

105)40:1

With this chapter we come to the third and final section of the prophecy of Isaiah which, as may be seen from the Analysis of the book, we have entitled 'Messianic'. One does not need to read long in this section to discover certain things, e.g. that the new subject matter is the impending deliverance of God's people from captivity; that not Assyria, but Babylon, the dominant empire concerned; that Assyria is not even mentioned; that therefore we are dealing with a period 150 or so years later than Isaiah's own time; that Isaiah's name is not mentioned in these chapters at all. These considerations have led the great majority of scholars to assume that here we have the work of another prophet, the second Isaiah, who prophesied in Babylon during the exile. On the other hand, however, a minority of conservative scholars have stoutly maintained that this is also the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem, and that it is true predictive prophecy; that it was accepted by the writers of the New Testament and by Jesus as having been written by Isaiah himself not another. This is not the place to deal with the pros and cons of this question of biblical criticism. But we may well ask ourselves why, if there were two Isaiah's, nobody from that time until the 19th century - a period of 27 centuries - ever thought to discover or realise it? It can hardly be maintained, surely, that spiritual discernment comes into its own only with the emergence of the higher critics. The question here, however, is not one that affects faith and practice, and meaningful exposition does not depend on adopting the critical position.

106)40:1

The atmosphere of this new section of Isaiah is immediately seen to be different from what precedes it, comfort and assurance coming in place of the stern warnings of earlier chapters. This, as we shall see, is the predominant characteristic, although there are stern words also. The chapters stand in the same relation to the rest of Isaiah as John's Revelation does to the New Testament as a whole, and have not only the same kind of 'forward look' with its accompanying note of comfort (cf Revelation 1:17, 'Fear not') but also the same kind of revelation, that of the sovereignty of God. This is one of the great messages of this section for our day. For it is a message to God's people who have suffered a long and weary captivity, and it bids them hope in Him, revealing to them His grand and glorious sovereignty. The whole section divides into three parts, each comprising nine chapters, 40-48, 49-57, 58-66, each part containing nine addresses by the prophet. The first begins with a prophecy of divine help (cf John the Baptist's use of it), and the last section ends with a vision of new heavens and earth. In the heart of the central one, we have the wonderful vision of the Suffering Servant, fulfilled in the Christ of the cross. In the first (40-48) we have the contrast set between the living God and idols, between Israel and the heathen; in the second (49-57) the contrast between the present suffering of the Servant and His future glory; in the third, (58-66) the contrast in the heart of Israel between the hypocrites and unbelieving on the one hand and the faithful and humble on the other. With these introductory notes we are now able to begin our study of the text.

107)40:1-11

The first eleven verses of the chapter constitute a kind of prologue, and have been called the prophecy of the four voices. The first (1, 2) is the voice of God speaking to the prophets, commanding them to speak comfort to His beleaguered and distressed people. The long silence of the captivity is about to end, and God is breaking into that silence with a message of hope and deliverance. 'Speak ye to the heart of Jerusalem' is the meaning of the words in 2 - they are words of love and wooing (cf Hosea 2:14ff). The second voice (3-5) vindicates and ratifies the message of the first. The announcement of divine deliverance is no empty, meaningless word, but one that issues in action, and the word to the heart of Jerusalem in the first becomes here a word to 'hands and feet and active will': 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord'. And Providence had in fact prepared the way, by bringing down the might of Babylon and raising up Cyrus, moving his heart to release the captives. It was in this way that the glory of the Lord was to be revealed, for all the world to see. The necessary implicate of the word of pardon and forgiveness spoken to the people of God (1, 2) was that they should be brought back to their own land, hence the highway through the desert from Babylon to Jerusalem, with the crooked made straight and the rough places made plain. God does not do things by halves. When He pardons, He also sets free. It is He who opens the prison doors to let His people go.

108)40:1-11

The third voice (6-8) records the plaint of a people whom long captivity had dispirited. 'All our best men have gone', the voice seems to say, 'the passing years have taken toll; all flesh is as grass; we are not what we once were'. But back comes the answer: 'Yes, grass withers, and the flower fades, but the word of the Lord endures forever'. This is the one great determinative circumstance: they had the divine Word. And they went back, weak and conscious of their helplessness, but with that strong Word to guide and uphold them. The fourth voice (9-11) summons Zion itself to proclaim the glad tidings of the divine deliverance. The contrast between 10 and 11 is very striking, but is one which is often made in the Scriptures. The majesty of the divine power and the gentleness of its dealing with a needy people is perfectly expressed in the twofold figure of the lion of Judah and the lamb of God. One commentator suggests that there may be a contrast intended between 11 and the very different journey that Judah made to Babylon in 586 BC, with harsh and merciless taskmasters driving them through the desert. Here, a broken and humbled people are gently guided, as by a Shepherd-hand, back to their own land. Such is the kindness of God!

109)40:12-25

The prologue has announced the sovereignty and omnipotence of God, and now this truth is spelt out in the rest of the chapter. We have to bear in mind, as G. Adam Smith points out, that the prophet is addressing a dispirited and spiritually starved people, deprived for many years of the ordinances of religion. History had gone against them, bringing captivity upon them, and there were those among them who interpreted this to mean that the gods of the heathen had triumphed over Jehovah, and had succumbed to the pressures of idolatry. Others, nobler spirits, could not believe this, but believed nevertheless that God had cast them off. It is to answer this twofold situation - the idolaters on the one hand, and the despondent and despairing on the other - that this chapter concerns itself, with the idolaters being the subject of 12-25, and the despondent in 26-31. It is interesting to see the answer the prophet gives to the idolaters. A tremendous statement unfolding God's glory in nature (12-17) and in history (20-24), lofty and majestic in its utterance, is interrupted by a swift thrust of sarcasm, scathing and devastating in the ridicule it pours upon the dumb idols in which they were placing their trust. This is a lesson to us on how to deal with modern idolatries in our time. Perhaps if we used some sanctified sarcasm and irony in our witness we might succeed in demoralising the confident idolaters of our sick society and laugh them out of court.

110)40:26-31

The remaining verses of the chapter are devoted to reviving the faith of the despondent and despairing among God's people. And to these the prophet says simply, 'Look up!' From the dreariness and drabness of life, from its seeming meaningless and confusion, from its perplexity and hopelessness, look up and see the order in the heavens. The stars are kept in their courses by the living, Creator God, and He is our God, ordering our lives also, controlling and guiding them unerringly through the maze of conflicting and perplexing circumstances to His desired goal. He Who calls the stars by name (cf Psalm 147:4) has the names of His people engraven on the palms of His hands. Whatever else, therefore, can be said about the situation, they can hardly say that their way is hid from Him. Are the mere stars more important than man, the crown of His creation? This, then, is the answer to the despairing heart: Hope in God, and wait on Him. This gives new strength ('renew' in 31 has been rendered 'change', and suggests that we exchange our puny strength, which is weakness, for the everlasting strength of God - wonderful and enriching thought!), and new staying power. The progression: Mount up with wings - run - walk - moves from the easier to the more difficult, from the sudden soaring of hope, so characteristic of human experience when God comes with grace and power to the soul, by which we rise from the depths of despair into light and joy, to the swift movement of running the race set before us - how applicable this would be to Israel's bustling preparation for leaving Babylon and getting on the road. Then finally, the long, hard slog day by day, which is the most testing of all. But He gives more grace, and that grace is sufficient for the humdrum of life's ordinariness. This is the promise of God for the despondent heart. What more could it need?

III)41:1-7

This chapter takes the form of a court scene similar to that in chapter 1, but with the Gentiles as the subject of the arraignment, not God's own people. The theme is still that of idolatry, and the prophet brings the idols to the bar of God for judgment. The summons to the trial is given in 1, the ground of the trial given in 2-7. A digression follows from 8-20, in which God speaks comfort to His people; then in 21-29 the trial is resumed, the case summed up and the verdict given 'for the sole divinity of Israel's God' (Smith). The Gentile nations then, are bidden look at contemporary history, and observe in the dramatic rise to power of Cyrus the Persian (2, though he is not here mentioned by name), the hand of the God of Israel at work. It is in this historical phenomenon that the promise of the previous chapter is seen to be coming to fruition and fulfilment. God is saying, in effect, 'Who do you think is responsible for this new world figure? I, the Lord! It is I Who have done this, and by this I am going to fulfil My promise to My people'. The reference in 5-7 is probably to the nations Cyrus had already conquered, and to their pathetic and unavailing trust in idols to save them from the doom that swept down upon them. It is indeed a tragi-comic picture, and Isaiah's holy sarcasm seems to emphasise afresh the emptiness of idolatry as the terrified people sent messages of empty encouragement to one another and hastily tidied up their idols in an attempt to make them 'work' in the hour of crisis. So much, he seems to say, for their gods of wood and stone!

112)41:8-20

Isaiah pauses at this point to speak words of wonderful comfort and assurance to God's people, Israel. The contrast with the previous verses is quite remarkable: the same hand, and the same activity (viz. the raising up of Cyrus) that spelt such consternation to the heathen was to be comfort and hope to Israel, in much the same way that the pillar of cloud and fire in olden time was an assurance and protection to the Israelites and a troubling and discomfiture to the Egyptians. The implications in 8, 9 are impressive and far-reaching. The reference to Abraham may be intended to remind the prophet's hearers that it was from Chaldea (Ur of the Chaldees) that the patriarch was called to go and possess the land of Canaan. And when Israel by her sin had gone back to 'square one', so to speak, to languish in captivity in the same Chaldea (Babylon), God again took her up, repeating the original calling and election given to Abraham. This is what the Bible means by grace. 'We will start again at the beginning', says God. 'I chose you, and have not cast you away'. What follows in 10ff underlines the extent to which divine grace will go in the restoration of a fallen people and comfort to a dispirited people. Wonderful to hear for a fallen people, words of promise. Wonderful too for there is a timelessness and un-conditionedness about them that makes them belong to all who are given faith to claim them for their own, God's words to the worms of the earth (14) to make them what they never were, but were always meant to be. What hope, what incredible prospect!

113)41:21-29

Isaiah turns once more to the Gentiles, and challenges the oracles and priests of heathenism to prove their divinity by interpreting, explaining or guiding history. Face present events, says God to the idols, and forecast their issue, tell us what the future holds. Produce any past predictions of the events of the present. Indeed, do anything at all, be it good or evil (22, 23). But they cannot. They are dumb idols. And therefore the Lord Himself interprets and explains history (25-29), and claims it as the fulfilment of His purposes. 'They cannot tell you what is going to happen', says God, 'or how Cyrus is going to act; but I will tell you, for this Cyrus is My servant, raised up to do My will'. It is impossible not to sense the exultation of spirit throbbing in the prophet's words as he gives vent to this expression of the divine sovereignty and omnipotence. It is as if he were saying 'Who would not wait on such a God?' And this is the message of the chapter for us, for He is both utterly worthy of our trust and confidence, and more than sufficient for all our need.

114)42:1-7

These verses constitute the first of several 'servant songs', so called, which are found in this final division of Isaiah, others being found in 42:18ff, 43:5-10, 49:1-9, 50:4-10, 52:13-53:12. These passages stand distinct from the rest of the book. An impressive amount of study and scholarship has been expended on these passages, but expositors are still not absolutely clear and certain as to what precisely they signify. This much however, can be said, that they find their fullest and truest fulfilment in Christ. To say this does not answer all the questions that arise in the study of them, and one that immediately presents itself is that in the central passage in the last chapter we studied - 41:8-20 - Israel is clearly spoken of as the servant of the Lord. It is not surprising therefore, that some have taken the words in 42:1, 'Behold my servant' as necessarily referring to Israel, not Christ. Clearly there is some truth in this contention, for in 41:8ff it is the captive nation of Israel that is being spoken about and spoken to. The fact of the matter, however, is that these passages are open to several interpretations, not contradictory but complementary to one another. Israel could be read into 42:1, as also could Isaiah's faithful remnant, but it is even truer to say that Christ fulfills these words most completely. For He, ultimately, is God's Israel. If we recall God's original promise to Abraham, that in his seed all families of the earth should be blessed, and realise that this is what Matthew is referring to in the genealogy at the beginning of his gospel, when he calls Jesus the 'son of David, son of Abraham', we will see that Christ is the promised seed in whom all the promises of God are fulfilled to the world, but from Abraham to Christ, there is the whole history of the people of God intervening, and therefore at any point in that history there is a necessary link between Israel and Jesus. It is this fact that enables us to understand more fully the ambiguous nature of the interpretations placed upon the 'servant' passages in Isaiah.

115)42:1-7

It would be tempting to spend much time in the study of this notable and well-known passage, but in the interests of our main purpose in studying Isaiah as being to get the main sweep of the prophet's message, we must resist this. But we spend a further day looking at Isaiah's words. G. Adam Smith gives a useful analysis in the following four headings: The conscience of service (1); the substance of service (2, 3); the temper of service (4); and the power behind service (5ff). He also points out finely that although the passage speaks of service to man, it is first of all service to God, and it is the former because it is first of all the latter. The opening words of the song are echoed in the 'This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased' of the gospel narratives. Jesus recognized in His own mission a combination of the glorious kingly figure of the Messianic hope and that of the Suffering Servant. The recurring mention of the 'judgment' must not be misunderstood. It is not in the sense of a judicial sentence of punishment, but of the principle of right and justice that it is used. 'Putting things right' is a fair rendering, and one recalls the gospel narratives which tell of how Jesus went about 'putting right things that were wrong', healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out devils. The coming servant of God was to have as his task the redressing of wrong. The picture in 3 is very moving. The servant of God will not despair of the most abandoned and hopeless of men (cf God's promise to a worm in 41:14). We are reminded of the words of an old hymn,

Down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter,
Feelings lie buried that grace can restore;
Touched by a loving hand, wakened by kindness,
Chords that were broken will vibrate once more.

The power behind service (5ff) is the creative power of God, and it is this power that is present in the gentle 'weakness' of 1-4. This is the principle by which God works His purposes in the world. He hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty.

