

# Isaiah 66

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[ 0 : 00 ] One of the problems is knowing where to stop, isn't it? If you do any public speaking, particularly! a problem for preachers. Knowing where to stop. I was told once by another preacher that! my preaching was like a plane circling the airport. That you kept thinking it was going to land, but no, you went round for another lap. Which, I took it. Knowing where to stop.

It's difficult, isn't it? And I think you get to Isaiah 66, and you think, well, you get to the end of Isaiah 65, and you think, this is a great place to stop. And then, Isaiah 66 is a puzzling chapter. I remember last week, this magnificent vision of a new heavens and a new earth. It's described, isn't it? It's one of the mountain peaks of Isaiah, certainly one of the mountain peaks of the Old Testament. The peaceable kingdom, it's a great place to end. The wolf and the lamb lying down together. Grazing together. It's a great way to finish.

And then Isaiah goes and adds another chapter. It's a long book, isn't it? 66 chapters. It's a long book. Now, we know, don't we, that Isaiah wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It's not a mistake that Isaiah 66 is there. It's not him struggling as an aeroplane, going around the airport for one more lap, struggling whether to land. Isaiah is not a Rambler.

But rather, what he does in this chapter is he pulls together a number of strands. And he presents to his listeners, for one last time, the choice that lies before you. The book of Isaiah is a tale of two cities. The book begins in the earthly city of Jerusalem.

And God laments, he says, Israel, you become like a prostitute. He says, your city, the city of Jerusalem is a city full of injustice and unrighteousness. But the book ends in another city. In the new Jerusalem. In the city that Isaiah calls the new heavens and the new earth.

[ 2 : 02 ] The perfect world. It ends with things as they're meant to be. And Isaiah is this kind of covenant enforcement officer. He is God's representative. He is God's lawyer who presents not only the case for the prosecution, but he also shows the rebellious and the accused. He shows you the way to the new heavens and the new earth. He shows you the way to freedom. And the question Isaiah is asked all the way through is how do we get from chapter 1 to chapter 66? How do we get from the city of Jerusalem to the new Jerusalem?

How will the faithless city become the faithful city? And so Isaiah presents his closing arguments, as it were, and he turns from the question of how to the question who.

Who will be there? Who will get to inhabit the new city? Who will inhabit the new heavens and the new earth? Or to put it another way, do you want to experience for eternity perfection and paradise? In the presence of God. And if you do want that, what should it mean for the now, in the present, what should your life look like? And Isaiah gives us three answers to the question.

He gives us three characteristics of people who will live in the new heavens and the new earth. Let's jump right in. The first characteristic of people who will dwell in the new heavens and the new earth is that they tremble at God's word.

[ 3 : 36 ] Look at verse 1. Thus says the Lord, Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What or where is the house that you would build for me?

And what or where is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made. So all these things came to me, declares the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look.

He was humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. So God begins, doesn't he, with a very simple and profound statement. He points to his sheer greatness and his immensity.

And he says, The earth is my footstool. The earth on which you dwell. It's where I rest my feet. That's how massive I am.

But in all his greatness, do you remember what God had promised his people? God had promised to his people that he would dwell, the great majestic creator of the heavens and the earth, he would

dwell in the temple in Jerusalem.

[ 4 : 38 ] All the way back in 1 Kings chapter 8, he promises to the King Solomon, I will dwell in the temple. And so God here isn't scorning that the powerful and transcendent God that he is would dwell in a human earthly edifice.

What he does here, what he is really doing, is he is mocking the idea that you and I can build structures that could somehow contain God and could impress God.

That the people of Israel could have a temple of the Lord that they could somehow put God in their favour. So translating verse 1 is quite difficult.

Most of the translations in verse 1 with these words, it's simply where? Where is the house that you would build for me? But the sense, if you were to put it in colloquial English, is wherever.

Wherever is this place. But God adds really a sense of irony as he so often does in Isaiah to the question. It's as if God is saying in verse 1, to be honest with you, I'm having trouble locating your temple.

[ 5 : 53 ] I'm finding it a little hard to find. Can you tell me where it is? Can you give me directions? Can you give me the postcodes? And I think that's quite humbling for you and I. That as humans, we build, don't we, these impressive edifices for God.

Churches and cathedrals for God. And God professes them hard to find. Westminster Abbey. I can't quite see it.

St Paul's Cathedral. Well, where is it? I.P.C. Ealing's glorious new building. No, sorry, you're going to have to give me the directions again, God says.

It's not that God doesn't know where it is. Of course he does. That's not the point. It's not that he despises buildings. Like many evangelicals do. He mustn't do that. It's not that he rejects the motives of the building's construction.

