

Isaiah 66

INTRO: Isaiah 66 begins by contrasting the character of the righteous and the wicked. The righteous were ***humble, repentant***, and showed respect for God's commandments. The wicked were ***violent, idolatrous, self-willed, spiritually unresponsive, and hostile to the righteous***. A day of retribution was coming, in which the wicked would be purged from the covenant community and the righteous vindicated. The Lord's fiery judgment would destroy the wicked along with their pagan practices. The righteous would take possession of glorified and renewed Jerusalem, where peace and prosperity would abound. The Gentiles would come to Jerusalem on a regular basis to worship the Lord. In the background the smoldering, decaying carcasses of the wicked would serve as a constant reminder of the consequences of rebellion against the Great King.

I. The Lord has regard for the humble and contrite (66:1–2). God is pictured figuratively as sitting on a **throne** (cf. **6:1**) with **the earth** as His **footstool** (cf. Stephen's defense, **Acts 7:49**). Because of His majesty no one can **build a house** for Him to dwell in ('Heaven and highest heaven cannot contain Thee, how much less this house', **1 Kings 8:27**); *He* is the Creator—He is Owner, He made the materials. **V. 2.** Yet what He values above His inanimate Creation are people who are **humble and contrite** (cf. **Isa. 57:15**) and who follow His **word**. The spiritual temple of the heart, though not superseding the outward place of worship, is God's favorite dwelling ("If you love Me you will keep My Word, My Father and I will make our abode with him" **Jn 14:23**). God is looking for a heart in which to dwell—a heart which belongs to Him: *tender, broken over sin, responsive to Him, and taking the Word of God seriously.*ⁱ

Our great God condescends to look with favor and regard upon those who are **humble, contrite, and obedient**, following His **word**. God will 'look to' have regard for those who are **humble**: who live in dependence upon God (note prayer is just that), rather than upon trusting *mankind* and an arm of *flesh* (**Jer 17:5**). For the **contrite** (crushed over sin, repenting; putting it to death). For those who **tremble** at His Word (respect unto obedience). In the final state in heaven there shall be "no temple," but "the Lord God" Himself and the Lamb are its temple' (**Rev 21:22**) (sanctuaries temp.).

II. The Lord will judge hypocritical formalists (66:3–6). So many religious errors are traceable to a wrong concept of God. Without a proper grasp of God's majesty, man imagines that if he builds an elaborate and ornate temple or cathedral, God will gladly attach His Name to that structure—i.e. 'God will show up' and religious activity will be conducted there with God prospering the devotees.

Our text shows us why this is a disastrous idea which leads to **formalism**. For, God does not have regard for formalism in worship (**Is 29:13**). God loathes even the

sacrifices of the wicked (“I have had enough of burnt offerings, I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls and goats,” **Is 1:11**; ‘sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord’, **Pr 15:8**; ‘prayer of the wicked an abomination’ **28:9**). The strange comparisons in **verse 3** indicate that the people’s religious **sacrifices** and offerings were only external ritual. In their hearts the people were murderers, perverters of God’s dietary laws (cf. ‘Who sit among graves and spend the night in secret places; who eat swine’s flesh, and the broth of unclean meat is in their pots’, **65:4**; **Lev. 11:7**), and idolaters.

Vv. 4-5 they have chosen—opposed to the two first clauses of **Is 66:4**: “as *they* have chosen their own ways, so I will choose their calamities/punishments. Rather “vexations,” God will choose the troubles which they thought to escape by their own ways.” **Their fears (v. 4)**—the things they dreaded, hoped to avoid by the idolatrous “abominations” (**Is 66:3**) they practiced. **I called, no answer**—(See on **Is 65:12**; see also, ‘Rose early and called and you did not answer’, **Jer 7:13**). **Did what I did not choose**—but *did* the evil deed deliberately as a matter of *choice* (‘knew what they were doing was wrong, but indulged anyway and gave hearty approval to others’, **Rom 1:32**). “*They* chose that in which I did not delight”; therefore, “*I* will choose” that in which *they* delight not, the “calamities” and “fears” which they were most anxious to avert. They were going **their own way** (cf. ‘each has gone astray and turned to his own way’. **Isa. 53:6**) rather than the Lord’s way. Therefore, **harsh** judgment would come. People in Israel who professed to know **the LORD** but **who** actually hated and discriminated against God’s people would be shamed by His discipline when **the temple** would be destroyed by the Babylonians.