116)42:8-17

God's commissioning of His servant (1-7) is hailed by a hymn of praise, a new song (10) which answers to the new things (9) that God declares to His people. There are two points of impressive importance in this passage. One is that while in 1-7 the light and blessing from God are said to be brought through the ministry of the Servant, in 8-17 these are spoken of as the action of God Himself. There is no real contradiction here: the conclusion we come to is that God will accomplish this through the Servant, and that in the Servant His own action and His own travail is seen (cf 7 with 16). This is something that the Jews never understood in their own prophetic Scriptures, but it is something we need to see clearly if we are to understand what Isaiah is saying in these chapters. The second point to note is the two contrasting metaphors applied to God in 13 and 14. The one portrays a man of war - a familiar enough picture, of the Lord leading His armies to victory in battle. It is the second that is so striking, as it depicts the lonely agony and pain of a travailing woman as she brings forth her child. This is something we must read back into the picture of the Servant in 1-7 - as indeed Isaiah does in the wonderful fifty-third chapter - for it is through such travail that God, in His Servant, brings forth the new creation which is here foreshadowed. When one recalls our Lord's words in Gethsemane, 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death' and lays them alongside this striking metaphor, the portrayal of a God in travail becomes very impressive and moving. Nor is it difficult to see how Isaiah should have been moved to write these words, for had he not, in a very profound way, shared in that travail himself, in his lonely ministry?

117)42:18-25

Again we have the 'servant motif', but here the verses seem to have reference to Israel as a whole. G. Adam Smith remarks that 'they are entitled "Servant" only in order to show how unfit they are for the task to which they have been designated, and what a paradox their title is beside their real character.' The nation as a whole had been favoured with God's revelation (in the law); when that did not avail to make them fulfil their destiny, He brought them into the discipline of the exile (24, 25). But they have benefited neither from the one nor from the other, and the conclusion that they are no more fit to be God's Servant. It is from this tragic reality, as we have seen already in our studies, that Isaiah's concept of the 'remnant' developed, as indeed the tradition also from the 'remnant' to the one 'Servant' in Whom alone the calling of Israel is fulfilled. A straight line thus runs from Isaiah's words here to our Lord's own teaching in the gospels (cf Matthew 23:37ff) and Paul's in Romans 9-11. And yet, this cannot be the last word about them, for the grace of God is greater than their sin - this is the force of 43:1ff as we shall see in the next reading - and He begins with them again, although with the 'Israel within Israel', the remnant, the 'eyes and ears' among the blind and deaf (43:8). The message that comes through, therefore, is that while Israel as a whole is unfit to be God's vehicle of revelation to the world, it is nevertheless within Israel that the true capacities for such a service are found. And this, as we know, is fulfilled ultimately only in Jesus the true Servant and Israel of God.

118)43:1-7

Within the context of the meaning of 42:18-25, and the limits that the message of that passage puts on the idea of Israel, we may say that this is the first lesson that this new chapter teaches: To men who have forfeited His favour by their sins, God comes afresh in grace and love. It is a wonderful utterance, and all the more so in the foreshadowing it undoubtedly affords of the mighty intervention of God in Christ in the gospel for our salvation. One is reminded of the 'but's' of the New Testament, Romans 3:21, Ephesians 2:4, where the plight of man is offset by the glorious affirmation of what God has done in Christ for our redemption. The phrase 'called thee by thy name' (1) means to be called for a specific purpose. We are called by name because God has a work for us to do. The emphasis in 2 is meant to contrast with 42:25 - there, the fire did kindle upon them and burn and scorch, here there is miraculous preservation. The reference is general, and not, as some suggest, to the Red Sea experiences of the first Exodus, or to the dangers that would attend them on their way back to the Promised Land. It is a general metaphor - and a blessed promise - for the severest trials, the hazards and disciplines of the spiritual life. God is saying, 'There is no extreme testing in human experience in which I will not stand with you'. There is hardly anything greater than this in the New Testament itself, and we are reminded of Paul's climactic exclamation in Romans 8:37ff, 'In all these things ... more than conquerors ...'. The meaning of 3bff is said to be that Cyrus would be compensated for the liberation of Israel by the conquest of these African nations, and this may be so. The meaning, however, may be more general, as indicating that God was prepared to go to any lengths to redeem His people. G. Adam Smith translates 4 as 'I give mankind for thee, and peoples for thy life', and adds, 'All the world for this little people? It is intelligible only because this little people are to be for all the world.'

119)43:8-13

These verses present to us a tribunal scene in which God summons Israel into an assembly of the nations to bear witness to Him and to the truth of His prophecies. None of the heathen nations can answer the questions put to them by the Lord: none can own to any ability to have foretold the course of events. But Israel are His witnesses to the fact that He has predicted what has eventually come to pass. The phrase in 8, 'blind people that have eyes' is difficult, and has been interpreted in widely different ways. G. Adam Smith takes it to refer to the remnant among the people, i.e. those among the blind and deaf who had eyes to see and ears to hear. Skinner, however, suggests that the meaning is similar to that of 42:20, the sense being that while Israel lacks insight into the divine meaning of her own history, she is nevertheless a competent witness to the bare external facts. She has heard the predictions, and seen them fulfilled. They were, in other words, poor witnesses, but though they did not understand what God was doing, at least they could see that He was doing something. They saw His word fulfilled. And God, finding the heathen nations and their gods unable to meet His challenge, calls on His own people to bear witness on His behalf (10). The meaning of 12 is ambiguous in the AV. The reference is not to a demonstration of God's power in days when Israel had no strange gods among them, as if to suggest that it was the presence of strange gods among them now that had prevented such demonstrations, and grieved Him away from them - although this is a truth expressed elsewhere in Scripture. Rather, Israel is witness to the truth that it is God, Jehovah, and no strange god, that has been active in their history. He is the only God who had to do with them during all this prediction and fulfilment of prediction.

120)43:14-21

This passage begins with an announcement of the overthrow of Babylon (14, 15) and continues with a description of how God's people will issue forth from their bondage. One is reminded of our Lord's parable about first binding the strong man, then spoiling his house. Such is the pattern here. What is particularly significant is the way in which this sequel to the overthrow of Babylon is described. What the prophet is speaking of is a new exodus, comparable indeed to the first, from Egypt, but even greater than that mighty act. Such is the power that is to bring Israel out of bondage. What God did once, He can do again. What encouragement to the people of God in every age! But there is something almost paradoxical here. On the one hand, the prophet is reminding his readers of the past and of what God once did for His people; on the other hand, however, He warns them not to let their memories linger on the past (18), for God was to do a new thing. There is something important here for us. It is, of course, an incentive to faith to recall the great things God has done in the past; but it is possible to become so anchored to the past that we end up by limiting God, in the sense that we expect Him - and alas, require Him - to work today in the same way as He did in the past. Some Christians live in the past, in the structures and patterns of past revival movements, and are not prepared to recognize any work that does not carry the flavour of the nineteenth - or the seventeenth - century. But God says, 'Remember not the former things ...' - i.e. 'I am a contemporary God, so do not try to limit Me to what I have done in the past'. How prone we are to 'pigeon-hole' the Almighty and cut Him down to (our) size!

121)43:22-28

The Lord effects this deliverance of His people, not because they are worthy but for His own Name's sake. They have no merit to plead; yet, in this undeserving state, God visits them in mercy and in grace. This is the message that rings through the closing verses of the chapter. Over against all Israel's unfaithfulness, the absence of sacrifice and the religious disposition that sacrifice was meant to express, God remained faithful to His covenant pledges to them. This underlines a wonderful lesson for us. God saves us, and blesses us, not for anything in us, but for something in Him, not because we are lovable, but because He is love. There are no human grounds on which God forgives sin. It is always 'for mine own sake' (25), and no amount of putting Him in remembrance can ever discover any grounds on which we may be justified in His sight (26). Nothing could emphasise more graphically the sovereign, unmerited free grace of God than this. We have no merit to plead before God, only our sin and our need. As Matthew Henry puts it, 'It was not our merits, but our misery, that brought the Saviour down to die on the cross' - our misery, our need, our exceeding need, and His exceeding love!

122)44:1-8

This chapter is introduced in much the same way as the previous one was - as a contrast to what immediately precedes. In 42:18-25, the prophet bewails the blindness and insensitiveness of God's people - blind to all His dealings with them and therefore, humanly speaking, fit only to be rejected. Then follows the divine 'but' of grace, and God comes to them with messages of infinite hope and, in spite of everything, begins with them again. So it is also here, where 43:22-28, stressing that all God does is for His own Name's sake, not because His people are worthy of it, is the backcloth against which the wonderful 'Yet now' and 'Fear not' of 1, 2 must be understood. The promise of water poured on the thirsty echoes 41:17 and 43:19, but here the reference does not seem to be to the opening of rivers of water in the wilderness when the returning exiles pass through it, so much as to the increase of the Israelite population to be effected by the outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord. Some commentators suggest that this word was given to answer the fear that the Israelite community would dwindle during the Exile. One recalls in this connection what is said in Acts concerning the first Exodus, 'When the time of the promise drew nigh ... the people grew and multiplied in Egypt' (Acts 7:17). The reference in 5 seems to be to proselytes and converts from among the heathen and we should note the order of things - it is the anointing of the Spirit upon God's people that will attract the outsiders, who will want Jacob's God for themselves when they see what He has done for Jacob. This is always the way, and is ultimately the only answer to the problem of communication in any age.

123)44:9-20

This passage is what Skinner calls 'the most elaborate and remorseless satire on the folly of idolatry in the whole book'. In itself, it needs little comment for its message is quite plain. The prophet's biting sarcasm is impressive, and it prompts us to remark that there may be an important lesson for us to learn here. Sometimes the best way to deal with idolatry, of whatever kind, is to expose it for the stupid, senseless thing it is and hold it up to ridicule. Luther once said 'The devil hates being laughed at, he cannot stand being made a fool of'. This is something we also must learn to do with the idolatries we are faced with in modern life. There are some situations in which satire is not only permissible but is the only effective weapon to deal with them. What would Isaiah say of the modern idolatries of TV, sport, film-stardom, the pop-idols and other 'sacred cows' of the contemporary scene? G. Adam Smith, speaking of the intellectual right to scorn which the Israelite captives in Babylon had, says, 'Monotheism, even in its rudest forms, raises men intellectually - it is difficult to say by how many degrees. Indeed, degrees do not measure the mental difference between an idolater and him who serves with his mind, as well as with all his heart and soul, One God, Maker of heaven and earth: it is a difference that is absolute. Israel in captivity was conscious of this, and therefore ... their proud faces carried a scorn they had every right to wear, as the servants of the One God'.

124)44:21-28

Over against the emptiness and futility of idolatry, these verses begin with an admonition to Israel to realise her special relation to the one living and true God. The phrase 'Thou shalt not be forgotten of Me' is rendered 'Thou shalt not forget Me' in the modern versions - in the sense of 'Thou shalt not play false with Me', but the AV may nevertheless be right, since it does, after all, stand in contrast to what has been said in 9-20 about the dumb and dead idols that could not possibly answer the prayers of their devotees, whereas God can and does. He does not forget His people in need. The imagery in 22 is very wonderful; the picture is that of heavy, dark clouds being dispersed by the sun breaking through them, to return no more. One commentator says. 'The sense of being forgotten of God is produced by the consciousness of guilt, hence the promise of forgiveness is here repeated'. This is the deliverance that is about to be fulfilled, says the prophet (23) and it is spoken of as already accomplished. The remainder of the passage introduces us to the instrument by which this deliverance is to be accomplished - Cyrus of Persia. The 'build-up' in 24ff is very impressive, particularly the statement in 26. What God was about to do was simply a fulfilment of what His prophets had said for long that He would do. What a word of vindication for faithful men who have down the years proclaimed the message of the Lord to an unheeding people! Our God is One Who confirms the word of His servants and performs the counsel of His messengers - what comfort, what encouragement to those who thus seek to serve Him in the gospel!

125)45:1-8

The truly astonishing thing in this passage, so full of rich promises and memorable sayings, is that it is to a heathen king that it is spoken. The Lord's anointed - His Messiah (for 'Messiah' means 'anointed') - is Cyrus the Persian, who is also called His Shepherd (44:28). This, as we are to see in the next Note, was a hard and difficult concept for pious Jews to swallow, but called and anointed Cyrus was for the task appointed him of securing Israel's release and effecting her return to her own land. The lesson of the passage lies in the emphasis it lays on the sovereignty of God. In this connection we should note the sense of irresistible power sweeping forward, when God deigns to act. It is not that Cyrus is a worshipper of the Lord, or that he is conscious of being taken up by Him - this much is clear from 4, 'though thou hast not known Me'. He is but the instrument of the divine will and purpose, and Jacob is the real goal of God's dealings. As G. Adam Smith puts it, 'All things, irrespective of their character, are from Him, and for His ends. But what end is dearer to the Almighty, what has He more plainly declared, than that His people shall be settled again in their own land? For this He will use the fittest force. The return of Israel to Palestine is a political event, requiring political power; and the greatest political power of the day is Cyrus. Therefore, by His prophet, the Almighty declares Cyrus to be His people's deliverer, His own anointed.'

That being said, however, we must also add that the same irresistible, forward sweeping power, and the same rich promises, are true for all on whom God lays His hand and whom He calls to His service.

126)45:9-13

These verses are addressed to a section of the exiles who, it seems, objected to the idea of a heathen ruler being made the divine instrument of deliverance instead of one raised up from among themselves, as in the case of the first Exodus, when Moses was the Lord's anointed one. God takes them very firmly to task for thus 'striving' with their Maker, as if He were subject to their examination and approval in the things He chose to do in His own world and among His people. The obvious lesson here is that of the danger of being unwilling to allow God to work in His own way, and of assuming He will work only in the way we think He will work. Some people refuse to allow God His rightful freedom. As G. Adam Smith says, 'We must not substitute for faith in God our own ideas of how God ought to work'. The AV rendering of 11 is misleading. North renders it, 'Is it for you to take Me to task about My children, or give me orders about what I do?' So also, similarly, the RSV. Delitzsch translates it 'Ask Me what is to come; let My sons and the work of My hands be committed unto Me', while Cheyne puts it thus, 'Concerning things to come, will ye question Me? And concerning the work of My hands, will ye lay commands on Me?' Another rendering has 'Ask Me (but do not criticize Me); and leave to My care the work of My hands'. The statement in 12 is introductory to 13. It is the Creator of all things Who has appointed and raised up Cyrus to be the deliverer of Israel. It is as if the Lord were saying to them, 'I can do what I like'. Indeed! And shall the clay say to the potter. What makest thou?

