



Good News
Bible Reading Program

A free educational service provided by the United Church of God, an *International Association*

— May 2003 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1 May	Hezekiah's sickness; Sign of the sundial; Hezekiah's life extended	2 Kings 20:1-11; 2 Chronicles 32:24; Isaiah 38
2 May	Hezekiah's wealth; Babylonian envoys; Hezekiah's pride of heart and God's wrath looming over Judah	2 Chronicles 32:27-29; 2 Kings 20:12-19; Isaiah 39; 2 Chronicles 32:25, 31
3 May	Sennacherib's invasion and conquest of Judah's cities; Micah's warning of coming destruction on Jerusalem; Hezekiah humbles himself; Assyrian encampment before Jerusalem	2 Chronicles 32:1-5, 30; 2 Kings 18:13-16; Micah 3; 2 Chronicles 32:26, 6-19; 2 Kings 18:17-37; Isaiah 36
4 May	God assures deliverance through Isaiah; Sennacherib's threat; Hezekiah prays and presents threatening letter before God; Further assurance from God through Isaiah; Sennacherib's forces slain; His later death in his own land	2 Kings 19; Isaiah 37; 2 Chronicles 32:20-23
5 May	The coming reign of the Lord; Zion to be delivered from Babylon; The Messiah from Bethlehem; Israel's end-time military power broken; Vengeance on disobedient nations	Micah 4-5
6 May	God pleads with Israel; Promise of final salvation	Micah 6-7
7 May	Comfort to God's people	Isaiah 40
8 May	God will help Israel; Challenge to idol worshipers	Isaiah 41
9 May	God's Servant; To magnify the law; Israel's disobedience	Isaiah 42
10 May	God will restore Israel; Because of sin, Israel is first given to curse and reproach; God will pour out His Spirit on Israel	Isaiah 43:1-44:5
11 May	Idolatry ridiculous; Redemption of Israel	Isaiah 44:6-23
12 May	Coming restoration of Judah; Cyrus foretold; No other God but the Almighty Creator	Isaiah 44:24-45:13
13 May	The true God and Savior vs. the worthlessness of idols; God proclaims the future and brings it to pass	Isaiah 45:13-46:13
14 May	Fall of the daughter of Babylon	Isaiah 47
15 May	Israel to be refined and then brought out of Babylon	Isaiah 48
16 May	Light to the nations; God will not forget Zion	Isaiah 49
17 May	God will redeem and comfort His people	Isaiah 50-51
18 May	Redemption of Jerusalem; The suffering Servant	Isaiah 52-53
19 May	The heritage of God's servants; Invitation to salvation	Isaiah 54-55
20 May	The Sabbath and true worship for all peoples; God rebukes the wicked and revives the repentant	Isaiah 56-57
21 May	Proper fasting; Sin separates from God; Repentance & salvation	Isaiah 58-59

22 May	Coming of the light of Zion	Isaiah 60
23 May	Anointed preacher of good news; Zion's future glory	Isaiah 61–62
24 May	Winepress of judgment; God's mercy; Prayer for deliverance	Isaiah 63–64
25 May	God's justice; A new creation coming	Isaiah 65
26 May	Acceptable and unacceptable worship; Zion gives birth; The coming of God in judgment and millennial worship	Isaiah 66
27 May	Death of Hezekiah; Reign of Manasseh over Judah, his apostasy, captivity, repentance and death	2 Kings 20:21–21:18; 2 Chronicles 32:32–33:20
28 May	Reign of Amon over Judah and further apostasy; Josiah king of Judah	2 Kings 21:19–22:2; 2 Chronicles 33:21–34:7
29 May	Day of the Lord	Zephaniah 1
30 May	The meek hidden; Nations to be judged; God's rebellious people punished; A remnant to be saved	Zephaniah 2–3
31 May	Jeremiah's calling and commission	Jeremiah 1

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Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading**Hezekiah's Sickness and the Sundial****(2 Kings 20:1-11; 2 Chronicles 32:24; Isaiah 38)****May 1**