Israel’s revolt against God was not an abandonment of religion, but a move into false religion. The Hebrews turned to false gods they thought they could manipulate—as if they could harness the divine. This has always been the attraction of idolatry: one may imagine that he is the master of his own fate and the captain of his own soul. Idolatry offers control in which the idolater trusts only in his own actions.ⁱⁱ

V. 5. You who tremble at His Word—the same godly persons as in **Is 66:2**, the believing few among the Jews. **cast you out for my name’s sake**—excommunicate, as if too polluted to worship with them (‘keep away, I am holier than you’, **Is 65:5**). So in Christ’s first sojourn on earth (‘hated on account of My Name’, **Mt 10:22**; ‘if anyone confesses Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue’, **Jn 9:22, 34; 16:2**). So it shall be again in the last times, when the believing shall be few. **Let the Lord be glorified.** the mocking, blasphemous challenge of the persecutors, as if their violence towards you was from zeal for God. “Let the Lord show Himself glorious,” namely, *by manifesting Himself in your behalf* (as “He shall *appear to your joy*.”). So again Christ on the cross (‘He saved others, He cannot save Himself, come down from the cross and we will believe’, **Mt 27:42-43**).

V. 6. from Jerusalem His “temple,” He will take vengeance on the enemy (‘those

who have defiled My Holy Name, I have consumed in My anger’, **Ezek 43:1–8**; ‘those who gather in siege against Jerusalem will be severely injured’, **Zech 12:2-3**).

III. The Lord’s Kingdom Promises to the faithful Remnant (66:7–14). At His appearing, the glory of God and His presence makes all things new, the Jewish remnant will be gathered, the Gentiles evangelized and brought in, and Jerusalem will be made a joy on earth. **Vv. 7-9.** she—Zion. Before she travailed she brought forth—The prosperity to her, shall be *sudden beyond all expectation* and *unattended with painful effort* (**Is 54:1, 4-5**). **66:7–11.** Israel’s return to the land will be so remarkably quick that it will be like a woman giving **birth** to **a son** before (**v. 7**) or as soon as (**v. 8**) she has any **labor pains**! God does not start something and leave it unfinished. As surely as the opening of the womb for **delivery of a child**, so God will do for **Jerusalem** what He has set out to do. This then is cause for rejoicing.

Vv. 10-14 The people of Israel will **delight in** Jerusalem as an infant delights in her mother’s sustenance upon the breast. Jerusalem is made a joy on earth. In the next verses, we see that the remnant could take some consolation in the fate of their tormentors.

66:14–18. When God restores His people to Jerusalem (vv. 10–13) in the Millennium, they **will rejoice** and prosper, but on His enemies, and her enemies He will swoop down in judgment like a **fire**, “. . . When the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (cf. **2 Thess 1:7–9**).

IV. After global judgment, the Lord will ‘give birth’ to His renewed nation (66:15–21). **V. 15.** (‘He comes in judgment in pestilence and plague’, **Hab 3:5**; **2 Pe 3:7**). **chariots ... whirlwind**).

V. 16. “With fire will Jehovah judge, and with His sword (He will judge) all flesh.” **all flesh**—that is, *all* who are the objects of His wrath. The *godly* shall be hidden by the Lord in a place of safety away from the scene of judgment (‘come My people, hide, close your doors until the indignation is past’, **Is 26:20-21**; **Ps 31:20**).