Rather he's saying, your buildings are not where my eyes easily and readily focus. God does not repudiate houses of worship.

[ 7 : 03 ] But God does say, your buildings are not the sharpest focus in my field of vision. That's not where he holds in on. That's not where God looks this morning. Where does God look?

Where does God look? Can you see? Verse 2. He looks at those. These are the ones that I look on with favour. This is the one to whom I will look. Those who are humble and contrite in spirit and tremble at my Lord.

The Lord's priority is very clear. It is not the building we construct. It is not the building that we seek to improve. In which we gather. No, it is ultimately the man or the woman or the boy or the girl who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at his word.

There is one. There is one in the midst of all creation. In the midst of the sun and the stars and all the feasts and all the parties and all the feats of engineering and all the architecture.

There is one that secures the gaze of the great creator and it is the individual who is humble. The people who are humble. And it's contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

[ 8 : 14 ] The word contrite is translated in other places as lame. Usually it's about physical lameness. But here and only here in the Old Testament it has this sense of inability spiritually.

It's not just a sense of our sin but a sense of the damage that sin has done to you.

That you and I are helpless in pleasing God. Have you come to that point? That you are spiritually lame. The word humble is a word we use more often than the word contrite.

But we're still confused I think what it means. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis it's not thinking less of yourself. Of course it's not. But it's thinking of yourself less.

And that's an important distinction. And the Bible directs us along the path of humility by instructing instructing you to think of yourself less and think of God more.

[ 9 : 25 ] So how do you know if you're living a life of humility? How do you know if you're living a life of contrition and spirit as a citizen of the new heavens and the new earth? And Isaiah gives us one clear indication and it is this that you tremble at his word.

And Isaiah sees that characteristic as one that sets true followers of God off from those who are not actually following. they have the appearance of following but they're not.

And so in verses 3 to 4 he describes those who go through the motions of religious activity. He says they turn up at church. They make great show.

They actually make great sacrifices. They do other things but they don't tremble at God's word.

They have vibrant worship.

Loud worship. Noisy, fervent worship but they don't tremble at God's word. And God says actually you might look really super spiritual this morning but to me they are sinful.

[10:33] Your worship is meaningless. It is unacceptable. It is apostate. I have to tell you that this verse about trembling at God's word has really stuck in my craw this week.

And it's a huge challenge. Two weeks ago I was in Poland I wanted to go to see the Polish National Cathedral that's just built. We went in and they had a celebration of the mass.

And I sat at the back while I stood at the back and watched. I don't know whether you've done that. It's quite a heartbreaking thing to watch really. But within me there was a smug superiority as the man rattled through and he doesn't believe a word of this.

These people don't know what they're doing. When you come to Isaiah 66 and verse 2 I think if you are spiritually haughty or pride as I am proud as I am it cuts the legs from under you.

Because God says here are the ones that I delight to look upon it is those who tremble at my word. And the scripture is read. Do you have that sense of holy reverence?

[11:48] When you get your Bible open at home to read with your family to read it yourself that sensitive reverence that we come to the Lord God to hear him speak to obey whatever he says.

And we tremble at God's word because it is God's word. God's word. It is the word of the sovereign. The word of the almighty God of the universe.

It is the word of the God who has revealed himself. The God who has revealed himself through Isaiah as the only God. The God who will abide no rivals.

The God who scorns our worship of idols. And the only God who will forgive our sin. The only God who has sent a rescuer for you and me in his suffering servant.

The only God who renews the strength of those who wait for him. Those Isaiah said who are the citizens of the heaven and the new earth whose future is guaranteed are those who tremble at God's word.

[12:53] And that might be very difficult for you to get your head around because you say I don't want to tremble before God. Isn't God the God of love? Isn't God the God of compassion? The God of comfort?

Why do you tremble before him? Why would we have such an attitude of fear? Let me give you an illustration. Imagine you are exploring an unknown glacier on the north of Greenland.

I know it's one of those ridiculous illustrations. But let's say you're exploring a glacier in the north of Greenland in the dead of winter just as you reach the sheer cliff with a spectacular view of miles and miles of jagged ice snow mountains.

And there is a terrible storm arises. And the wind is so strong that you are absolutely scared stiff that you're going to be blown off. You and your party right over the cliff. But in the midst you discover one of the party discovers there is a cleft in the ice where you can hide and so you go in there.

And you feel secure. And the mighty power of the storm it rages on but you watch it with a kind of trembling. With a kind of trembling pleasure.

[14:07] It surges across the glacier. Now the question is this. What's changed in your experience of the storm? Initially you had this fear that this terrible storm could literally claim your life.