127)45:14-17

Some scholars think that 'thee' in 14 refers to Cyrus, but it seems more likely, in view of what is said at the end of the verse, that the reference is to God's people, Israel, and that what is envisaged is the people of the Gentiles by the people of God, that is to say, Israel's true destiny will be fulfilled when she is redeemed from bondage and brought back to her own land. This is followed by a rapturous outburst in 15, as Israel - or the prophet - marvels at the wondrous ways of God. Mercy is in all the mystery that has been Israel's lot. In all they suffered God seemed to be hidden, but now, in the act of revealing, Israel can see clearly. A very similar note of wonder rings out in the climax in Romans 11:33ff to Paul's teaching about the mystery of God's dealings with His chosen people. Truly His ways are past finding out! It is not often at the time, but generally only in retrospect, that we are able to see this. But the testimony of the Scriptures that it is so should be an incentive to faith to believe it in the darkness when God does not seem to be anywhere. George Goodman describes, in a very beautiful poem, how he passed through a time of great mental and spiritual darkness in which the face of God seemed hidden from him. When the storm began to subside he wrote:

But when the clouds were driving back,
And dawn was breaking into day,
I knew Whose feet had walked with mine,
I saw His footprints all the way.

128)45:18-25

God's creation is an orderly one, not chaos - this is the force and meaning of 'in vain' in 18, and since this is so, all that He plans and purposes in it is orderly too, not - as 13-17 might seem to suggest - arbitrary, incomprehensible and meaningless. Though He is a hidden God (19), He chooses to make Himself known, and men do not need to seek in vain in abstruse, superstitious forms for knowledge of Him. Man cannot, by searching, find out God, but He is to be found because He reveals Himself to men. He does not ask men to seek Him without hope of result. In 20-25, nature is summoned to consider this God Who has predicted the victory of Cyrus (cf 41:1-4, 21-29, 43:9-13). Here it is those who have escaped after the victory is won who are called to this consideration. In 22 a universal appeal is made to the ends of the earth. This is the kind of God He is, and He bases His summons on what He has done for the deliverance of His people from Babylon. It is impossible not to think, in reading these verses, of their greater and ultimate fulfilment in the gospel of Christ. It is the deliverance Christ has wrought that becomes the ground of the appeal of the gospel: 'Be ye reconciled to God'. The invitation to be saved is based on the 'finished work', whether this be deliverance accomplished out of Babylon or on the cross, just as is the assertion that every knee shall bow to Him. For His victory displays His Lordship and His right to the homage of men.

129)46:1-7

This chapter, and the next two, which bring us to the end of the first section of the third part of Isaiah, deals with the overthrow of Babylon and the deliverance of Israel from her tyranny. First of all, the fall of the deities of the city of Babylon that is described: Bel is Marduk, and Nebo is his son, 'the Jupiter and Mercury of the Babylonian pantheon'. The contrast in 1-4 is between the impotent gods of Babylon and the living God whom Isaiah proclaims, and Bel and Nebo are represented as cowering in fear at the approach of the conquering Cyrus. Idols, exhausted animals and gods are all lumped together in this panic flight. Here, then, is the ludicrous spectacle of 'gods' being heaved unceremoniously on the backs of the weary pack animals, in the desire to get them clear of the enemy. In contrast to this, Jehovah declares Himself to be the Bearer of His people (3, 4). What a testimony this is to the living God! In 5-7 we have another satirical picture similar to those in 40:18-20 and 44:9-20 (see Notes), in which the prophet, with biting and devastating sarcasm, cuts the Babylonian deities down to size. This is the 'moment of truth' to which all idols and idolaters must ultimately come. And what a pathetic exposure it is!

I 30)46:8-13

The exposure of the idols is followed by an appeal to the argument from prophecy. The fact of correct prophecy, of which the supreme example and instance is the raising up of Cyrus, proves the divinity of Jehovah. The appeal is addressed to the 'transgressors' (8), i.e. the waverers in Israel who had been taken in by Babylon's might and tempted to believe that Babylon's god was therefore greater than the God of Israel. To this attitude God says, 'Remember'. Cast your minds back to the early days of Jehovah's power, and act as men should, rationally and reasonably. Do not be swept away by panic reactions; think. This is never an unnecessary piece of advice for crisis-situations, for generally, at such a time, the temptation is towards irrational, panic reaction. If only we would force ourselves to think, and in an attitude of recollection anchor our trembling souls in the God we have known in all our best and most fruitful experience, we would weather the storm. 'Stout-hearted' in 12 is used in a derogatory way and means 'stubborn-hearted'. The appeal here is for repentance in view of the imminence of the deliverance of God. 'Righteousness' in 13 has the force of 'righteous action' and means 'deliverance'. When read into New Testament teaching such as Romans 1:17 and 3:21ff this becomes a highly significant and illuminating concept.

131)47:1-5

Having dealt with the gods of Babylon, the prophet now turns to Babylon itself. It is interesting to see that Cyrus now disappears from the limelight. He is important only as the instrument of the divine deliverance; Israel is important as the object of it. It is all for her! This gives us a true insight into the real priorities. God raises up kingdoms and casts them down. From the divine standpoint, it is not the power of great nations that is important, but the bearing of that power on the divinely chosen people. Great powers are raised up as instrumental in the furtherance of God's purposes in the world. Isaiah sees the relative importance of the insignificant Israelite captives and the world-sweeping conquests of Cyrus, and he would also see today the relative importance of the super-powers with all their technical expertise and the struggling Church of God - and says in both instances: 'These are simply instruments of God's purposes; they are not the stars of the show, only 'extras'. The principals are God's people'. One cannot but marvel at the prophet's breadth of vision and the daring of his faith to think in such terms. It would be well for the Church of God to begin to think big like this, and believe its destiny more.

132)47:6-15

Babylon is represented as a delicate and luxurious lady who is reduced to the shameful condition of a slave. This is the divine judgment on her overweening pride and utter heartlessness. She had been the instrument of God's vengeance on His people when He was intent on disciplining them but she had gone over the score and much further than God intended they should, and therefore were to suffer in turn, being ripe for His judgment. Israel had broken the law, and God had sentenced them to a term of imprisonment, and appointed Babylon as jailor. The jailor's job is to keep his prisoners in captivity, but he has no inherent right to maltreat and terrorise his prisoners. If he does, very properly the law will deal with him next. This is what is being said here of Babylon. Two points should be noted in the indictment against her. One is in relation to the phrase 'wherein thou hast laboured from thy youth' (12). This refers us back to the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 6, which underlines the nature and essence of sin as being the determination to reach up and challenge God. Babylon is always in Scripture the symbol and epitome of anti-God power. The other point is the debt owed to this passage by the book of Revelation, chapters 17 and 18, which continues and amplifies the theme of divine judgment on anti-God power. God always has the last word, and when He speaks, proud empires crumble to the dust and are no more.

133)48:1-11

These verses appear to be addressed to the rebel element among the exiles, and the prophet is vindicating the methods of God's revelation to them, pointing out that predictions have been given and withheld in such a way as to remove every excuse for attributing the great events of history to any other cause than to the will of God. The emphasis in 3-6a is on the fulfillment of prophecy. It was necessary for Jehovah to have foretold the captivity; if He had not, it would have been assumed that, when the captivity came, Babylon's gods were stronger than He. It was a myth among ancient peoples that when victory was won it was their gods who had gotten them the victory, and Israel might well have been tempted to think this so, had God not warned them that He Himself would bring them into captivity. The 'new things' (6bff) refer to the impending deliverance from Babylon. This was 'new' in the sense that they could not possibly say 'This is what we expected', for grace is not the natural, but the most unnatural and unexpected thing in the world, unaccountable, and understandable only 'for His own Name's sake'. In 10, 'with silver' is rendered 'for silver' in RSV. The meaning would then be that, without expecting to find any good metal in Israel, God nevertheless chose her as His own. The exile brought Him neither pleasure nor profit, for Israel had been mostly dross. Others (as NEB) take it 'not as silver is tested, but in the furnace of affliction'. Neither alternative is entirely satisfactory. What is clear is that the captivity had a disciplinary aim in view; it was not something that Israel's enemies did to them with superior gods to give them success, but something that God Himself did to them, to fulfil His will in them.

134)48:12-22

The reference in 12-15 is to the raising up of Cyrus as the instrument of God's will and purpose against Babylon. How shattering it must have been to the Israelites to hear a heathen monarch being spoken of as one whom the Lord loved! It is never pleasant - but often very necessary - to have our hidebound prejudices challenged and so decisively demolished. The prophet himself seems to be speaking in 16, as Ellicott paraphrases, 'I have not from the beginning of my prophetic work spoken in dark, ambiguous speeches like the oracles of the heathen. From the time that the great work began to unfold itself, I was present contemplating it. Now the time of revelation has come'. That is to say, Isaiah is seeking to interpret the present situation of impending deliverance in the context of all he has said to the people over the years, and bring home the wonder and glory of it to their hearts. Some commentators suggest that what follows in 17-19 may contain the promise as well as the grief of God at His people's waywardness and rebelliousness, as if to say: 'Your disobedience has brought such trouble upon you and robbed you of My peace, but even yet, if only you now turn to Me in penitence and new obedience that peace will again be yours'. This seems to be the force of 20-22, where the captives are summoned to go forth from Babylon. 'Deliverance and freedom are yours', says God, 'but remember, if you go back with hearts unchanged, the process of discipline will be repeated. There is no peace to the wicked'.

135)48:12-22

Here is a further observation on this passage from the Sandyford-Henderson Notes, The Revelation, by George Philip: 'From 17 to the end, the passage scarcely needs comment. The people refuse the strong, stirring word of God Who desires to pour out His blessing upon them. This is God's sorrow (Psalm 81:10-16) and comes very near in the Person of Christ as He wept over Jerusalem. When will we learn that the God of salvation, Who is seeking to lead us in the right way, and Who to that end often has to hedge us in with thorns, is set upon our profit, not our loss? From our untrusting attitude, you would think God was a robber and a thief, instead of the Giver of all grace. The theme here is the blessings of obedience, and the command in 20 is addressed to those who are lagging like Lot and looking wistfully and lustfully back like Lot's wife. Can there be blessing for such? The wording refers to the glorious deliverance from Egypt at the Exodus, and the return from Babylon is likened to that wondrous act of God. But think - if there were laggards in Israel they would have found themselves swamped when the waters of the Red Sea returned. God has a timetable to keep, and He will keep it. It will be our own fault if we are left on the platform when the train has gone. Have you ever had that experience? It is desolation indeed.'

136)49:1-9

This chapter begins the second of the three divisions of the last section of Isaiah's prophecy. Having dealt with the theme of the impending deliverance from Babylon, emphasising Jehovah's sovereignty and power as over against all idols and false gods, the next group of nine chapters (49-57) deal with the general theme of redemption through suffering and sacrifice, and emphasise the rehabilitation of Jerusalem rather than the release from Babylon. Chapters 49 and 50 are linked together in thought, and one common factor is that there is a 'servant-song' in each: 49:1-6 and 50:4-9, and the emphasis returns to that of chapter 40, comfort and consolation. It will be helpful to look at these two chapters in outline before examining them in detail. The servant-song (49:1-9) is followed by a promise of speedy deliverance to Israel, based on what is said in the song (10-13); then the scene switches to Jerusalem, and to a series of three doubts expressed by Zion in her distress and low-spiritedness: doubt of God's care (49:14-23), doubt of His power (49:24-26), and doubt of His purpose (50:1-3). These doubts having been dealt with, there follows another servant-song, emphasising faithfulness to God's Word, and the suffering that necessarily follows this (50:4-9). And finally, words of promise and warning. We shall begin to look in detail at these divisions in the next Note.

137)49:1-9

The previous chapter ends with the call to go forth from Babylon, and now Israel, about to be liberated, is reminded that she is saved to serve, and to fulfil her role among the nations as a light shining for God. The picture unfolded in this servant song is therefore that of the instrument of God's grace and purpose in the world. We have already seen how the interpretation of this servant-figure passes from Israel the nation to Israel the remnant and to our Lord Himself, and how, in thinking of Him, we pass from deliverance from Babylon to redemption from sin unto everlasting life. It is true that it is only in our Lord that we find this word fulfilled. But it is also valid as a picture of what Israel was called to be, and just as true for the Church. And we may surely take the promises it holds to ourselves when we seek by grace to fulfil the calling it puts before us. It looks at first as if it is Israel, the nation, that is being spoken to (3), but soon, in 5, 6, we see a distinction between the nation and this person who is appointed to bring Israel back to God. This ambiguity should not confuse us, or deter us from making the most of all possible applications of the words, not least in our own consciousness of God's calling to us to serve Him in the gospel. In this connection, how eloquently 2 speaks to us of the inner preparation that is needed to make us effectual in that service. The degree of thoroughness with which we submit to that preparation will surely determine the measure in which 9 will be true of us. 'Lord, speak to me, that I may speak in living echoes of Thy tone'.

138)49:10-13

Here is a word of wonderful promise to all who venture out at the command of God. Its first reference is an encouragement and assurance to the captive Israelites in Babylon that when they obeyed the summons to 'go forth' to their own land, God would meet them, and more than meet them, with His provision for all their journeying needs, and as such calculated to give these faltering ones just the kind of confidence they needed after the long years of exile. But the words are of wide and general application, and are the heritage of all who go forth to serve God in the gospel. Their message is this: It is not that there will not be needs on the way; but He has promised to supply them; it is not that there will not be pressures or distresses, but He undertakes to take the sting out of them; it is not that there will not be difficulties, but He will smooth them away; it is not that we will be lacking in perplexities, but He will lead us through them all, showing us a clear way. Little wonder that 13 commands us to sing and be joyful. With such a God we have something to sing and be joyful about: O let us lay hold upon His promises, and by them still every murmur and every plaint in our faithless hearts!