We are skipping over Sennacherib's invasion for now. Indeed, many date Hezekiah's sickness and the visit of Babylonian envoys, which we'll read about in our next reading, as having occurred prior to Sennacherib's invasion. One reason for this is the fact that Hezekiah proudly shows the wealth of the national treasuries to the Babylonians, as we'll see (2 Kings 20:13)—and yet Hezekiah gave away much of the treasuries to Sennacherib (18:15-16). Another important indicator is God's statement in 2 Kings 20:6 that He will defend Jerusalem and Hezekiah against the king of Assyria—seeming to indicate Sennacherib's assault, which would necessitate that it had not yet occurred. Finally, destruction is seen looming over Jerusalem *following* Hezekiah's sickness (see 2 Chronicles 32:24-25). Therefore, we will proceed on what appears to be the likelier supposition—that Hezekiah became ill prior to Sennacherib's invasion.

But his sickness must have come *right* before—earlier in the same year as the invasion. In 2 Kings 18:13, we are told that Sennacherib (who invaded in 701 B.C.) came in the 14th year of Hezekiah. Thus we understand Hezekiah's sole reign upon the death of his father to have begun around 715 B.C. Hezekiah's 29-year reign is reckoned from 715 to 686 B.C. Since Hezekiah's life is extended 15 years beyond his sickness, this would place his sickness in 701. The Bible says his illness came "in those days" (2 Kings 20:1; 2 Chronicles 32:24; Isaiah 38:1)—that is, in the days of Sennacherib's invasion. And this must have indicated a narrow span of time, as we've seen.

Sadly, as faithful as Hezekiah had been, in preparing for war against Assyria, he and his people were not looking to God but to their military capabilities and strategies. Isaiah had stated this very thing in Isaiah 22:8-11, which we read earlier. God, then, allows Hezekiah to fall prey to a deathly illness involving some kind of lesion. Hezekiah thus refocuses on his commitment to God—fervently praying for healing. And God promises to heal him.

It is interesting to note Isaiah's prescription of a poultice of figs even given God's promise to heal. "The practice of applying figs to an ulcerated sore is well attested in the records of the ancient Middle East, being mentioned as early as the Ras Shamra (Ugaritic) tablets of the second millennium B.C." (*The Nelson Study Bible*, note on 20:7). This shows that we are to do what we physically can to relieve ourselves of illness in addition to fully relying on God's healing. In addition to purely supernatural miracles of healing, there are natural laws of health and healing that God created for healing. All healing comes from God—and our working within His laws of health and healing does not betray trust in Him. Even using physical methods such as Isaiah prescribed, it is still God and His laws that do the healing. Thus, God's promise to heal can include using the systems of the body and is not limited to overt miracles. In Hezekiah's case, perhaps God supernaturally healed part of Hezekiah's problem and let natural healing methods alleviate the other part.

We then see the sign of the sundial. This was an incredible miracle. Like the miracle of Joshua's long day, it involved stopping the earth from turning—and this time rotating it backwards a ways. Consider that the surface of the earth at the equator is moving at a speed of more than 1,000 miles per hour. The laws of inertia demand that if the earth were suddenly stopped, everything on its surface would go flying forward—and massive upheaval would result on land and sea. So God had to have kept everything calm and in place. It is truly staggering to contemplate. Certainly Hezekiah understood it to be a great miracle. But given our scientific knowledge today, we are able to realize the immense complexity of this miracle far more than Hezekiah possibly could have.

Hezekiah Receives the Babylonian Envoys**(2 Chronicles 32:27-29; 2 Kings 20:12-19; Isaiah 39; 2 Chronicles 32:25, 31)****May 2**

Merodach-Baladan of Babylon was, as we've seen, involved in his own ongoing struggle to gain independence from Assyria. He ruled as king twice in Babylon—first from 721-710 B.C. and later for a short time in 703. "Amazingly, Marduk-apla-iddina [Merodach-Baladan] rebounded...and instigated yet another rebellion in 700. Again, and for the last time, he was put down; and Assur-nadin-sumi, a son of Sennacherib, was installed as regent in Babylon" (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 1987, p. 414). What this tells us is that, though he wasn't then on the throne, Merodach-Baladan was still a factor in 701—when Hezekiah was sick and Sennacherib invaded.