V. 17. This **judgment** meted out by the Lord will be fair/just because of their abominations: worshiping in idolatrous **gardens** (cf. ‘you will surely be ashamed of your oaks and the gardens which you have chosen,’ **Isa. 1:29**; **65:3**) and eating ceremonially unclean animals such as **pigs** (cf. **65:4**; **66:3**; **Lev. 11:7**) and **rats** (cf. **Lev. 11:29**). **In gardens** “for (entering into) gardens,” namely, to sacrifice there. **behind one tree**—rather, “following one,” that is, some idol. **mouse**—legally unclean because it was an idol to the heathen. The Pharisees with their self-righteous

purifications, and all mere formalists, are included in the same condemnation, described in language taken from the idolatries prevalent in Isaiah's times (false religions have counterfeit sanctification and purification rites).

V. 18. “For I know their works and thoughts,” will punish. **it shall come**—the time *is come* that I will. **Gather nations**—against Jerusalem, where the *ungodly* Jews shall perish; and then the Lord at last shall fight for Jerusalem against those nations: and the survivors (**Is 66:19**) shall “**see God's glory**” (“In that day the LORD will defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the one who ^bis feeble among them in that day will be like David, and the house of David *will be* like God, like the angel of the LORD before them. “And in that day I will set about to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem” **Zech 12:8-9**)—for Messiah's physical presence will make Israel the center of world attention.ⁱⁱⁱ

V. 19. sign—a *banner* on a high place, to indicate the place of meeting for the dispersed Jewish exiles, preparatory to their return to their land (“And He will lift up a standard for the nations and assemble the banished ones of Israel, and will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth” **Is 11:12**). **those that escape of them**—the Gentile survivors spared by God (see on **Is 66:18**; ‘survivors’, **Zech 14:16**). “Now it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways and that we may walk in His paths.” For the law will go forth from Zion and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (**Is 2:2-3**). and represent it, not that the Jews go as missionaries to the Gentiles, but that the Gentiles come up to Jerusalem to learn the Lord's ways there.

V. 20. they—the Gentiles (**Is 66:19**). **bring your brethren**—the Jews, back to the Holy Land (“Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Behold, I will lift up My hand to the nations and set up My standard to the peoples; and they will bring your sons in *their* bosom, and your daughters will be carried on *their* shoulders” **Is 49:22**). It cannot mean the mere entrance of the Jews into the Christian Church; for such an entrance would be by *faith*, not upon “horses, litters, and mules.” “Offering” is metaphorical, as in **Rom 15:16**, ‘Paul speaks of his offering of the Gentiles to God’. The Gentiles are here represented as using *their* modes of conveyance to “bring” the Jews to Jerusalem. **chariots**—“vehicles,” borne, not drawn on wheels. **litters**—covered sedans for the rich. **upon swift beasts**. **Priests Levites**—some of those returning will have special roles in the millennial temple. It will be for spiritual worship: enjoying the direct access to God which was formerly enjoyed by the ministers of the temple alone (**1 Pet 2:9**; **Rev 1:6**).

V. 21. People outside of Israel will turn to Him and worship Him. The remnant of believing Israelites will travel as missionaries to other parts of the world, to tell

Gentiles about God's **glory**. Those places and peoples will include **Tarshish**, etc. These and other peoples will be converted and will travel to **Jerusalem** to worship in **the temple** (cf. "So many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD." "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'In those days ten men from all the nations will grasp the garment of a Jew, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you." ' " **Zech. 8:22-23**).

V. The Lord will punish the wicked eternally (66:22–24). The Lord to establish new heavens and new earth (66:22–24).

V. 22. Glorified Israel would be as enduring as the new heavens and the new earth. "Old Israel will pass away; but from it there will spring the remnant that has survived judgment, and together with it will be a great influx of Gentiles, all of which will form the true Israel of God under the new dispensation.