I 39)49:14-23

It is one thing, however, for the prophet to speak these wonderful words of comfort and assurance in 1-13, and to summon heavens and earth to break into song, but quite another to believe them when faced with the sad and tragic facts of the situation as it really was. For years Jerusalem had lain waste and desolate, and it seemed as if God had indeed forgotten her. And so, the first of the three doubts dealt with in this section of the prophecy is answered in terms of a wonderful double assurance in 15, 16 that (a) He has Zion's name graven on the palms of His hands, so that it is ever before Him and He cannot forget, and (b) the picture of her in a restored and perfect state was in His heart. In the mind of God the ruined city was already standing proudly rebuilt, with the glory of the latter house greater than that of the former. The reference in 18 is to the returning exiles, and Jerusalem is bid lift up her downcast eyes to see the vanguard of the liberated captive band approaching their homeland once again. The verses that follow are deeply moving. Zion is represented as astonished and almost mesmerised at the sight of so many of her children returning to her. The change from desolation is complete as God uses the Gentiles to accomplish His purpose of bringing them back to their Zion. The metaphor is very daring. In 15, God compares His love to that of a nursing mother and now, in 23, the same thought is expressed in the care He shows in bringing His people back. He is not content to say these things to them; He fulfils them. That is the measure of His love.

140)49:24-26

The second doubt, expressed in these verses, is of a different kind. Even if Zion be now convinced of God's love for her and her people, will these tyrants who hold them captive give them up? After all, they had lost the war, and Nebuchadnezzar had taken them as lawful booty. The doubt, then, is no longer of the divine love, but the divine power. The answer to this doubt is expressed in unambiguous and unequivocal terms, and a great testimony is borne to God's saving and delivering power. It is impossible not to relate this to New Testament categories, and see in this glorious affirmation a revelation of the power of the gospel and its essential good news. We have already made reference (in the Note on 43:14-21) to our Lord's parable about binding the strong man, then spoiling his house, and this is the thought that comes to mind in reading these verses. What music in the words, 'the captives of the mighty shall be taken away and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered: for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee ...'. Is not this the assurance that God gives to all who serve Him in the gospel? He does not send us to this warfare on our own charges - we have no might of our own to set the captives free - but if He speaks in what we say, when, at His command, we say to the prisoners, 'Go forth' (49:9), then chains will fall off, and hearts will be free. Thank God for the power of the gospel!

141)50:1-3

These verses give expression to yet another doubt in the heart of Israel, which is resolved by God in His grace and love. It is not at first clear, however, what is being said, but if we read it thus: 'Where is your mother's writ of divorce that I am supposed to have given her?' The meaning becomes plainer. Israel thought that the Lord's withdrawing from her, and allowing her to go into captivity constituted a permanent, irrevocable divorce, and that He had disposed of them finally as a man in debt does in trying to raise money. 'No, no' says God. 'No such thing has happened. It was discipline, not final separation. That bill of divorcement exists only in your imagination. I indeed put your mother away, but where is the bill that makes her divorce final? You indeed were sold, but was it because I was bankrupt? Never. The reality of the situation is very different. Your sin was the instrumental cause of the captivity, not the failure of My love'. And as an effective proof of this assurance, there comes the promise of a demonstration of power on their behalf to deliver them and restore them to their own land (2b, 3): 'Is My hand shortened that it cannot redeem ...?' If God can work sudden transformations in the physical realm, can He not also do the same in the realm of history, reversing processes that seem, humanly speaking, unalterable, such as the captivity of His people. Is there anything too hard for the Lord?

142)50:4-11

We come to the next 'servant-song' and to a picture of great beauty, deeply moving in its implications. It is instructive to compare it with the previous song in 49:1ff - there, the servant's mouth is like a sharp sword, here he has the tongue of the learned. The common factor is the service of the Word, and here we are given an insight, as it were, into how a man's word achieves its sword-like quality, and into the nature of the discipline that takes place when he is in the shadow of God's hand (49:2). The servant learns his speech by listening, and grace - as G. Adam Smith beautifully puts it - is poured upon the lips through the open ear. It is the constant, day-by-day listening to God that gives him his message for men (4). But now a new thought emerges. To speak the word of the Lord in utter faithfulness is going to involve any servant of His in a costliness of suffering that can at times be so extreme as to be almost unbearable (6). There comes a point when a man has to face this challenge in his ministry in utter loneliness of soul, knowing that to go on as he has been going will mean encountering bitter hatred from those who refuse his word. And he is faced with the temptation to water his message down and make it more acceptable. If he yields, he will lose the divine unction upon him and a glory will depart from his ministry; but if he sets his face like a flint (7) to preach without fear or favour, he knows he will not be put to shame, and all the resources of the Godhead will be at his disposal (8,9). This is the preacher's charter, and with it, none need fear.

143)50:4-11

Two further points require to be underlined in these verses before we pass from them. One is the foreshadowing of our Lord that is evident in them, the other the significance of 10 and 11. We are reminded in 4 of the New Testament's verdict on Jesus, 'Never man spake like this Man' (John 7:46), but it is in 6 particularly that we see the deepest fulfilment of the prophet's words as applying to Him. It is He Who is the great Prototype in suffering for righteousness sake, as it is in fellowship with Him that we share in His sufferings. The chapter ends with a word of assurance (10) and a word of warning (11). First of all, an exhortation is given to the pious in Israel (10) to imitate the Servant's faith in God, as unfolded in 4-9: the Servant, under pressure (5, 6), leans upon his God (7-9), and this is the example we must follow. In this, there is at least the suggestion that if we stand faithful to God as he did, we also shall have such experiences. The words of warning in 11 are, in contrast, directed towards the wicked and ungodly in Israel. One traditional interpretation here is that the reference is to those exiles who played with the fires of political revolution, instead of abiding in the deliverance of the Lord. Others think they are the revilers and abusers of the Servant in Israel. Whichever interpretation we may adopt, it is a relevant word for all who play with strange fire in the things of God. Fireworks are fleeting, and soon spend themselves; but they can also do much harm before they finally splutter into extinction.

144)51:1-8

We come now to a second series of doubts, not about God, but about themselves. And God reassures His people in a series of exhortations in such a way that faith rises again and cries to Him for His mighty coming. Thus we have three 'Hearkens' in 51:1-8, and three 'Awakes' in 51:9-52:12. The doubt that is now besetting Israel is implied rather than stated in the opening verses. The clue lies in 2. Israel is looking at herself, recognizing how few are really prepared to go forth into freedom at the command of God, and on how small and insignificant a group the future seems to depend. In this discouragement, God reminds His people of their origin, bidding them remember that when God called Abraham he was alone, one man, yet God made him a great nation. Can it matter, then, that they are now few in number again, and insignificant in their own eyes? Is God not able once again to multiply the people? How apposite this word is in times of discouragement: remember the past, and look to what God once did, and remember He can do so again. Law and justice (4) sum up His will for His world, and here the assurance is given that these will be fulfilled and come to pass, bringing about a new order (6). In view of this, the prophet exhorts the people to stand up to all pressures and disciplines (cf 50:7-9). The example of the Servant is held up before them here, 'who for the joy that set before him endured the cross'. The travail and cost of faithfulness is always abundantly worthwhile in the end. Well might the prophet say to them, 'Fear not ... neither be afraid'! Provided we can be sure of God in terms of these verses, there is nothing we need fear.

145)51:9-16

Now comes the response of faith to the assurances given by God to His people, and their uplifted and encouraged hearts cry out to Him in 9-11. 9 corresponds to 1, 2: they do indeed look back and remember what God did in days of old, and make this a strengthening of their confidence. 'Rahab', 'the dragon', 'the sea', 'the deep', are all symbols of the original 'chaos' over which the Spirit of God brooded to bring forth light and order. The reference in 10 echoes the great Exodus deliverance from Egypt, and the second return of Israel to the land, repeating the words of 35:10, is likened to that great earlier manifestation of divine power. In 12-16 we have God's answer to the people's impatient faith. Over against the terror and fear of the oppressor, God sets His own majesty and glory. How wonderfully all this speaks to the believer's experience: Even in the context of a living faith in God's assurances (9, 10), our hearts often tend to falter and fear as we look around us to see the forces that might still engulf us - like Peter looking around him and seeing the waves boisterous, when walking on the water - and we become distraught again. But God in His pity knows how prone we are to become low-spirited, and comes again to strengthen and assure us (12), reminding us that His ultimate goal in His dealings with His people is the renewal of the entire universe - new heavens and new earth (16) - as if to say, 'With this as My ultimate purpose, and you as a cardinal element in it, is it possible that I should ever let you down or fail to keep you safe? I am He that comforts you'.

146)51:17-23

The second 'Awake' is addressed to Jerusalem. The beleaguered city is pictured as a woman lying prostrate and senseless, intoxicated with the cup of the Lord's indignation which she has drunk, her sons unable to help her (17-20). The Jerusalem lying in ruins and disorder as she had been left by the enemy is movingly portrayed in the book of Lamentations in language that breathes the very spirit of despair. Yet the stricken city is bidden awake and stand up. The verb 'awake' is used in a more intensive form here than in 9, and the suggestion is of shaking a stupefied and prostrate figure in order to rouse it to consciousness. The message that the prophet is thus urgently communicating to Jerusalem is one full of hope and comfort. The cup of trembling (22), which Jerusalem has drunk to the dregs (17), is to be taken from her nerveless hand and given to her enemies to drink. A complete reversal of the situation is to take place, as Babylon is brought low and Zion is once again exalted by the hand of the Lord. Few passages could illustrate more graphically the contrast between the Lord's 'strange work' of wrath, and His 'proper' work which is to delight in mercy, and no one who has, because of his sin, tasted of the cup of God's indignation will fail to sense the sweet grace and comfort that 22 and 23 convey to the afflicted soul. To hear these words is to hear the pardon of God and enter into peace.

147)52:1-6

The third 'Awake' is again addressed to Jerusalem, and Zion is exhorted to lay aside her soiled raiment and don her festal garments in anticipation of her near deliverance (1, 2). In 3-6, the Lord is 'represented as deliberating with Himself on the religious situation, so injurious to His honour, brought about by the unprecedented calamities of His people, and as resolving to end it by their deliverance' (Skinner). The idea is that the continuance of the state of Israel's captivity is intolerable to the Lord and to His majesty. It is for this reason that He acts to set them free. This is a further emphasis of the idea expressed in the words 'for His own Name's sake', as we see from 6. The proper rendering of 3 is 'Ye were sold for nought', i.e. Jehovah gained nothing by delivering Israel into the hand of her enemies, in the sense that no price was paid for her, and He asks nothing as the price of her redemption. This is one interpretation. Another, by Ellicott, suggests that 'there was no real sale (when Israel went into captivity), only a temporary transfer, and therefore Jehovah can redeem you at His own pleasure'. Whatever the interpretation, however, the spiritual application gleams with light and glory as an illustration of the free grace of God. Grace is free because it cost Him so much in the gift of His Son to redeem us.

148)52:7-12

The Lord has achieved victory over Babylon, and the prophet sees in imagination a runner coming over the hills and approaching Jerusalem with the news that the King Himself is on the way, soon to make His triumphal entrance (7, 8). It is hardly surprising that Paul should take up these wonderful words in Romans 10:15 and use them to describe the ministry of the gospel, for what is the good news if not a proclamation of the triumph of God and the coming of the King to men with messages of deliverance? In 8 the call of the runner is taken up by the city's watchmen. To see 'eye to eye' means 'to see close up', and the idea expressed seems to be that Jehovah will be seen distinctly and clearly when He comes to Zion (Skinner). The phrase does not have the idiomatic connotation of agreement and harmony that we give it in English. 9 and 10 bring us back to the activity of God (in answer to the prayer of 51:9), and we see the arm of the Lord made bare for the deliverance of His people. Following this comes the call to Israel to leave Babylon (cf 48:20ff). The picture is a glorious one, with the Lord, as commander-in-chief of His people, going before them and, paradoxically, His glory bringing up the rear, thus surrounding and enfolding them in His protection. The picture is reminiscent of the Exodus from Egypt, with the pillar of cloud and fire guiding and protecting Israel. But the differences are significant: here, there is to be no haste, as with the first Exodus (Exodus 12:11), for there will be no oppressor to pursue them, as then. In this respect, the new deliverance will be greater than the old. God's new things are always better than the old (42:9, 43:19).

149)52:13-15

The most famous of the 'servant-songs', known popularly as 'the Fifty-third of Isaiah' really begins here, in 52:13. It is a poem of five strophes or stanzas, each of three verses in the AV. It is pointed out, however, that in the original, three stanzas appear not of equal, but of increasing length, as if at each successive development of the thought there is a fuller and more decisive expression of truth gathering to a climax at the end. It is also pointed out by the commentators that each stanza begins with a phrase or statement that sums up its message. Thus, the first of these, in 13 'Behold my servant' sums up not only the theme of the first stanza but also of the whole song. The second, 53:1, 'Who hath believed' introduces us to the unbelief and thoughtlessness of those who saw the servant without feeling the meaning of his suffering. The third, 53:4, 'Surely he hath borne our griefs' describes how the servant in His suffering was the substitute for the people. The fourth, 53:7, 'He was oppressed' deals with the innocence and humility of the servant in contrast to the injustice accorded to him; and the final stanza, 53:10, 'It pleased the Lord to bruise Him', underlines the truth that behind men's treatment of the servant lies God's holy will. Analysis of a passage such as this may sometimes serve to take our eyes off the heart of the message that is being conveyed, and this we must strenuously avoid, above all with this tremendous and mystery-plumbing utterance; all the same it will serve its purpose if it guides our minds along the progressive revelation that the prophet's words give us. It is true that this mighty prophecy, as G. Adam Smith puts it, was fulfilled in One Person, Jesus of Nazareth, and achieved in all its details by Him alone. This is its supreme value for us. But let us pause to ask ourselves what it could have meant to the people of God to whom it was first spoken, and what impact these haunting words must have had upon their minds and hearts. Must they not have had a profound effect, evangelistically, upon them? An indication from God that the redemption for which they longed was possible only through the suffering of this Suffering Servant of the Lord?

