

Our God Saves: Live

The Conclusion of History

Isaiah 66

Mark Vroegop

For behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many. "Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following one in the midst, eating pig's flesh and the abomination and mice, shall come to an end together, declares the LORD. "For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations. And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the LORD. "For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD. "And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh (Isa. 66:15–24).

Today we come to the final chapter of Isaiah!

Next week will be our final sermon in this glorious book, and I'll attempt to provide a high-level overview of the mountain range of this massively important book. I have mixed feelings about the ending of this book because Isaiah has become a personal favorite. I now understand why some call it "the Romans of the Old Testament."

I'd like to remind you that our next series over the eight weeks of summer will be on the book of Ecclesiastes. I've worked with a team to develop a study that I think will be deeply helpful. Brad, Nate, Jeff, Evan, and Greg will be the teaching team. I usually take a break from preaching in July, and the elders have graciously allowed me a few more weeks for a time of writing and studying for the next series on Revelation. I'll be here most Sundays through the summer, and I can't wait to be taught by these faithful brothers.

Ecclesiastes addresses how to live faithfully in a frustrating world. It has a posture to it that looks like someone throwing up their hands. I'm sure you can relate. Frustration and pessimism are part of the air we breathe right now.

The book of Isaiah also invites us to consider our spiritual posture as it relates to the theme "Our God Saves." Let me suggest to you that there are two ways that we can respond to this statement. We can be marked by humility or haughtiness. We can be marked by receptivity or resistance. We can be characterized by obedience or obstinacy.

This is a theme all over the book of Isaiah. It began in the first chapter:

Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken (Isa. 1:18–20).

To make it even more vivid, maybe you could think about this with the illustration of a physical posture. Is your spiritual posture marked by open arms or defensive push-back? Using a football analogy, are you "going deep" and looking for the Lord? Or are you taking the position of the Heisman Trophy and trying to stiff-arm the Lord?

"Our God Saves" isn't just a theme for the book of Isaiah; it's a fork in the road of life. What's more, it's a fork in the road of human history and even in eternity. "Our God Saves" is something that every human being must respond to in one way or another.

And that's what we find in Isaiah 66. This book ends as it began – inviting us to consider our spiritual posture: Humble or haughty? Receptive or resistant? Obedient or obstinate? Let's see this distinction.

1) Humble or Haughty? (vv. 1-4)

Once again, we see Isaiah's big view of God. This final chapter begins with a massively elevated picture of God's glory and power. And this lofty vision of God creates a decision that must be made. Humility and haughtiness always have a reference point.

Humility is the correct response to who God is. Haughtiness is the wrong response to who God is. Both humility and haughtiness are deeply embedded with a theology. What you believe about God will inform what you come to believe about yourself.

Notice the elevated view of God in verse one. It's similar to what we heard in Isaiah: "I saw the Lord...high and lifted up" (Isa. 6:1). In chapter 66 we find God speaking about his own greatness. The text tells us that heaven is God's throne and the earth is his footstool. Pause and consider this image.

God tells us that the vast expanse over us and the unseen realm of heaven is his throne. The place that we dwell is a place for his feet. It's a statement of God's sovereign rule over all things. It's meant to create distance between God and mankind.

It begs the question about how humans engage with God or worship him. As glorious and attractive as the tabernacle or the temple were, they were very limited attempts to facilitate the honor and worship due to God.

Further, the text tells us that God affirms his role as Creator (v. 2). God made everything, which makes him the owner and controller of all. This is the starting point of understanding everything! It's how our summary of the gospel starts: God is holy – I am not – Jesus Saves – Christ is my Life.

What follows in verse 2b is key to this entire chapter. It may be the most important verse. And this is a theme that repeats itself. Don't miss it!

. . .But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word (Isa. 66:2b).

It's as if God is asking, "Where should I live? Who should I visit? What person or home fits with my glory?" That's the nature of the question. It's like a teacher who says, "I'm looking for a helper today, and it's someone who is quiet and listening."

Isaiah 66 lists three characteristics:

- **Humble** – The Hebrew word means those who are not powerful in themselves or in society. Their dominant characteristic is dependency. They are marked by desperately needing God.
- **Contrite spirit** – It's a word that refers to being crippled and unable to walk on your own. These are people who not only feel like they can't do it; they literally can't do it on their own.

Before we get to the third characteristic, I trust you realize how completely backwards this is to our Western/American mindset. We live in a world full of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Even self-promotion. It's the god of our age. And yet God meets with the lowly, the dependent, the helpless, and those who are marginalized. There's divine empowerment here. Eugene Peterson writes:

" . . .the most effective strategy for change, for revolution – at least on the large scale that the kingdom of God involves – comes from a minority working from the margins. I could not have articulated it then, but my seminary experience later germinated into the embrace of a vocational identity as necessarily minority, that a minority people working from the margins has the best chance of being a community capable of penetrating the noncommunity, the mob, the depersonalized function-defined crowd that is the sociological norm of America."¹

The spiritual state that gets God's attention, honors him, and opens the resources of heaven is dependency. So be very careful of things like power, money, influence, and popularity. Human

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/13599448-the-pastor-a-memoir>

beings look to those things, but God doesn't. What's more, rather than resisting or begrudging weakness, limitations, or uncertainty, embrace them as helpful means of creating dependency. As I shared two weeks ago from Reese Kauffman, the president of Child Evangelism Fellowship: "If dependency is my goal, then weakness is an asset."

- **Trembles at the Word** – This means that a reverence for God translates into a reverence for God's Word. Gary Smith, in his commentary on Isaiah says, "They deeply respect what God has said, take it very seriously, internalize it and make it part of their worldview, and then they implement it in their daily walk and thinking."²

The surest sign that a Christian understands who God is and who they are is how they receive and respond to the Word of God – the Bible. A marker of humility is how we respond to receiving the Scriptures.