Isaiah represented the faithful worship of the new dispensation under the worship categories of the Old. All mankind, i.e., both Jews and Gentiles, would come at the appointed times ("new moon, sabbath") to express adoration to Yahweh (**66:22f.**). Israel will be as constant **as the new heavens and the new earth. All mankind** (i.e., people from all nations) **will worship the LORD, bowing down before Him (Is 65:17; 'And I saw a new heavens and a new earth', Rev 21:1).**

V. 23. Literally, "As often as the new moon" that is, every month ('they will go up year by year to worship the King', **Zech 14:16**). **sabbath**—which is therefore perpetually obligatory on earth. **all flesh**—"And let all kings bow down before him, all nations serve him," **Ps 72:11**). **before me**—at Jerusalem.

V. 24. Go forth, and look upon the wicked—as the Israelites looked at the carcasses of the Egyptians destroyed at the Red Sea (**Ex 14:30**; compare **Is 26:14–19; Mal 4:1–3**,). **carcasses**—(**Is 66:16**), those slain by the Lord in the last great battle near Jerusalem (**Zech 12:2–9; 14:2–4**); type of the final destruction of *all* sinners. The wicked will face endless judgment, the description of their eternal corruption is hideous, they will be an abhorrent object lesson to the people of God of the folly of evil.

Their worm shall not die—(**Mk 9:44, 46, 48**). Image of hell, from bodies left unburied in the valley of Hinnom (whence comes *Gehenna*, or "hell"), south of Jerusalem, where a *perpetual fire* was kept to consume the refuse thrown there (**Is 30:33**). Those who have traveled for any amount of time in developing, or what are sometimes called, third world nations, know that in suburban and agrarian regions it is common to have no trash pickup system. Kerosene is poured onto piles of garbage and lit on fire. I can remember the smell of that smoldering garbage having burned all night and still giving off acrid choking smoke at sunrise.

The punishment of the damned shall not be inconsistent with God's true love for the redeemed will look with satisfaction on God's vengeance on the wicked ('tormented

in the presence of the Lamb', **Rev 14:10**).^{iv} These descriptions of the terrible consequences of rebellion ought to pierce our hearts and daily fill us with reverential fear and gratitude for God's reconciling grace.

CONCLUSION: ***The glory of God, and His presence, makes all things new—He is going to manifest His majesty in this restoration.*** As Isaiah had frequently written, these righteous ones will contrast greatly with **those who rebelled against the LORD**. They will suffer eternal torment. Jesus used the language of this verse to describe the eternal fate of those who reject salvation (cf. **Mark 9:48**). This awesome way in which the majestic Book of Isaiah concludes points to the need for unrepentant people turning to the only God, the Holy One of Israel.^v

We have seen that the book of Isaiah concludes with a dark picture of the fate of the wicked (cf. 'no peace for the wicked', **48:22**). While gold and silver depict the glories of Zion, so fire and worms depict the fate of the wicked. Those who refuse to render homage to God in his house are dead while they live (cf. **1 Tim 5:6**). They are consumed by their own corruption ("worms," i.e., maggots). They are perpetually under the wrath of God's judgment fire (**Jn 3:18**). "All mankind," i.e., the Jews and Gentiles who render homage to God, would regard with abhorrence the rottenness of the lifestyle of the unbelievers (**66:24**).

Isaiah 66 is about judgment and hope. This has profound ethical significance. For Isaiah has declared throughout this book that God was "the Holy One of Israel" and "the Creator of the ends of the earth." Such a God demanded moral purity and justice from His people and all nations. But, God's people, like other nations, failed to meet His standards of behavior. The Holy One was thus just—in punishing their sin by crushing them by invasions from Assyrian and Babylon, and sending them into exile. God, however would be Savior, Redeemer, and Father to those who would turn to Him in repentance. God would surely again act creatively and redemptively in leading his people home to a restored Jerusalem.