But then you found a refuge. And so you gained the hope that you would be safe but not everything in the feeling of fear has vanished. does it? Only the life-threatening part has vanished.

Because there remains, doesn't there, a trembling awe and wonder and fear. The feeling that you would never want to tangle with such a storm or be the adversary of such a power.

And so it is with our attitude towards God. Trusting in God and his promises turns terror into a holy and hopeful and dare I say happy trembling.

Into a peaceful trembling. Into a trustful trembling. God and Mr. Beaver, isn't it, in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. You remember the scene?

[15:18] Beaver describes Aslan's might and majesty. Aslan, the lion, God as it were. And as he finishes, Lucy says, is he safe? Mr.

Beaver says, safe? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he is good. He's a king, I tell you. And you see, those who are citizens of the new heavens and the new earth are humble and contrite.

And they demonstrate it by trembling at God's word. Because it is the word of God. That brings us to the second characteristic of people who live in the new heavens and the new earth.

And that is that they are citizens through a new birth. Look at verses 6 to 9. The sound of an uproar from the city, the sound from the temple, the sound of the Lord, rendering recompense to his enemies.

Before she was in labor, she gave birth. Before her pain came upon her, she delivered a son. Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment?

[16:24] For as soon as Zion was in labor, she brought forth her children. Shall I bring to the point of birth and not cause to bring forth, says the Lord? Shall I who caused to bring forth shut the womb, says your God?

So it's not an easy passage, but it seems Isaiah is prophesying of the destruction of Jerusalem, that God will judge those who have turned their backs on him.

Destruction that will come at the hands of the Babylonians. In 587 BC, 587 BC, at which time the temple would be destroyed. If you read on in the New Testament, you come to the point where the temple is rebuilt.

It's rebuilt after the return of the exiles, in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. But the temple is a shadow of the first one. The old people, they cry because the second temple is not a patch on the first one.

And that temple would be destroyed, wouldn't it, in AD 70. AD 70, just a few years after Jesus' death and resurrection. So there are many Christians who read this section of Isaiah differently.

[17:31] But my sense is Isaiah is looking forward to that later destruction of the temple, the one in AD 70. And he says something miraculous is going to happen before that destruction. That before Israel goes into labour, she will give birth.

Before the pains come upon her, she will deliver a son. Who's heard of such a thing? Who's ever seen such a thing? And the answer is no one. And in Isaiah at the same time, Isaiah is already told us of this great event.

Earlier in his book, he's prophesied to the miraculous birth of a son sometime in the future. So do you remember Isaiah chapter 7? Words that we're so familiar with at Christmas, isn't it?

She will give birth, she will give you a sign the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and you will call his name Emmanuel. And Isaiah is covered a lot of ground from chapter 7.

And in hindsight, we know a lot more, even though, even through the book of Isaiah as to who this son will be, this Emmanuel. So just a couple of chapters later, chapter 9, the son is the one who will be given.

[18:42] The son is the one who is born and will be called wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace, and upon his shoulders, the increase of his government will be no end.

Because this Emmanuel, this son, will be the king. And as we read through the book of Isaiah, we find that the king will come as a servant. And he will be a servant who will suffer and will die in our place and he will be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities and by his wounds we will be healed.

And when you realise that our citizenship is in the new heavens and the new earth, it is completely and entirely and totally dependent on this son whom God will send.

This son who was miraculously born will come as the servant king. But Isaiah says that is not all. He says from his birth will come your rebirth.

Zion gives birth not only to a son but she gives birth, verse 8, to her children. So that from the birth of this one son comes instantaneously a country, a people, a nation.

[19:57] That's exactly what you discover when you come to the New Testament. The birth of a son gives birth to a movement. A movement that cannot be contained within ethnical, political or territorial boundaries.

It's a movement that creates a people without borders that encompasses every tribe and tongue nation. It's the church of Jesus Christ.

It's the people of the new creation. It's the citizens of the new heavens and the new earth. And so you see this citizenship is not based on where you were born, is it?

It's not based on your postcode. And it's not based on your family heritage. It's not based on the amount of income that you report on your tax return. Our citizenship of the new heavens and the new earth comes through a rebirth.

Because without being born again, Jesus says, you cannot see the kingdom of heaven. The words of the apostle Peter, 1 Peter 3 and 4 says, praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 21 : 07 ] In his great mercy, he has given us new birth, rebirth, regeneration, into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, into an inheritance that will never spoil, never perish, never spoil, never fade.

You see, citizenship in the new heavens and the new earth depends completely on being reborn, receiving a new birth that comes through faith.

faith in the one who was miraculously born, but who died and raised again and he reigns forever. Just briefly before we look at the last characteristic, can you notice in verse 10 to 13, he moves, doesn't he, from the prenatal room to the nursery.