150)52:13-15

We now look at this stanza in detail. It is general and introductory, summarising all that is unfolded in detail in the chapter that follows. First of all, Jehovah makes a brief statement about the glorious destiny in store for His servant. RSV renders 13 'Behold, my servant shall prosper' (cf Jeremiah 23:6, where this word is used of the promised Messiah). This promise of exaltation gives perspective to what, after all, is the most moving expression of suffering and humiliation in all Scripture, and serves to remind us that life, not death, is the goal of suffering in Biblical thought. Not but that this is an extremely difficult concept to grasp or understand, as 14 makes clear. Blank amazement is kindled in the minds of the beholders as they see the servant's unexampled sufferings. They do not see meaning or purpose in it; it is negative and profitless, and therefore an embarrassment, not to say a stumbling-block, to them. But this same Suffering Servant is to teach them differently (15, where for 'sprinkle' we should read 'startle'). The real truth about this One's sufferings, when revealed, will be staggering and shattering in its implications. Men will see what was hitherto hidden to them, and be made to consider this tremendous new truth which hitherto they had not even conceived as a possibility, viz. that suffering is fruitful, and sacrifice the most practical thing in the world, that pain, in God's service, leads to glory, that the way to life is through death. The full New Testament exposition of this theme is unfolded in Philippians 2:5-11, where Paul underlines the integral connection between humiliation and exaltation by the emphatic 'Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him ...'.

ISAIAH 53:1-3

The translation of 1 should read as the RSV, 'Who has believed what we have heard', and we think G. Adam Smith is right when he suggests that it is penitent men, looking back from the light of the servant's exaltation to the time when his humiliation was before their eyes, who are speaking here, saying, 'Yes: what God has said is true of us. We were the deaf and indifferent. We heard, but who of us believed what we heard, and to whom was the arm of the Lord - His purpose, the hand He had in the servant's sufferings - revealed? Who would have thought that in this spectacle of weakness and humiliation, the mighty arm of God was being made bare in salvation for men?' How up-to-date all this is! Is not this the judgment men make today also about the gospel? In 2 and 3 the reasons for their disregard of, and indifference to, the servant are given. It was a wrong estimation of what he was, through the blindness of unbelief. As Paul was to write centuries later, 'the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them that believe not'. What a confession of the perversity of sin this is, that not only indifference (2) but also aversion (3) should be felt towards the spectacle of suffering: To despise and avert one's gaze from such an One must surely be the ultimate expression of sin, and yet until eyes are opened by the Spirit of God to see the loveliness of Christ, he is nothing to those that pass by, and of no value or interest. Looked at in this light, the words 'we esteemed him not' are very terrible indeed in our condemnation. Yet, paradoxically, it is the very consciousness of the mystery that His sufferings present to the mind that makes heart and conscience begin to frame thoughts and questions that will not let us alone. 'Why this suffering figure?' 'Why, Jesus, in thy dying hour endure such agony?' Such questions lead us into the theme of the next stanza, where an attempt to answer them is made.

152)53:4-6

The questions that arise around this suffering Figure are insistent upon an answer, and the answers begin to be given in this next stanza of the song. The sense of bewilderment and incomprehension at his sufferings (2) and the contempt (3) now yield to the realisation that a suffering figure towering over the wrecks of time cannot just be dismissed without explanation or comment. Something has to be said. Thus comes the recognition that the sufferings had to do with sin, i.e. that they were penal: 'Ah, yes, he is suffering because God has stricken him'. This was the philosophy of the day, as we may learn from the attitude of Job's comforters. In retrospect, however, the penitents now see that this was a false judgment. The sufferings were penal, yes, but they were also vicarious (4a, 5), it was our griefs and sorrows that he bore, our transgressions, not his own, for which he was wounded, and it was the price of our peace that was laid on him. And the griefs and sorrows, the wounds and the chastisement, represent the guilt that was laid on him (6) - redemptive wounds and sorrows, reflecting the redeeming love of God for men. It is difficult to find words adequate to describe this marvellous and moving picture of vicarious and substitutionary sufferings, and none has done it better than the hymn-writer, Philip Bliss in his immortal words:

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned he stood,
Sealed my pardon with his blood:
Hallelujah! what a Saviour!

153)53:7-9

These verses represent a further development in thought and an even deeper insight into the meaning of the sufferings of 3-6. The Servant was innocent and sinless (9), yet remained silent and unprotesting under all the suffering he endured. The AV rendering of 8 is dubious, and the RSV should be followed, 'By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?' The meaning is that he was put to death by a form of law that was tyranny, devoid, and in defiance of, justice. Both the sinlessness of the Servant, and the silence with which he suffered, are integral to the idea of atonement. On the one hand, only a sinless one can make atonement for sin, and it is, on the other hand, of the essence of atonement that it be made voluntarily and freely, hence Christ's submission to the indignities He endured, and His silence under provocation. It is not enough that the penalty of the broken law should be paid to the full, in atoning for sin; the injury done to the divine majesty must somehow be repaired also and it is this that He accomplished in the death He died. The sacrifice for sin which satisfied the law's demands contained within itself the offering of a sinless and spotless life wholly well-pleasing to God, 'making up for' the failures and sins of men.

Guilty, vile and helpless we;
Spotless Lamb of God was he:
Full atonement, can it be?
Hallelujah! what a Saviour!

ISAIAH 53:10-12

These verses constitute the climax of this wonderful 'servant-song' as they describe the divine purpose which is realised through the sufferings of the Servant. Cruel and appalling as the sufferings were, and perversion of justice as his death was, God was nevertheless at work in the tragedy, accomplishing something unspeakably glorious through His sufferings and woe. The divine purpose was in order that 'through his soul making a guilt-offering, he might see a seed, prolong his days, and that the pleasure of the Lord might prosper by his hand'. This is the amazing paradox that Peter underlines in his words on the day of Pentecost, 'Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: whom God hath raised up' (Acts 2:23, 24). It is a prophecy, therefore, of victory, of resurrection, of the triumph of good over evil through atoning, expiatory suffering; and this makes the prophet's words gleam and sparkle with glory. 'Dividing the spoil' in 12 reminds us of our Lord's own words about first binding the strong man, then spoiling his house, and of Paul's in Philippians 2:9-11. The 'seed' in 10 is the 'travail of his soul' in 11, and it is the emergence of this 'seed' out of the sufferings of the cross that satisfies the Son of God. This is the 'joy that was set before Him' (Hebrews 12:2) for which He 'endured the cross, despising the shame'. But do not let us pass by the mighty 'because' in 12 - all the blessings, the triumph and the victory - flow from the cross, on which He poured out his soul unto death.

155)53:1-12

Here is one final comment on the mystery and glory of the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah from the writings of G. Campbell Morgan: 'We have joy in our forgiveness, and in all the riches of our inheritance in our Lord; we have even greater joy in all the victories of our Lord, in the glories which are His, resulting from His passion. But the joy of knowing He will be satisfied is still greater. In this great chapter we are introduced to the mystery of the suffering of the Servant of God, in a way which can only make the lip dumb, and bow the soul to the most complete prostration of wonder and amazement. So great is the revelation that pity is impertinent; and sympathy is irreverent. We can only watch, and wonder, and adore as we see Him; of men, despised and rejected; of God, bruised and put to grief; in Himself, a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; at last, cut off out of the world of the living, His grave with the wicked. And all this because 'All we like sheep have gone astray ... and Jehovah hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all'. With necessary self-abnegation and complete abasement and shame, I am constrained to say: Was it worthwhile? That is, was man worth it? The answer is in these words: 'He ... shall be satisfied'. Then, I have but one thing to say, and it is this:

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.'

156)54:1-10

Scholars are agreed that this chapter has an integral connection with the previous one, and the connection is that the latter describes the blessings and deliverance which the atoning and redemptive sufferings of the Servant accomplish. A twofold image is employed in the description of these blessings; Israel is viewed both as a bride (1-10) and as a city (11-17), an imagery significantly taken up by the Apostle John in the book of Revelation (21:9, 10). The tremendous transformation spoken of in these verses is wrought by the suffering of the Servant, and illustrates the power of the cross in moral and spiritual renewal. It also demonstrates that all God's gracious blessings flow from the cross. The picture given is of a 'wife forsaken', childless and desolate, and now restored in a great and wonderful reconciliation. One thinks of Hosea's prophecy in this connection, which gives the other, darker side, the unfaithfulness and adultery of Israel. Here, the reconciliation is accomplished only through the sufferings of the Servant, and this is a reminder to us of what it cost God to redeem a soul, in terms of suffering and agony. The illustration Isaiah's words give of the 'kindness of God' breaking into the bleakness and desolation of human sin in the word of the gospel is almost too wonderful to be true, yet too wonderful not to be true, particularly the incredible hope expressed in 10, making us say, 'If only this is true, then the final answer has been given to the woe of man, and all is well'. What could underline more decisively than these words, the eternal security of the people of God?

157)54:11-17

The bride now becomes the city, and rich and glorious promises are held out of complete restoration of a city devastated by its enemies. Scholars tell us that 'fair colours' in 11 is a cosmetic image: the word is 'antimony', which was used by women for painting round the eyes, so as to set forth their brilliance more and show their beauty to the best advantage. Here is a very wonderful thought. When God begins to work in the human spirit, it makes that human spirit what it was meant to be, and brings it into its true destiny, planting in it a great radiance and beauty. There is nothing in the world so lovely as a truly saved soul. We should not miss the significance of what is said in 13. When spiritual renewal comes to a community or a nation, it is always true that the next generation inherits the blessings of that renewal. Every revival of religion lays the foundations of many generations. Well-taught children are the accompaniment of every true spiritual awakening. 17 contains a wonderful assurance that has been a comfort to countless servants of God in their experience of opposition in His work. This is the charter that God gives them when He sends them forth. One wonders if opposers of God's work and of His servants are aware of this. Do they know what they are letting themselves in for when they obstruct and resist a work of grace? 'Workman of God, O lose not heart'.

158)55:1-5

While the previous chapter unfolds the general glory of salvation, these verses remind us that a particular application and appropriation of salvation is needed. 'Ho, everyone that thirsteth'. (1) It is an address to those in the captivity of Babylon, who have 'settled down' to live there, to turn from the pursuit of earthly prosperity, which can never satisfy souls made for God, to the living fountains of waters in Him. G. Adam Smith says that the Jews learned their mercantile and business habits in Babylon, gathering prosperity and settling in comfort. 'They drank of the streams of Babylon, no longer made bitter by their tears, and ceased to think upon Zion'. With this background in view, this wonderful appeal is seen to be also a challenge to the captive people to remember that God had set eternity in their hearts and to lift their sights above merely material considerations. It is as if the prophet were saying, 'You have made for yourselves a good standard of living, even in captivity, but is material comfort the only consideration? You are made for better things. You are God's chosen people, and have a destiny in the world. Come out of Babylon and fulfil that destiny'. The force of all this as applied to our modern age, affluent and poverty-stricken as it is, can scarcely be over-estimated. We 'have never had it so good', yet we have never been so deprived and needy in the things that matter, and our tragedy is that we do not see the depth of our plight. The meaning of 3ff seems to be 'Look what I did with David when he submitted to My will and purpose for his life. I can do that for you'. It is significant to see that it is to obedience that God promises blessing and fulfilment (2, 3) - 'hearken diligently, hear'. This is faith, and without faith there can be no entering our true destiny.

159)55:6-7

It is the urgency of the divine appeal that is underlined in these well-known verses. The time is the eve of departure from Babylon, and it is God's appointed hour of opportunity. The door was open for the people to go back to their own land and in the literal sense, it was 'now or never' for His people. For times of refreshing pass, and opportunity, once missed, may slip away never to return. It is a solemn fact that, although it is certainly possible to seek and find the Lord in a day of grace, those who trifle with opportunity when it is given may find the voice of the Lord growing fainter and fainter until at last it can no longer be heard. These verses also indicate very clearly what seeking the Lord and calling on Him means and implies. It means repentance and turning to God from sin. Repentance is not a mere sorrow for sin, but a clean break with the past. Forgiveness is for the sins that are past, but the sins have in fact to be left in the past, not continued in. This is the only 'hearing' (3) that has any kind of relevance in the spiritual life, and certainly the only kind that will bring a man to God. It is a sad fact that many in Babylon did not 'hear' in this sense, and were left behind, knowing not the time of their visitation: and this is the sad and tragic fact that confronts us in the work of the gospel today. As Jesus said, 'Ye will not come to Me, that ye might have life' (John 5:40).

160)55:8-13

This magnificent passage continues the appeal to the complacent, earthbound and materialistic captives in Babylon to raise their sights and their horizons to see beyond the things that had enslaved their hearts. The summons to contemplate the heavens (9) is reminiscent of God's word to Abraham in Genesis 15:5, and bears a similar spiritual message about the thoughts and ways of God. This use of nature to communicate spiritual truth is continued throughout the passage, and in 10 and 11, the rain and the snow nourishing and watering the earth become the symbol of God's word to men. This is a deeply significant analogy which bears a twofold message: on the one hand, it emphasises the gentle unobtrusiveness of the divine word's action and influence on men, and, on the other, the inevitable effectiveness of that action and influence. Just as there is no doubt about the effect on the earth of the providential natural processes, so there is no doubt about what God's word will accomplish when He sends it forth. In this instance (12), it is the word of deliverance from Babylon that is in view. What God has said, will take place. And did, in the fullness of the time. 'Thus does the prophet, in his own fashion, lead the starved worldly heart, that has sought in vain its fullness from its toil, through scenes of nature, to that free omnipotent grace, of which nature's processes are the splendid sacraments' (G. Adam Smith).