The message of Isaiah is a challenge to Christians to hope in God, who is not through, or finished with creation. Old Testament Israel only partially realized God's salvation and peace. God, who acted to save Christians in the past through the Suffering Servant Jesus, will act again to bring history to His desired end of a new heaven and a new earth.^{vi}

The Book of Isaiah ends with a repetition of the twin themes that mark not only his messages but the writings of all the Old Testament prophets. *God sets before men a clear vision of two pathways. One leads to judgment, the other to hope—this is really 'two eternities'.* Of those who turn from Him the Lord says: They have chosen their own ways, and their souls delight in their abominations; so I also will choose harsh treatment for them and will bring upon them what they dread. Each man or woman

chooses the path he or she will follow. One path is according to what we are by nature, and the other is of grace; in other words, one path is merely who we are, and what we do naturally (that is the path of sin and death); the other is the path of divine grace—for those called of the Lord in grace are given new hearts to hate sin, and to love God, truth, righteousness and the people of God.

Those on the path of grace know and live with the knowledge that God is holy—He does not change, we must be changed! “I change not. . .” (**Mal 3:6**). True believers cry to God, “change me, O Lord, make me holy and pleasing and obedient in your sight through Christ by your heart-awakening power, by your Spirit, and by your transforming Word, and by the members of the Body of Christ.”^{vii}

The book of Isaiah is a powerful expose of sin, for in confronting Israel’s disobedience we have our own hearts exposed. And we see stubbornness, rigidity, demand for control, ingratitude and discontentment, a refusal to listen, and more esteem for created things than for God Himself. But, also in Isaiah we observe that the true believer hungers for God.^{viii} And, hopes not in imagined powers of self-reformation, but in the Lord who by His massive intervention in our lives, makes His presence felt by cleansing us, correcting us, comforting us, and sanctifying us—for Isaiah declares that God saves people.

Isaiah chapters 57 and 66 both make much of the word, ‘contrite’ which means to be crushed and broken over one’s sin against God. To be contrite is to seek peace of conscience God’s way, and not our way (by excuses, resolutions without change, comparisons with others, etc.). God’s way to a peace in the conscience and rest for the soul is through full trust in the redemption wrought by Christ. The holiness and justice of God drive us to Christ, for God is holy and we are not, and we must have God-approved righteousness in order to have right-standing with Him. That righteous status is found in Christ alone.

Now you hear this glorious gospel expressed in some way almost every Sunday morning, but have you ever considered in this manner? Namely, that all sin must receive ‘hell’—either personally (in one’s own person), or substitutionally, that is in the justice of God which Christ endured on the cross.^{ix} My friends, do not make the soul-destroying mistake of assuming that there is some sort of general mercy and love to all, and general vindication of righteousness. No, true believers take full, ample, soul-filling and conscience-filling atonement in casting themselves upon a personal Substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Highest. There is yet room, there is an ocean-depth of love that each of you may taste for yourselves. But, you must draw from this well yourselves, for Christ went to the cross to avert the wrath of God from all who would ever believe. And His great reward for bearing that wrath is to see His people saved from their sins, and brought to glory that they might dwell with Him in love forever.^x

End Notes:

- ⁱ John MacArthur Study Bible, notes on Isaiah.
- ⁱⁱ Ortlund Jr., Raymond, C., Isaiah, God saves Sinners, Preaching the Word Series, R. Kent Hughes, Series Ed. (pp. 447-457). Crossway, Wheaton: 2005.
- ⁱⁱⁱ MacArthur Study Bible, Isaiah.
- ^{iv} Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible (Vol. 1, pp. 503–505). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.
- ^v Martin, J. A. (1985). Isaiah. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 1120–1121). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- ^{vi} Chisholm, R. B. (1998). The Major Prophets. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), *Holman concise Bible commentary* (p. 290). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.
- ^{vii} Richards, L., & Richards, L. O. (1987). The teacher's commentary (p. 400). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- ^{viii} Ortlund Jr., Raymond, C., Isaiah, God saves Sinners, Preaching the Word Series, R. Kent Hughes, Series Ed. (pp. 447-457). Crossway, Wheaton: 2005.
- ^{ix} Ibid.
- ^x Bonar, A. A., The Gospel pointing to the Person of Christ, (pp. 50-53). Christian Focus Publications, 1988.