And these are remarkable verses. It gives you and I an astounding image of the church as a mother who nurses or feeds her children.

And then it plays with the image a little bit and extends the image to the comforting mother to God himself. God is portrayed as a mother. In verses 12 and 13. But thus says the Lord, behold, I extend peace to her like a river and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream.

[ 22 : 31 ] And you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip and bounced upon her knees. And as one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you.

You shall be comforted in Jerusalem. Do you remember those days back when, when you were little, when you were weak? For some of us that's difficult.

We can barely remember what we had for breakfast, but try and remember what it was like when we were little. There are certain particular scenes out there that are etched into our memories of our mothers.

From our earliest memories. Sitting on our mothers' knees, being bounced up and down, up and down, up and down. Giggling and smiling.

Mothers singing nursery rhymes and lullabies, kissing us in delight, hugging and caressing you when there were tears. I am in awe of mothers.

[ 23 : 33 ] The patience of the mothers of this church with their little children. It's, it's an amazing thing. The softness and the beauty. It comes more innately.

Not so in awe of the dads. I don't find that that patience comes as naturally. I might be wrong. I might be terribly successful in this. Who cares? But God says that is who I am.

That is who I am. That is who I am to my children. He is like a gentle mother. Mouncing. His children on their knees.

God is not an ogre. God is not an ogre. God is not standing over his people this morning with a stick ready to beat you. This is a God who wants to be like a mother to you.

It's an astounding picture. Lastly, the third characteristic of the new heavens and the new earth is that they are sent into the world to proclaim God's glory. They are sent into the world to proclaim God's glory.

[ 24 : 40 ] In verses 18 to 20. For I know their works and their thoughts. And the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they will come and see my glory.

Do you see the direction they are coming? Verse 19. And I will set aside among them and from them I will send. That is going. I will send survivors to the nations. Tarshish, Paul and Lod.

Who draw the bow to Tubal and Jabin to the coastlands far away. And have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory. And they shall bring forth all your brothers and sisters 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. God's plan throughout the scripture has always been to go global. It has always been to go global.

You see that with Adam. You see that with Noah. You see that with Abraham. To go global with this gift of grace and salvation. He is gathering his rescuing activity.

[ 25 : 48 ] Here it is. He's gathering his rescuing activity was a season restricted to those who'd been dispersed into exile from Israel. But the bigger plan was always, always to extend that rescue to all people.

John Stott points to three things here that Isaiah says about the global mission program of God. First of all he tells us the occasion of this global mission program.

Verse 18 God is saying mission activity will be precipitated. The thing that will come before this great mission activity is the rejection of Israel. By God's word.

Now the ESV, the ESV, I love the ESV. I wouldn't want to go back to the NIV but sometimes it is so literal it's incomprehensible. And so look at, look at your, the service sheet on page seven.

The NIV is a little bit better here. And more helpful. And so verse 18 says for I know their works and their thoughts and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues and they shall come and see my glory.

[ 26 : 51 ] The they there is referring to Israel because of what they done or not done. Because of their works. Because I know their works and their thoughts.

Because of what they done or not done. God says I'm going to come and gather the people of all nations. Now because of Israel's rejection we see this pattern again and again in the New Testament.

Israel, the Jews, they reject the Lord Jesus. And what happens is the gospel goes out to the nations. So four times the Jews reject the preaching of the word in Acts by Paul and he turns and evangelizes the Gentiles.

It happens in Pisidian, Antioch, in Corinth, in Ephesus and then in Rome. Now of course there's a remnant of Jews who believe, praise God. Many Jews did put their trust and faith in the Messiah but there were many more who rejected God's word.

And that led to the spread of the message to the Gentiles to us. So the occasion was the rejection of God's word by Israel. Secondly, the scope of God's mission program.

[ 27 : 56 ] Can you see that? I will gather people from all nations and tongues. And Isaiah signals out five places that represent the four points in the compass. You have Tarshish which is a city in Spain at the western end of the empire.

You have Pul and Lud which are in the southern part. You have Tubal which is in the far north. And you have Java and Greece which is in the eastern end of the empire. And then the distant lands beyond that.

And these are the places aren't they? Isaiah looks around. He's at the Atlas. He looks around the world at the furthest outposts. And he says, this proclamation of God's glory will grow up to them. But this mission was to go from Cameroon to Kazakhstan. From Leeds to Liberia. From Ealing to Estonia. To go all over the world.

But this movement was to have no ethnic or geographical or national boundaries. And that squares exactly with what happened in the book of Acts. Doesn't it? Acts 1 verse 8. He says to the apostles, the disciples, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.