161)56:1-8

This passage is linked to what precedes it by the reference in its opening verse to God's salvation and righteousness being near and at hand. The appeal in chapter 55 was for faith, as the hand that lays hold of the promised blessings of salvation, and now we have a strong, ethical emphasis on the fulfilment of the law. Those that return from the exile, being redeemed, are to keep God's commandments. This is an exact parallel to Exodus 12-20. First, there is the redemption out of captivity, then the giving of the law. 'I am the Lord thy God that brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me'. There is, therefore, no evidence of any legalistic spirit here. Observance of the law, rightly understood in the context of grace, is not legalism, and the two things should not be confused. Then follow words of hope for two classes of people, the sons of the stranger, and the eunuchs, and this gives us some indication of the measure of divine salvation spoken of in the previous chapters. The fear of the 'sons of the stranger' would be lest they be excluded from the Lord's restoration of His people to the Land. They had become proselytes, had embraced Judaism, but feared for the future either because of the enactment of Deuteronomy 23:3-8 which forbade strangers to enter in, or because of any intolerant, exclusive spirit that might develop among the returned exiles. They need not worry, the Lord says here. There can be no separation now, for He has broken down the middle wall of partition between them (6-8). What a word this is for all who feel that they are outcasts, who feel the need to be loved, to matter, to have a place: Let us rejoice that our God is a God 'Who gathereth the outcasts of Israel'.

162)56:1-8

The other class of people mentioned here is the 'eunuchs'. A word of interpretation is necessary here. It is a fact that one of the cruel and barbaric customs of the ancient world practised by conquerors was to make so many of their captives into eunuchs. And the book of Deuteronomy teaches that mutilation of this kind is a bar to entrance into the assembly of the Lord. But the eunuchs were not to say, 'I am a dry tree, i.e. I cannot become the head of a family now, because of what has been done to me, and therefore can have no real and permanent share in the hopes of the nation'. For God, here, promises to give them a name and a monument (place) in Israel to be remembered by, better than sons and daughters. This is very wonderful, both in its general and specific spiritual application. For one thing it tells us that nothing that the enemy can do to us can keep us from God or frustrate His loving purposes for us and in us. This is a wonderful underlining of the promise in Joel about the years that the locusts have eaten being restored (Joel 2:25). It is also an assurance that circumstances that are outwith our control, and providences that are ordained for our lives cannot mean ultimate deprivation and loss for us, but rather gain, for God makes capital out of them. Just as suffering is the pathway to exaltation for the Servant, so it is for all who follow Him. We die to live in the spiritual life, and in the kingdom of God, life - not death - is the goal in all God's dealings with us. This is such a glorious and triumphant word that it will bear some further illustration, and this we give, in the next Note, in a quotation from the writings of Dr James Denney.

163)56:1-8

'Jesus said to the Twelve, "Verily I say unto you, there is no man that hath left house, or wife, or brethren, or parents, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this time, and in the world to come, eternal life". These words might almost stand for a description of Paul. He had given up everything for Christ's sake. He had no home, no wife, no child; as far as we can see, no brother or friend among all his old acquaintances. Yet, we may be sure that not one of those who were most richly blessed with all these natural relations and natural affections knew better than he what love is. No father ever loved his children more tenderly, fervently, austerely and unchangeably than Paul loved those whom he had begotten in the gospel. No father was ever rewarded with affection more genuine, obedience more loyal, than many of his converts rendered to him. Even in the trials of love, which search it, and strain it, and bring out its virtues to perfection - in misunderstandings, ingratitude, wilfulness, suspicion - he had an experience with blessings of its own in which he surpassed them all. If love is the true wealth and blessedness of our life, surely none was richer or more blessed than this man, who had given up for Christ's sake all those relations and connections through which love naturally comes. Christ had fulfilled to him the promise just quoted; He had given him a hundredfold in this life, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children. It would have been nothing but loss to cling to the natural affections and decline the lonely apostolic career.' (Denney)

164)56:9-57:13a

At this point in the chapter, a different atmosphere obtains, and we are confronted with a word of solemn and stern warning. The gist of it is that the people are reminded that the sins here mentioned were the things that had led them into captivity, and they must not happen again. 'Turn not again to folly', they say to the returning captives: One of the things that had been significant and decisive as a harbinger of coming judgment, and which they had failed to discern, was the gradual removal of the righteous from the community (1, 2). The representatives of the old ways were passing away, being taken home to God out of the evil that was to come, leaving a generation that knew not the Lord. This is often a precursor of judgment, just as the gathering of men and beasts into the Ark and the closing of its door was a warning of the imminence of the flood that was soon to come. In 3-13, we have echoes of the sins that had led to the captivity, the idolatry and its accompanying immorality that had been such a blight on the national integrity. Perhaps the most pathetic and perverse note of all is struck in 10. They were weary in their sin and the way of life it had led them into, yet they still persisted in it, refusing to accept that it was a way without hope and without a future. Could anything be more eloquent of the essential hopelessness and despair inherent in the life of sin than this. What an infatuation sin induces in its hapless dupes.

165)57:13b-21

Here is the glorious alternative to the life of sin. 'He that putteth his trust in' God is the believing remnant, and for such, all is different, and comfort and hope abound for the penitent people who have wept the idolatry out of their hearts by the streams of Babylon and come to themselves. The sheer paradox of grace expressed in 15 is very wonderful. The high and lofty One stoops so low to rescue and recover His contrite people. One is reminded of Paul's marvellous flight of spiritual exaltation in Colossians 1, where he speaks of the mighty, cosmic Christ, creator and upholder of all things, coming to dwell in the hearts of men as the hope of glory. If we read this into what is said in 18, all the glory of the gospel becomes evident before our eyes as the rehabilitation and transformation of broken, soiled, bent lives becomes a reality in the promise of God, 'I have seen his ways, and will heal him', says the Lord. What a word for an interceding warrior of the faith, burdened about a loved one that has long resisted the word of the gospel: God promises that lips which have for so long soiled themselves with blasphemies and curses will yet speak the language of grace, and know the peace of God, however far away from Him they may have been.

A word of warning closes the chapter, giving a solemn reminder that the blessings of God are possible only to the penitent and contrite. There can be no peace for those that continue to resist the divine will. This phrase (21), like that in 48:22, concludes the second of the three sub-divisions of the final section of Isaiah's prophecy. The next chapter begins the final movement of his message, which has as its theme the triumph of the kingdom of God and His universal dominion.

166)58:1-7

Having spoken of the eternal purpose of Jehovah of peace for His people (chapters 40-48), and having revealed Him through whom alone that peace can be discovered, the Servant of the Lord, the Prince of peace (49-57), the prophet now proceeds to demonstrate the type of life that must be lived out by those brought into the fellowship of this gift of peace. The subject essentially now is 'The Programme of Peace' (IVF Commentary). This chapter and the next seem to belong together, and contain a series of rebukes and promises to Israel. The chapter opens with a summons to the prophet to be unsparing in exposing the sin of God's people (1). What follows serves to explain why this exposure was so necessary and unsparing. There was no lack of religion among them; but the earnestness and regularity of their religious performance is set in contrast to their neglect of social righteousness, and they were deluding themselves that this was acceptable to God. But religion without morals is not something that can ever please God (5). Fasting was practised as a kind of lever with God (3); it was something they 'did' without any relation to what they 'were', and this is an abomination to the Lord (cf the emphasis in chapter 1). The real issue is expressed in 6, 7. This is what true religion must issue in: doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. This is a perennial problem: there are still those today to whom correctness of religious form and expression is everything, to the exclusion of the weightier matters of the law, and those for whom conformity to religious patterns and shibboleths is more important than doing justly and loving mercy. This is something that must be cried against very loudly indeed, for the sake of God's great name.

167)58: 8-14

The message of the rest of the chapter is clear: spiritual health and renewal follow when the abuses of religion mentioned in yesterday's passage are corrected, when religion and morals are wed together, as God means them to be. It would be difficult to find an Old Testament passage that stresses more clearly than this, the dynamic that resides in lives that are absolutely right with God - light breaking forth, health abounding, righteousness reaching out, prayer answered, continual guidance, souls satisfied and like a watered garden, and immense and significant fruitfulness (8-12). What a glory shines from these verses: Do we really believe that this is possible for us? But another question arises. If we are such strangers to the blessings and fruitfulness that these words unfold, may it not be that religion and morals have somehow become sundered in our experience and that religious form has come to mean more to us than it has any right to, at the expense of real compassion and caring for the world? This is not to say that the service of man is everything in the Christian Faith, and there is no basis in these verses for what is sometimes called a 'social gospel' at the expense of eternal issues. This is not the point, as Isaiah has made very clear at various stages in his prophecy. But the fact remains that it is possible to become beguiled from the truth of Christ's gospel by a barren formalism and externalism, and this has always spelt impoverishment for the Church's life. Let us therefore allow the prophet's words to challenge us, and haunt us, until very desire for what he holds out becomes the stimulus for a breaking through of all useless externals to newness of life.

168)58:8-14

But what are we to say about 13, 14, with their emphasis on the keeping of the Sabbath? At first glance, this seems to give the whole position away. Hitherto the prophet has been concerned exclusively with the moral - love, mercy, compassion. But now here is a non-moral injunction, and one in which formalism is particularly a danger. The point, however, is this: the Sabbath here stands for the acknowledgement of God, and taking pleasure in the Sabbath equals taking pleasure in Him. 'Calling the Sabbath a delight' and 'delighting thyself in the Lord' are inextricably associated. This is why contemporary attempts to 'liberalise' Sunday legislation in our own land have such sinister implications. It is the neglect of God inherent in these liberalising movements that is the ominous and tragic factor. Let us be quite clear on this. It is not mere 'letter of the law' observance of the Sabbath that is important, but the fact of acknowledgement of God by Sunday observance. It is quite possible to be punctiliously exact in Sabbath observance without acknowledging God at all, and it is surely certain that there are some kinds of legalistic observance that must be odious to God because they violate the real intention and spirit of His holy day. But the observance of the Sabbath as a token that all days are His, just as tithing one's income is a token that all we have is His - this is the real issue, and this is why Isaiah mentions it here. It is no inadvertent or unconscious relapse into legalism on his part, but an appreciation of the basic issues involved in a true relationship to God.

169)59:1-15

The debate of the previous chapter continues here. The first two verses sum up the message, and what follows elaborates and expounds what the prophet says in them. The prophet's thesis is quite simple: God is absent from the life and experience of His people, not because He has lost His power, but because they have grieved it away by their sin. Does not this have something to say to us today? For the Church is undoubtedly in this position in our modern society. The diagnosis offered is different, however, to that given here. Today, it is said to be a problem of communication that faces the Church, and that the effect of mass media, which has conditioned the life of modern man cannot be ignored. A communication pattern, therefore, that takes the approach of the mass media into consideration is essential if the message of the gospel is to be got over to a TV-conditioned people. We will take leave to question whether this diagnosis and judgment, plausible and persuasive as it is, really gets to the heart of the problem. The real situation is not so much that of a Church with a problem of communication as that of a Church under the judgment of God for its sin. It is the breath of God that is needed, to blow through the dying embers and fan them into a new flame that will sweep through the Church's life, bringing renewal and an accession of power that will astonish and flabbergast a generation of Churchmen that have never seen what the living God can do when He makes bare His holy arm. What the Church needs today is not a change in its methods but a change of heart.

170)59:1-15

Some commentators think Isaiah may be quoting from another source in 5-8, and it is interesting to see the use that the Apostle Paul makes of these verses in Romans 3, in his general indictment of man, the sinner. These, then, are the sins that hold back the divine deliverance. G. Adam Smith rightly says: 'All these charges might be true of a society as outwardly respectable as our own. Nor is the charge of bloodshed to be taken literally. The Old Testament has so great a regard for the spiritual nature of man, that to deny the individual his rights or to take away the peace of God from his heart, it calls the shedding of innocent blood These crimson verses ... do not refer to murderers or maniacs: they refer to social crimes, to which we are all in perpetual temptation, and of which we are all more or less guilty - the neglect of the weak, the exploitation of the poor for our own profit, the soiling of children's minds, the multiplying of temptation in the way of God's little ones, the malice that leads us to blast another's character, or to impute to his action evil motives for which we have absolutely no grounds save the envy and sordidness of our own hearts.' All this makes the confession of sin that follows in 9-15 very relevant for us as well as for those in the prophet's day, with its dawning realisation of the reasons for God's delay in vindicating and delivering His people. If, as seems most likely, the reference is to a deferment of the advance of Cyrus on Babylon (by which alone the captives could be set free), then the impressive message is that the moral issues of sin in the people of God condition the political issues involved in any change in the balance of power in the world. Truly the nations are in His hand, and are used by Him in the furtherance of His purposes!

171)59:16-21

'The language of complaint and prayer now gives way to that of prophetic anticipation. Since the people are hopelessly entangled in its own sins, and no human champion appears on the scene, Jehovah Himself, represented as a warrior arming for the conflict, undertakes the work of salvation' (Skinner). This is surely how to understand these verses, and the consequences of the divine intervention are unfolded, with destruction to all who oppose His will and redemption for His people. It is clear that 17 is the source from which the Apostle Paul draws his imagery for the Christian armour in Ephesians 6, and we may see how daring his thought is when he identifies God's armour with that of the Christian. The well-known words in 19 do not in fact have nearly as strong manuscript authority as the RSV rendering, which reads, 'He (the Lord) will come like the rushing stream which the wind of the Lord drives'. The difference is one mainly of grammatical construction, but the meaning is not essentially different in its central affirmation, which is that the living God will come in His appointed time in all the power of a triumphant, resistless might, bringing redemption to His people. And even though the phrase about the enemy coming in like a flood is not grammatically without question or suspicion, in the spiritual sense, this is what the passage has been about, after all, for it is the intransigent power of sin gripping the lives and hearts of God's people that has been bemoaned and bewailed in the previous verses. It is precisely this that the initiative of God's grace is designed to counteract and answer. Of 21, Delitzsch says, 'The Church of the last days, endowed with the Spirit of God, and never again forsaking its earthly calling, carries (these words) as the evangelist of God in her apostolic mouth'.