We can therefore see why he would be sending a delegation to Jerusalem at this time. Ostensibly it was to congratulate Hezekiah on his recovery from illness, but there was surely more political motivation behind it. Indeed, this was likely part of an attempt to forge an alliance with Hezekiah against their common foe, Assyria. Hezekiah was more than willing to show off his wealth—possibly to prove that he had enough to help finance a joint rebellion—and did so with a certain amount of pride (2 Chronicles 32:25).

Isaiah, however, warns that all of that wealth would eventually be taken by the Babylonians when they were no longer friends—perhaps even prompted by the reports taken back by these visitors. Sadly, Hezekiah’s response is not one of humility or repentance—only selfish satisfaction at the fact that this won’t transpire in his days.

God was greatly displeased at Hezekiah’s attitude in the whole affair. Though the king had been miraculously healed and been promised deliverance from the Assyrians by God, here he was again looking to his wealth and the help of foreign powers to overcome Assyria. And he was not sorry at Isaiah’s rebuke. “Therefore wrath was looming over him and over Judah and Jerusalem” (verse 25). Indeed, God withdrew from him as a test (verse 31). This all seems to refer to God allowing the catastrophic invasion of Sennacherib.

Invasion of Sennacherib and Micah’s Warning (2 Chronicles 32:1-5, 30; 2 Kings 18:13-16; Micah 3; 2 Chronicles 32:26, 6-19; 2 Kings 18:17-37; Isaiah 36) May 3

In 701 Sennacherib marched west to crush the brewing revolt. He came down the Mediterranean coast, “and after the surrender of Ashkelon and Ekron turned toward Judah. He made his headquarters at Lachish [28 miles southwest of Jerusalem]; reliefs found at Nineveh [now displayed in the British Museum] show the breaching of the double walls and the fortifications of the gate [of Lachish] by siege rams. Traces of the intense destruction have been found in the excavations on the site (stratum III) and also at Tell Beit Mirsim (Ashan) and Beer-sheba” (Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 1977, p. 99).

In conjunction with the Assyrian invasion, Hezekiah took further precautions to protect Jerusalem. Rather than just having the water of Gihon brought inside the city by his tunnel, it was necessary to keep enemies from polluting the spring or preventing its waters from reaching Jerusalem—or from using it and other springs. So he concealed the springs outside the city (compare 2 Chronicles 32:3-4). But this alone would not protect Hezekiah’s people.

Sadly, besides Hezekiah’s own lapse in attitude and failure to completely rely on God, Judah had declined quite a bit spiritually during the reign of Ahaz so that even Hezekiah’s reforms were not sufficient to entirely reverse the downward trend. Perhaps if Hezekiah had fully trusted in God, he could have successfully continued to withstand the Assyrians, but God permitted Sennacherib to invade the land and capture many of its cities. It is, of course, possible that God would have brought destruction against Judah anyway because of their injustice and wrongdoing, as brought out in Micah and Isaiah’s prophecies.

As for the scale of what happened, notice these words of Sennacherib himself from the famous clay prism on which this campaign is recorded: “But as for Hezekiah, the Jew, who did not bow in submission to my yoke, forty-six of his strong walled towns and innumerable smaller villages in their neighbourhood I besieged and conquered by stamping down earth-ramps and then by bringing up battering rams, by the assault of foot-soldiers, by breaches, tunneling and sapper operations. I made to come out from them 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, innumerable horses, mules, donkeys, camels, large and small cattle, and counted them as spoils of war” (quoted in *Eerdmans Handbook to the Bible*, 1983, sidebar on 2 Kings 18). It is interesting to consider, then, that by this deportation many people of Judah, Benjamin and Levi joined the Assyrian captivity of the northern tribes—20 years after Samaria’s fall.

At these dire events, Hezekiah panics while Sennacherib is still at Lachish (2 Kings 18:14). Hezekiah takes much of the gold and all the silver from the temple to pay the tribute imposed on him (verses 15-16). Yet Sennacherib is not fully appeased.