[ 29 : 02 ] And you will be my witnesses where? Jerusalem. And Judea. And Samaria. And the ends of the earth. And so at the end of the book of Acts, it can be said that the gospels go to the end of the world.

Just as Isaiah prophesied. And then thirdly, there's the goal of mission. And it's nothing short of the glory of God. That is that God would be known and honoured for who he is.

And that shouldn't surprise us. All of life is intended to be for the glory of God. Why were you created? What is your chief end? The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

What's particularly striking in this passage is God is sending out messages to the nations to proclaim the glory of God. Through the rest of the Old Testament, God promises the nations will come to Zion.

There will be this pilgrimage of the nations, like rivers flowing towards Jerusalem. It's only when you come to the end of the New Testament. To the New Testament, this movement goes from the nations to Jerusalem.

[ 30 : 07 ] It's replaced by God sending out from Jerusalem to the nations. But the one exception is in the Old Testament, Isaiah 66, 19. Where God says, I will send out to proclaim my glory to the nations.

And as the story of God's people continues, we discover that those who are brought in are brought in to be sent out again. Those who are citizens of the new heavens and the new earth.

They are brought in and sent out as missionaries to proclaim the glory of God. And that includes you and that includes me. That we are to live and to proclaim the glory of God.

In your home. In the way that you treat your children. In the way that you work. In the way that you use your leisure time.

In your school. And in your social circle. And in your neighbourhood. So that those around you will come and know how great God is. And you might say, that sounds great.

[ 31 : 11 ] How do I exactly proclaim the glory of God? Listen to these words from Paul from 2 Corinthians 4. For God who said, let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts.

To give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. The glory of God is most clearly demonstrated and proclaimed the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

To proclaim the glory of God, you need to love Jesus. Live for Jesus. And talk about Jesus. It's really simple, isn't it?

I'm really hard. And that's what we're talking about. That if we are citizens of the new heavens and the new earth, which is another way of saying, are you a Christian? You understand that it's part and parcel of your life.

To live for, to love, and to speak about Jesus. So the book of Isaiah moves from the earthly city of Jerusalem to the new heavens and the new earth.

[ 32 : 18 ] It's in some ways the summary of the Bible, isn't it? Genesis 1 begins in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the Bible ends with God created the new heavens and the new earth. And Isaiah encapsulates the movement of the Bible.

For those who are citizens of this new world, three characteristics. You tremble at his word. You realize you can only be a citizen through rebirth, through being born again. And thirdly, you understand that you've been sent out with a mandate, a commission to proclaim God's glory.

The end. It's not, is it? Let's circle the airport one more time. Look at the last verse. And they shall grow out and they shall look on the dead bodies of the men who've rebelled against me for their worms shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh. What a beautiful ending to the book. You know when Isaiah 66 is read in the Jewish synagogue today, they read verse 24, and then they go back and read verse 23 again because they cannot believe that it should end in such a book, such a verse.

They don't want to finish it with such a horrid ending. But we have to figure out that Isaiah knew what he's doing, that he finishes this book in the way that he intends to finish. He wants you and I to sit bold upright and to listen up.

[ 33 : 51 ] Because what he does at the end of verse 24 is he says, if you will not tremble at God's word. If you will not be born again, if you will not proclaim the glory of God in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, verse 24 awaits.

And you might be tempted to say, oh that's so Old Testament isn't it? We are New Testament people, in fact let's go even better. I'm a red letter Christian, I just believe in the words that Jesus says, you know the ones in the red words.

Jesus will rescue us out of this, right? Jesus says in Mark 8, 12, the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness and in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It's an indirect quote of Isaiah 66, 24. There is no one other than Jesus who talks about this outer darkness. What is he talking about? He's talking about Isaiah 66, 24.

Where Isaiah says, people who have heard me, who have heard this prophecy, and yet they don't tremble, and they're not born again, and they don't proclaim the glory of God, they will go to this outer darkness.

[ 35 : 05 ] And in Mark 9, 9, 47, Jesus says, if your right hand causes you to sin, tear it out, because it's better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell where the worm does not die.

Isaiah 66, 24. Because this is real. Now you could finish the servant series here with a little light-hearted story that breaks the tension.

But for me to do that would be a great disservice to the book of Isaiah. Because that is not how Isaiah wants to finish his book. He says, this is reality. And if you rebel against the living God, who is the loving God who came to rescue you, who is the living God, who is the God who sent his son in this world to suffer in your place, who is the living God who wants to comfort you like a mother, if you refuse that, the only thing left for you is justice.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.