A word of caution here. A culture of self-reliance and individualism isn't the only way pride is fostered. Massive amounts of information contribute as well. Christians have never had more access to the most compelling books or the most articulate sermons. And it can cause us to not receive the Word as the Word. We can be guilty of focusing on communication, style, articulation, etc. And we forget the value of the Bible as the Bible.

So, what's your posture with the Word today? Are you open-handed or are you stiff-arming God's word? Understanding who God is – "Our God Saves" – leads to a right understanding of yourself.

Verses 3-4 highlights a regrettable alternative. Rather than embracing humility, the people of God are playing "fast and loose" with their spiritual lives and worship. They're not taking God seriously. Their disregard for God shows up in their inconsistency. It's not like they stopped worshiping. No, they just keep worshipping God while proudly assuming the rest of their life didn't matter to God.

Notice the use of the word "like" in verse 3. It's designed to highlight the comparison of inconsistency. It's similar to what the first chapter of Isaiah said, "You spread out your hands. . .even though. . .your hands are full of blood" (1:15).

If we're honest, the danger for most Christians is not a lack of activity. Most of us know how to show up and "put it on." We know how to look the part and talk it up. Our danger isn't our presence on Sunday; it's the pretense on Monday.

Verse 3b captures it so well: "Those have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations." This haughtiness opens the door for divine discipline. In their pride they refused to listen. And it put them on the wrong side of God.

² Gary Smith, [Isaiah 40-66](#), vol. 15B, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2009), 730.

There's a contrast between being humble and haughty.

2) Receptive or Resistant? (vv. 5-17)

The next contrast relates to whether God's people are ready to receive what God has in store for them or whether they'll be resistant. What they receive is both the bruising and the blessing of God.

First, the bruising. In verse 5 Isaiah turns back to the theme regarding "trembling at God's word." But he shows us what the effect is. Look at the phrase in quotes. Their godliness has resulted in them being persecuted by their own people. Ray Ortlund puts these words into the persecutors' mouths: "You're always saying you want to glorify and enjoy God. Let us help you. Let's see how joyful you are as we show you to the door."³ And then there's a promise of God's judgment. Which raises the question of whether or not you are okay for being persecuted for your godliness.

Then the blessing. In verses 7-14 we get a glimpse of the glory that God will give to his people and the joy of their existence. There's the miracle of birth and multiplication without pain or limits. God is going to create a people for his own possession (vv. 7-8). And it is the power of God that will guarantee it!

"Shall I bring to the point of birth and not cause to bring forth?" says the LORD; "Shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb?" says your God (Isa. 66:9).

Notice the description of blessing. In verses 10-11 there's the promise of future blessing, including how that will extend to those outside of Israel. In verse 12 there's the hope of a future day that will be marked by incredible peace, and in verse 13 there's the comfort that God will offer to his people. And finally, in verse 14 there's the promise of joy and flourishing in God's kingdom.

In verses 15-17, we find another judgment text. Notice the poignant language in verse 15. The Lord comes in fire in a whirlwind while riding a chariot. And his judgment is swift (v. 16). Verse 17 gives us the reason. They resist God's call for faithfulness: "...compromisers among the professing people of God...worshippers who follow their own pleasure and do not respond to his call, listen to his word or walk in his way."⁴

All of this is here to remind God's people about the future so that they'll live differently. The promise about the future creates a dividing line regarding what realm we are living for. This is the same argument as we find in Hebrews 12.

³ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [*Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 451.

⁴ J. Alec Motyer, [*Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 457.

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:25–29).

There's a contrast between the receptive and the resistant.

3) Obedient or Obstinate? (vv. 18-24)

We've arrived now at the final section of this glorious book. After 66 chapters we see the beautiful endgame of God. We read about what the future holds, the gathering of God's people, the new heavens and new earth. And we see yet another contrast.

Verse 18 opens with a statement about God knowing "their works and their thoughts." He knows who the real deal is. He knows where his followers are. And God is going to get them from all over the world. What's more, the text indicates that God's people (a remnant) will be involved in declaring his glory all over the known world. In the same way that God scattered the nations in Genesis, now he is regathering them, not to make a name for themselves but for them to glory in the name and fame of God (v. 19).

The future offering will not be bull, lambs, and goats (v. 20). Rather, the vision here is of a vast caravan of people streaming into the presence of God. Some of the people who are brought will even be made priests to the Lord.

This will be a vast number of people whose defining characteristic is "Our God Saves." They are an army of people who have been rescued and whose works and thoughts fit with the plan of God. And they are welcomed into a world marked by true worship.

For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the Lord (Isa. 66:22–23).

Isaiah began with rebuking God's people for their false worship. Isaiah ends with the establishment of true worship in the presence of God's glory. And yet it's not the final word. This glorious, massive, theologically robust book ends with a sober reminder that our God saves from something. He saves us from our own rebellion. God welcomes the obedient but judges the obstinate.

Verse 24 is a chilling reminder that as glorious as God's kingdom is, there's also a real eternal punishment for those who resist God's invitation.

And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh (Isa. 66:24).

As I said in the beginning of this sermon, “Our God Saves” isn’t just a theme for the book of Isaiah; it’s a fork in the road of life. What’s more, it’s a fork in the road of human history and even in eternity. “Our God Saves” is something that every human being must respond to in one way or another. Is your spiritual posture marked by open arms or defensive push-back?

And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Rev. 21:5–8).

Isaiah presents a fork in the road marked by the sign: “Our God Saves.”

Are you: Humble or haughty? Receptive or resistant? Obedient or obstinate?

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