172)60:1-9

After the series of rebukes and promises to Israel in the last two chapters, we come to a glorious vision, with the light of God shining on the streets of Jerusalem. The chapter before us is a picture of the restoration that was to come to Zion with the deliverance of Israel from her captivity and their return to the ancient city of Jerusalem. The picture in the opening verses seems to be that of the desolate city being called upon by the returning exiles to awake to rejoicing, for the Lord's salvation was coming to her. The metaphor is that of a sunrise, and therefore indicates the dawning of a new day for the people of God. The metaphor changes in 2, suggesting that as a result of light coming to Zion, she will now attain her divinely appointed role in the world of shining and giving light to the Gentiles. It is significant to see how deliverance from captivity in the physical sense is associated with the moral and spiritual deliverance of the people. Release from Babylon was the sign of the forgiveness of God and moral renewal. The spiritual application of all this to our time is surely obvious. The Church needs to shine in the darkness - has indeed been called to this - and will, when her captivity is turned and she enters into a new experience of the forgiveness of God. It was the glory of the time of the Reformation that this is what happened to God's people. The recovery of the mighty doctrine of justification by faith set all Europe singing and shining with light. The description of the exiles' return in 4-9 echoes 49:18ff, they are represented as being brought home by the nations among whom they have sojourned, with the resources of the world placed at their disposal, and bringing with them the wealth of distant countries as tribute to the God of Israel - like the Jews of the first Exodus bearing with them the spoils of the Egyptians. So great and complete is the vindication of God!

173)60:10-22

The remainder of the chapter speaks of the rebuilding of Jerusalem and her adornment as the praise of all the earth. The picture is one of the reversal of all the woes and captivity of Israel, and her coming into her own. The establishment of peace, and righteousness, through Zion, is the theme, with the Lord as the everlasting light. Clearly, the picture combines the near and the far, the immediate restoration of Israel from Babylon, and the ultimate consummation of all things. It is, when we ask: Was this in fact fulfilled, and if so, how and when, that we land in difficulties. But the point of prophecy is, surely, that it be fulfilled. And we may certainly say that the rejoicing of the opening verses was fulfilled in the return of the exiles from Babylon (cf Psalm 126). Yet it was not all fulfilled, and Israel did not, in fact, become a light to lighten the Gentiles, No: but another Israel did, viz. Christ and the Church. And this was, and is, fulfilled in the New Testament. This, it seems to us, is the point of the well-known passage with which the next chapter begins, and which was used by Jesus Himself who claimed to be its fulfilment. But its original reference is surely to Israel's true calling to be a light to lighten the Gentiles. Israel never rose to this, but Jesus did, He alone did. He is the light of the world, and this is how He exercises that light. He is therefore Israel, He, that is, with His Church. And in Him the meaning of chapter 60, and its prophecy, is fulfilled.

174)60:10- 22

Having interpreted the passage in its context and in its true prophetic fulfilment in Christ, it is now open to us to spiritualise these verses and apply them to every situation in which God comes to men in restoring grace and love. When God turns again our captivity and visits us in His mercy, the barren and waste places of the soul are renewed in His coming. The temple of the Holy Spirit which is man's soul is renewed and rehabilitated and made beautiful again with divine adornment. It is not difficult to see the spiritual application of words such as 13 in this connection, or of 17, with its clear message of 're-valuation'. There is nothing in the world so lovely to look upon as a restored spirit wrought upon by the grace of God. This is an aspect of salvation that we ought to think about oftener than we do; it is certainly present in the thought of both the Old Testament and the New, as may be seen from references such as Psalm 90:17 and Psalm 149:4, while the use of the Greek word 'kalos', meaning 'lovely' or 'beautiful', to describe the believer's walk (1 Peter 2:12) is some indication of the extent of spiritual adornment that is possible for those whom Christ comes by His Spirit to indwell. And, after all, if it is He by Whom all creation was brought into being, with all its many-splendoured loveliness who comes to do the work of re-creation in us, it is not expecting too much of Him to believe that He will impart and imprint something of His own beauty and loveliness in us, His redeemed creatures, whom He comes to make His own. This is His will, and to this end He says 'I will work, and who shall let it' (43:13).

175)61:1-3

We have already indicated the relation of this wonderful chapter with the one that precedes it. The fact that these words were fulfilled so plainly by Christ makes the question as to whether it was the prophet himself as representative of the people who originally spoke them, or the Servant of the Lord. Scholars are divided on this issue, some thinking it was the prophet, and some insisting it was the Servant. The fact is they suit either equally well. What is important to see is that the mission to bind up broken hearts and beautified soiled lives flows from the beautifying spoken of in the previous chapter, and here the message is very plain: it is only rehabilitated and transformed lives that can be the instruments of rehabilitation and transformation to others. The immediate reference of the words is to the captive exiles in Babylon, and we can well imagine just how sweet this proclamation of good news must have sounded to ears made weary and dispirited by long imprisonment. And this original circumstance serves to underline the depth and drama of the spiritual application made by our Lord in terms of the gospel of grace. All that these marvellous words could possibly have meant to the languishing Israelites - and it was a big 'all' - is infinitely more true of those who have known the despair and loneliness of the prison house of sin. And each man who has known the touch of Christ in his life is surely able to say what He said in the Synagogue, 'This day is this scripture fulfilled - in me'.

176)61:4-9

These verses describe the glorious future of the redeemed people. In 4 it is the rebuilding and rehabilitation of waste places that is in view, a work that is unfolded in books like Ezra and Nehemiah, where promise emerges into realisation for the returned exiles. The spiritual application of this to the desolation and barrenness of our own land is very appropriate, and the emphasis on 1-3 on proclamation of the good news as the way in which it can be brought about provides a huge and devastating challenge to all who nowadays tend to discount the power of preaching as a spent and outdated force in the life of the Church. The thought in 5, 6 certainly seems to reach out into the far future, beyond Israel's immediate restoration from Babylon, and it may be that the most significant commentary on these words is to be found in Paul's teaching in Romans 11, where he unfolds the relation of the Jews to the Gentiles in the economy of divine redemption. Israel's calling was to be a 'kingdom of priests' (Exodus 19:6), and although she signally failed in this calling throughout the history of the Old Testament, and confirmed that failure in her rejection of the Messiah in the New, it is nevertheless clear in Paul's teaching that she will yet be 'grafted in' once again (Romans 11:17, 23) to the original olive tree at the end, and acknowledged as the seed that the Lord has blessed (9). This does not, however, detract from the spiritual application of these verses to the Church and its life, and the prospect that they hold out of a revived and renewed Church is a very wonderful and heartening one, bearing glad testimony to the truth that mercy triumphs over wrath and that the grace of God is greater than human sin.

177)61:10-11

The personal note which was struck in 1-3 now reappears in these verses. Here it seems more likely to be the prophet speaking, perhaps in the name of the community, and exulting in the glorious prospect of spiritual renewal. The metaphor is a nuptial one, and the gladness and finery of a wedding scene is opened up before us. The spiritual lesson is not hard to seek; when God discloses Himself in mercy and grace to the soul, this is the kind of experience that results. Paul's words in Ephesians 5:25-27 are a useful parallel here as indicating the ultimate purpose of Christ with His people, to present them a glorious Church to Himself. The value of this particular metaphor is that it safeguards against the danger of thinking of the justification of God (the gift of righteousness) in any cold or formal manner as, alas, sometimes has been done. It is certainly not without significance that the passage in which Paul deals with this cardinal doctrine ends with the words, 'We joy in God, through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 5:11). This is the note that rings out so unmistakably in Isaiah's words here. The passage concludes with the assurance that just as the seed germinates in the earth, so surely will the Lord bring to pass the great redemption here promised, through the self-fulfilling power of His word.

178)62:1-5

The theme of righteousness in 61:10 is continued in these verses - righteousness in the sense of divine vindication. There are different views as to who is speaking in 1, some think the prophet himself, some the Servant, and some the Lord Himself. There is no doubt however, that it is Jerusalem that is spoken of, and what is expressed is a determination to see all God's purposes fulfilled for His people. One is reminded of the idea of God's Sabbath rest being broken by the entrance of sin into the world and not being restored again until all redemption is accomplished in the victory of Christ (cf Hebrews 1:3), where Christ, 'when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down ...'. This vindication will be plain for all to see (1b, 2) and one which will bring Israel 'into her own'. The exuberance and richness of the metaphors here are very impressive, serving to underline the personal nature of the relationship between God and His people. The idea in 3 seems to be that the Lord holds the crown and diadem in His hand for all to see, i.e. His people will be the crown of His loving, redeeming purposes and, in their final redeemed state, will be to the praise of His glory to all the universe, 'His workmanship', as Paul puts it, in Ephesians 2:10. The 'new name' in 2 is elaborated in 4, 5 'Hephzibah' means 'My delight is in her' and 'Beulah' means 'married'. What could emphasise more graphically the unstinted and unreserved self-giving of God as His heart goes out in an abandonment of love to His people? It is a measure of the dullness of our spiritual perception that we have so largely failed to take in the amazing fact that God wants the love of our poor hearts because He loves us like this. O that we might believe the love that God has for us, and believe that He means what He says.

179)62:6-9

These verses are about the Lord's 'remembrancers' (which is the meaning of the phrase 'ye that make mention of the Lord' in 6 (cf 42:26). Some think they are angelic beings, as in Zechariah 1:12 and Daniel 10:16-21, but it is more likely that they are the divinely appointed prophets who, like the God they serve, take no rest until the divine purpose is fulfilled. Thus, comparing 1 with 6, we see that the divine passion and compassion are to be matched by the same passion and compassion in those who serve God. It is because there is such a disparity between the two today that there is so little sign of the divine vindication in the Church and the world. Is there anything in the Church's life, for example, to correspond with Christ weeping over Jerusalem? What unceasing vigilance and earnestness are exhibited in 6, 7! For prophet and intercessor alike there is to be an unremitting burden - 'keep not silence, give no rest till ...'. What a word for the exercise of prayer! 'Christian, seek not yet repose'. There are two points to note in 8, 9. On the one hand, what is said here may be regarded as promises to be claimed in prayer and, as such, they constitute a challenge to us to lay hold upon them. On the other hand, it may be that 8, 9 are the Lord's response to the prayers that 6, 7 elicit from His people. When God's people keep not silent, but besiege His throne of grace with their importunate cries, this is the effect such prayer has. Let us put it to the test!

180)62:10-12

The final verses of the chapter constitute another summons to the exiles to depart from Babylon and every foreign city and return to Zion (cf 48:20, 52:11). We may be meant to see a connection between the thought of the foregoing verses and what is said here, because the kind of prayer envisaged in 6ff is prayer that opens prison gates and enables men to go out into the liberty of the children of God. Some commentators, however, suggest that the gates referred to are those of Jerusalem, and that the exhortation is addressed to the inhabitants of that city to prepare for the final restoration of the exiled Jews. One question that arises concerns the phrase 'gather out the stones' in 10. The metaphor is that of road making (cf 40:3, 4), and it is not clear to whom this work falls. Is it the prophets of the Lord, and His remembrancers, whose work is thus described? Certainly their work is hard and unremitting, slow and often toilsome, with little to show for it in the short-term. It may, however, be a general indication that the return from the Exile was not to be without effort on the part of the people themselves, notwithstanding the divine initiative in the whole operation and its divine undergirding by His mighty hand. The bones of Ezra and Nehemiah are a sufficient evidence of the arduous nature of the effort that was involved in making good the release from captivity. But the prior and primary emphasis is undoubtedly what God is about to do. It is His saving work that will be made plain to the nations and its effect will be seen. 12, what Zion becomes to all the world the holy people, the redeemed of the Lord, a city not forsaken, with the beauty of the Lord their God resting upon them for all to see.

181)63:1-6

Primarily, the picture here is of Jehovah returning in victory from a campaign against Israel's enemies - all the other enemies apart from Babylon, and represented by Edom, the most traditional of all. It is 'the year of vengeance of our God' as foretold in 61:2, and corresponds to 'the acceptable year of the Lord' for His people. The emphasis throughout is on the loneliness of the divine Figure (cf 59:16). 'It illustrates the passion, the agony, the unshared and unaided effort which the Divine Saviour passes through for His people' (G. Adam Smith). And, surely, no more dramatic picture could be found of the 'warfare' aspect of our Lord's death and resurrection. Here is 'Christus Victor' indeed, going into battle for us men and for our salvation, into that lonely field of conflict to grapple with the powers of darkness, and coming forth, a solitary and majestic Figure, with the marks of His costly victory evident upon Him.

Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious,
See the Man of sorrows now;
From the fight returned victorious;
Every knee to Him shall bow.

Scholars insist that this vision is one of judgment, not redemption, and that it is misleading and perverse to apply it to Christ. It is difficult to understand this viewpoint: was not the cross and passion of Christ both judgment and mercy? Was not sin punished, and the vengeance of God wreaked upon it, in the death He died, as well as redemption purchased and victory won dark powers? It is precisely because it is a 'vengeance-vision' that it constitutes a picture of Christ's work, as He trod the winepress alone to procure our salvation.

182)63:7-10

These verses are the beginning of a reflective prayer which stretches to the end of chapter 64, and to which God gives answer in chapter 65. The prayer may be regarded as being stimulated by the vision of Jehovah in His victorious might given in 1-6, and as a cry to God to do this that He is visualised as doing, and do it speedily, for His captive people. G. Adam Smith interprets it to mean that, although God has gloriously promised His deliverance, the people are not ready for it, and the prophet's prayer is that He would make them ready. In 7-10, Isaiah gives a recital of the Lord's past mercies and loving-kindness. This is the work of the Lord's 'remembrancers' (62:7), to recall His goodness in the past and plead this with Him for the present. The reference in 8, 9 is to the time of Moses and Joshua, when the Lord's loving confidence in His children had not yet been betrayed, and when He continuously manifested Himself as their Saviour, bearing them safely through all dangers. What a wonderful commentary on their early history, and what echoes there are in these words of our own experience of His grace. There was a 'But', however, so far as Israel was concerned: they rebelled, and vexed His Holy Spirit. Is there a 'But' in our story too? Is it only of the past that these words are true of us, and not the present? Has our sin grieved away that wonderful presence, as theirs did?