It was perhaps right around this time that the prophet Micah delivered his powerful warning of chapter 3 to the leaders of Jerusalem, including Hezekiah. Interestingly, years later this episode will be used by some as a defense of Jeremiah, when others want *him* put to death for pronouncing judgment on Jerusalem. At this point, you should read **Jeremiah 26:17-19**. As you can see from the later testimony given in these verses, it does appear that Micah’s warning corresponded to events at the time of Sennacherib’s invasion. Micah’s preaching—probably along with Isaiah’s and the terrible events—brought about Hezekiah’s humbling himself in repentance. Jerusalem would not fall.

Sennacherib sends a delegation to taunt the city (2 Kings 18:17). Whether coincidentally or not, they conduct their business at the very place Isaiah had confronted Ahaz about 30 years earlier to warn him of the Assyrian threat (compare Isaiah 7:3).

Tartan, Rabсарis and Rabshakeh of 2 Kings 18:17 are probably titles, as in the New King James Version, rather than names as in the earlier KJV. The NIV translates these as “supreme commander,” “chief officer” and “field commander.” The field commander addresses Hezekiah’s representatives, speaking Hebrew in the hearing of all the people, to maximize intimidation (verse 26). He first questions their reliance on Egypt for help (verse 21). This was something God Himself had rebuked them for (compare Isaiah 30:1-5).

Then he questions why they claim to rely on God, when Hezekiah has taken away all of the high places and insisted that they worship only at the altar in Jerusalem (2 Kings 18:22). This of course reflects a total misunderstanding on his part on how God was to be worshiped, though it may have planted some doubts and worries into the minds of the besieged Jews.

The field commander then claims that God had told the Assyrians to destroy the land (verse 25). God probably did not speak to the king of Assyria, although He apparently did move the Assyrians to war against the northern kingdom of Israel and take its people captive—and now He may have been similarly moving Assyria against Judah. Yet in his particular claim the Assyrian official was, no doubt, being rather presumptuous. But he really gets into trouble when he challenges God Himself, saying that God is no different than the gods of the other nations he has destroyed, and is incapable of delivering Jerusalem (verses 30-35).

As we will see in the rest of the account, God is *not* like the false gods of pagan nations.

Judah Delivered from Sennacherib (2 Kings 19; Isaiah 37; 2 Chronicles 32:20-23) May 4

Hezekiah takes the field commander’s blasphemy to God. Through Isaiah, God assures him He has heard it and will deal with the Assyrians. Then the Rabshakeh returned to his king but “did not find Sennacherib at Lachish. Sennacherib had gone to besiege Libnah [about five miles north of Lachish], and from there set out for the Valley of Eltekeh to meet the Egyptian Army which had come to the aid of Judah” (Aharoni and Avi-Yonah, *Macmillan Bible Atlas*, p. 99).

Eugene Merrill gives details regarding the participation of Egypt, now ruled by Pharaoh Shebitku: “In the spirit of general rebellion following Sargon’s death in 705, Shebitku with his armed forces moved north in 701 to join the Palestinian states, including Judah, in an effort to withstand the new king of Assyria, Sennacherib. By the time Shebitku arrived, Hezekiah may already have promised his tribute to Sennacherib. Whatever the case, the Assyrian broke off further hostilities against Jerusalem when he learned that Shebitku was on the way. Sennacherib then confronted the forces of Egypt and Judah at Eltekeh. Victorious, he divided his army, leaving part to provide defense against the Egyptians and sending the others to Jerusalem, apparently to punish Hezekiah for his collaboration with the rebels.

“By then a second large contingent of troops from Egypt, led by the crown prince Tirhakah, was on its way. Sennacherib was soon apprised of this, but communicated to Hezekiah that he should take no comfort from it since the Assyrians had completely destroyed all their previous enemies (2 Kings 19:9-13)” (*Kingdom of Priests*, p. 416). This is a reference to the letter that Hezekiah received (verse 14). “Egypt did indeed prove to be a ‘splintered reed’ [as the Assyrian official had warned] (2 Kings 18:21): Shebitku and Tirhakah retreated without doing the Assyrians further harm” (p. 416).