183)63:11-14

In adversity the people realise the privilege they have forfeited by their rebellion, and long for a return of the days of Moses. 'He' in 11 is Israel, not Jehovah. This turning back of their minds to the wonders of the Exodus must be regarded as a hopeful sign of penitence. We should compare this with Jeremiah 2:6, where the failure to think back to the days when the Lord brought them up out of Egypt is regarded as a sign of iniquity and impenitence. It can hardly be accidental that in their wistful longing they should be looking for another Exodus, for this, as we have seen, is what the Lord was about to do for them. It was He Who had planted the longing within them. The metaphor of the horse and cattle is beautiful and moving: the people are led through the wilderness treading as firmly and securely as a horse on the flat prairie land, and dealt with as kindly and gently as the farmer deals with his beasts of burden as he takes them out of harness when their day's work is done and leads them out to pasture. Thus surely does God bring His people to their resting-place. It is easy to see how in such a spirit of penitent recollection, hope might begin to rise within the hearts of the people. Nor is it different today, and this is one of the ways in which the Lord kindles new faith in us, by revealing afresh to our hearts His great tenderness towards us. But, oh, how slowly we awaken to His overtures.

184)63:15-19

Here is a heart-cry indeed. But even in the context of its yearning and agony, hope is beginning to kindle, however faintly and uncertainly. The sense of the faraway-ness of God is very real, however, and this adds a poignancy to the yearning in the prophet's heart as he takes on himself the burden of the whole people. There is something important for us to learn here: when the sense of the 'withdrawnness' of God becomes quite intolerable for us, making us cry out in this way. It is some evidence of the working of the Spirit in us to produce the kind of penitence that will be prepared to have dealings with God on any terms He is concerned to make. What seems to be expressed in 16 is the consciousness that they are no longer worthy to be called by the name of Abraham or Israel, by reason of their sin - a solemn acknowledgement that they had 'unchurched' themselves. And yet, they appeal beyond their heritage to the God Who gave them it in the first instance, and cast themselves solely on His grace. This is the ultimate ground of appeal, and one that is not denied. The plea in 17 is a recognition of the tragic perversity of sin - there is something in it that they cannot understand, still less control, and something so deep-rooted that only God Himself can deal with it. The RSV should be followed in 19, 'We have become like those over whom Thou hast not ruled, like those who are not called by Thy name'. Nothing could be more abject than the despair which this statement represents. The words of the hymn writer echo this sentiment very graphically, as they speak of God's grace revealed in Christ:

And I, poor sinner, cast it all away;
Lived for the toil or pleasure of each day;
As if no Christ had shed His precious blood,
As if I owed no homage to my God.

185)64:1-3

The agony of prayer continues, and indeed intensifies as the consciousness of need deepens in the prophet's heart. In 63:15 it was 'Look down', but here in 1 it is 'Come down'; it is a cry that the Lord might rend asunder the solid firmament and melt the mountains, in making Himself known to His people in terrible acts. Well, this is no idle prayer, filled with extravagant and impossible requests, and it is open to a needy people to pray thus, provided they realise the implications of what they are asking. One recalls Malachi's words, 'Who may abide the day of His coming?' (3:1), and Matthew's testimony (27:51) that at the coming of the Son of God to die at Jerusalem the earth quaked and the rocks rent, and John's vision in Revelation 6:12-17 of the convulsions in nature at the coming of God in judgment. It is not a light thing to invite the presence of the overwhelming glory and majesty of God into our human situation. Our God is a consuming fire. All the same, we should not confine this to the apocalyptic imagery of the last days; it is something that can happen now because it has happened before, in the past (as 3 seems to indicate, and as Psalm 44:1 clearly testifies). The prophet is thinking of the past glories of His people, when God moved among them in power and might, and it is this that gives us today some ground for believing that, when we pray thus, we do not cry to God in vain. 'O God, You did it once, in days of old; do it again, in our day and generation, for Your great Name's sake'. This is the lesson of these verses.

186)64:4-7

There are two points to note in these verses. On the one hand, the prophet recognizes that God has a great willingness to meet with and work for those who wait for Him, and is still prepared to do those very things spoken of in the first verses of the chapter. Thus 4 and 5a. On the other hand, in 5b-7, Isaiah acknowledges the people's sinful condition, and the divine anger resting upon them because of this. The text in 5b is very uncertain, but the RSV may be followed as a likely rendering, with the meaning, 'We have been a long while in our sins: can there be any hope for us?' It is the dispiritedness of long sinning that is expressed here, producing a kind of despair that we find echoed in the story of the man at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1ff). And herein lies the answer to the question, 'Shall we be saved?'; for John tells us that it was when Jesus saw the man lie there and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, that He said to him, 'Wilt thou be made whole?' and 'Rise, take up thy bed and walk'. But another thought arises here. If God is willing to manifest Himself to those that wait for Him, yet withholds Himself, the explanation can only be that it is His people's sins that grieve Him and limit His working. It is the message of 59:1, 2 all over again: 'The Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, but ...'. And it is a big 'but' now, as it was then. This is the lesson we must learn.

187)64:8-12

The prophet's prayer comes to an end with a final appeal to the Fatherhood of God, and His consideration for the work of His hands. In this he pleads, not righteousness, for they have none (6), but relationship. It is an appeal to the covenant, and to the special bond created by God between Himself and His people. But there are two sides to such an appeal. It is true that it means casting oneself on the mercy and grace of God, but that very abandonment implies submission and surrender to Him. And this is what is underlined in the 'potter/clay' metaphor. It is idle to be speaking of any covenant-relationship to God except in terms of our willingness to stand ourselves in that relationship. And our contribution is obedience. When will we dare to take Isaiah's words seriously.

188)66:3-4

The meaning of these two verses is not easy to determine. Four legitimate sacrificial acts are bracketed with four abominable heathenish rites - this much is clear, but how to interpret it? One possibility is that the prophet is saying - in connection with what is expressed in 1 and 2 - that the legitimate sacrificial act is as hateful in the sight of God as the heathenish rite, when men's hearts are far from Him. This would be in line with the emphasis in chapter 1. On the other hand, it may mean that the apostate Israelites were practising both rites at the same time, drinking as it were, the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils. It may be that the second of these is more likely. Either way, this was their choice; and therefore (3b, 4), as they have chosen, so, says the Lord, will I choose their delusions (cf 65:12). It will be useful to read the Apostle Paul's words to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 10:1-21 as a commentary on this situation represented here, to remind ourselves that this is a temptation in every age, and that the cost of faithfulness is no less now than it was then.

189)66:5-9

It is not easy to see a sequence in the prophet's thought in these verses. In 5, the faithful in Israel who have obeyed God's word (cf what is said of them with 2b) are comforted by the prophet and bidden quietly endure the mocking of their apostate brethren, in the assurance that the latter will be put to shame and confusion when the Lord comes to vindicate His people. That vindication is spoken of in 6 as being already beginning to take place, even as the mockery goes on. This is a word that is applicable to any similar situation where there are those who tremble at His Word. The mockery of the worldling, whether in the world or in the Church, is ever hard to bear, but this is something the faithful are liable at any time to face, and must face, with equanimity. In 7-9, the prophet speaks of the sudden repopulation of Jerusalem by her children (cf 49:17-21), a reference to the return of the exiles, by which the poor and struggling Jewish community will become at once a great nation. What an assurance this is, in relation to 5. The birth-throes in 7 refer to the protracted time between the announcement of the Return and its actual happening. The picture is a very dramatic one. Zion has lain desolate for these long years of the Exile, and now suddenly she is to be restored. This is the 'new thing' that has repeatedly been stressed in the prophet's teaching since chapter 40, and now it is underlined again, being about to take place. One can hardly help thinking of the dramatic fulfilment these words have had in our own time in the return of the Jews to Palestine. Truly a nation was born in a day: How slow we should be to doubt the literal fulfilment of God's promises, in the light of this!

190)66:10-14

In 10, 11, Zion's children are called to congratulate their mother, and enjoy her. The prophet's metaphor is that of motherhood, and two pictures of it are given, that of children suckled and cradled by their mother (11), and that of a grown man bringing his wounds and weariness home, to be comforted by his mother (13). Comfort and well-being are the notes that are struck, and this is further borne out by another metaphor - God's peace is to be like a river. It would be hardly possible to find a figure more rich and varied than this, for what can show more variety or change of mood than a river now swift-flowing, now meandering, now gurgling and splashing, now with still waters running deep. The peace of God is not stagnation, but a many-sided experience. Furthermore, the suggestion is that such peace is undisturbable. Cast a tree-trunk into the river, and the river will bear it up on the bank; let the river meet an obstacle, and it will but flow round it; neither its flow, nor its speed, will be altered one whit. This will bear thinking about, especially in relation to another kind of metaphor we sometimes use to describe human experience. 'A spanner in the works' can do enormous damage to a machine, and even a very small foreign body is enough to make it grind to a standstill. But if peace is so easily disturbed - as, alas, it often is - by even a little thing, can it be 'peace like a river'?

191)66:14b-18a

Over against the blessedness of God's faithful, the prophet sets the judgment of the unbelieving. This he describes in the form of a theophany, in which the Lord appears in fire and tempest to judge His enemies. The RSV reading of 17 should be followed instead of the AV which has substituted the italicised word 'tree' and confused the sense, which is that reference is being made to the practice of heathen, Babylonish rites, in which the 'one' referred to is the witch-doctor who leads his devotees in their horrible abominations. And God says, 'Those who have sold themselves to this shall come to an end together'. These shall be the 'slain of the Lord' (16). Such, then, is the ultimate outcome of the division between the remnant of the faithful and the unbelievers in Israel - for the one, blessedness and enrichment and peace, for the other, desolation and loss and confusion. It must ever be so. This is not something arbitrary and unconnected with what has gone before, but is on the contrary, integral to the whole revelation of the righteousness of God given by the prophet. God's universe is built and governed on moral lines, and the necessary and inevitable issue of denying and repudiating His holy laws must always in the end be loss and woe.

192)66:18b-24

The judgment is followed by a manifestation of the glory of the Lord to all nations. The meaning may possibly be that the supernatural glory of God will be visible as He dwells in the Temple. The 'sign' seems to refer to judgment, for the prophet goes on immediately to speak of the survivors being sent to the nations to declare the glory of the Lord to them, and to gather the scattered exiles of the dispersion home to Zion (20). Detail of meaning here may elude us, but the general tenor is plain, and it is not difficult to associate what Isaiah says here with, for example, Paul's teaching in Romans 11, where he also speaks of the ingathering of the Jews at the end-time. The truth is, any gathering of Jews to Palestine has apocalyptic significance, and their initial ingathering at the end of the Babylonian exile (which is the primary reference here) adumbrates the final one spoken of by Paul. We have already referred to the momentous event of the reconstitution of Israel as a nation in 1948 after so many centuries of wanderings and oppression, and we must also bear this in mind in our thinking about Isaiah's words here. At all events, the association of ideas between the ingathering of the outcasts and the establishment of the new heavens and new earth (22) is common to both Isaiah and Paul (cf Romans 11:15). The prophecy ends with one further emphasis on the finality of the division between the faithful and the apostate, expressed in words and thoughts which our Lord Himself obviously made use of in His solemn parables of judgment (Mark 9:43, 44; Matthew 13:30, 47-50).

193) Summary of Prophecy

It remains now, to say something by way of summing up the message of Isaiah's mighty prophecy, and this we now seek to do. Although in the analysis at the beginning of our study we have a threefold division of the book - chapters 1-35, Prophetic; 36-39, Historical; 40-66, Messianic. 36-39 belong to the first section from a historical point of view, so that, for purposes of summary, we may divide the whole book into two parts, 1-39 and 40-66, the first concerned with the threats of Assyria, the second with Babylon. Each of the two parts of the prophecy divides into three sections, and we look at Part I now. The sections are as follows: 1-12, 13-27, 28-39. Each has at its end a passage (larger or shorter) which depicts the grace of God triumphant in final vindication. Thus, in 11 and 12, we have a messianic vision; in 24-27 we have Isaiah's little apocalypse; in 34, 35, we have a picture of final judgment and grace. The lessons of these sections, with the prophet's warnings against alliances with either Israel, Syria, Assyria or Egypt, all alike underline the folly of complicity with the enemies of the Lord. Not alliance with these, he cries, but reliance on God, Isaiah's confidence was based on one fundamental reality: the sovereignty of God. The vision of the Throne (6:1) is central, and runs through each of the sections, explaining the word of the Lord in each. 'Trust in the Lord forever; for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength' (26:4).

194) Summary of Prophecy

Part II of the prophecy also has its three sections, 40-48, 49-57, 58-66. Each of these contains nine addresses by the prophet, and each ends with 'no peace to the wicked'. In the first group, the contrast is drawn between Jehovah, the living and true God, and idols, between Israel and the heathen. In the first group of addresses, the contrast is between the suffering of Jehovah's Servant and future glory. In the third, the contrast is between the faithful and the apostates and hypocrites, between the 'remnant' and the 'rest'. The lessons in the second part of the book are as follows: the central section (49-57) contains the main teaching on the Suffering Servant, and the central chapter of that section (53) is the supreme revelation. Here is the essence of the teaching: Deliverance and redemption through the suffering of the Servant. Whereas the first part of the prophecy (1-39) stresses the Throne, the second (40-66) stresses the Cross; and the two are inseparably linked together. One recalls the Apostle John's words in Revelation 5:6, 'And I beheld, and lo, in the midst of the elders, stood a lamb as it had been slain'. This is the validation and vindication of God's sovereignty in the world. He reigns through the Cross.