But far greater forces were pitted against Assyria. Hezekiah went back to the temple, this time taking Sennacherib’s blasphemous letter and laying it out before God (verse 14).

Have you followed Hezekiah’s example when facing “an impossible” trial? That is, have you taken a letter, a bill, a legal paper or some other document that threatened your well being and read it aloud to God, kneeling before His throne in prayer, imploring His help? It is a moving and inspiring way to pray in a time of truly serious need.

Following Hezekiah’s appeal, Isaiah is once again used to confirm God’s anger at the Assyrians’ blasphemy and presumptuousness, and to bring God’s reassuring message about how God would defend Jerusalem, provide for Judah and renew its population growth.

Sennacherib’s prism records: “He [Hezekiah] himself I shut up like a caged bird within Jerusalem, his royal city. I put watch-posts strictly around it and turned back to his disaster any who went out of its city gate. His towns which I had despoiled I cut off from his lands....”

Regarding the remainder of this account, Werner Keller writes in his book, *The Bible as History*: “Surely now must come the announcement of the fall of Jerusalem and the seizing of the capital. But

the text [of the prism] continues: ‘As for Hezekiah, the splendour of my majesty overwhelmed him...30 gold talents...valuable treasures as well as his daughters, the women of his harem, singers both men and women, he caused to be brought after me to Nineveh. To pay his tribute and to do me homage he sent his envoys.’

“It is simply a bragging account of the payment of tribute—nothing more.... The Assyrian texts pass on immediately from the description of the battle of Jerusalem to the payment of Hezekiah’s tribute [which had been paid earlier!]. Just at the moment when the whole country had been subjugated and the siege of Jerusalem, the last point of resistance, was in full swing, the unexpected happened: Sennacherib broke off the attack at five minutes to twelve. Only something quite extraordinary could have induced him to stop the fighting....” (1980, p. 260).

Sennacherib doesn’t tell us what happened, but the Bible does. God miraculously intervened and slew 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one night (verse 35). Sennacherib returned in disgrace to Nineveh, where he of course did not report his ignominious defeat. Rather, he did what he could to make it look like a victory. T.C. Mitchell of the British Museum writes, “The Assyrian annals tacitly agree with the Biblical version by making no claim that Jerusalem was taken, only describing tribute from Hezekiah of gold, silver, precious stones, valuable woods, furniture decorated with ivory...iron daggers, raw iron and musicians” (*The Bible in the British Museum*, 2000, p. 59).

The Bible then states that Sennacherib, while worshiping in the temple of Nisroch, was murdered by two of his own sons. “The name Nisroch has been identified as the god Nushku or a corrupted form of Marduk, the traditional god of Mesopotamia. The events depicted here [i.e., surrounding Sennacherib’s murder] took place 20 years after God’s deliverance of Jerusalem. When his father was assassinated, Esarhaddon took the throne and ruled from 681 to 668 B.C.” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 2 Kings 19:37). This means that Sennacherib did not actually die until five years after *Hezekiah’s* death. Still, Sennacherib had to live the rest of his life with the memory of his terrible defeat. It was so crushing that never again would he mount a military campaign against Judah.

The Reign of the Messiah; Judgment on Israel’s Enemies (Micah 4–5)

May 5

It is not clear when the rest of the prophecies of Micah were delivered. It is possible that chapters 4-7 were delivered before or during Sennacherib’s invasion. However, there is reason to believe they were given later, as we’ll see. We do know from Micah 1:1 that they were given prior to Hezekiah’s death—but this did not come until 15 years after Sennacherib’s invasion. Therefore, we have a fairly broad time span here.

Micah 4 begins with essentially the same words recorded in Isaiah 2:1-4 about Christ’s millennial reign to come in the last days. But Micah adds some other important details.

First of all, he adds that “everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid” (Micah 4:4). This shows that everyone will have personal property and be able to enjoy the fruit of their own labor. It also shows that there will be no reason to fear crime or assault. For, as God says in Isaiah 11:9, people will not be permitted to harm each other in the world under Christ’s reign. Indeed, as more and more people are converted to God’s ways, fewer and fewer will even seek the harm of others—until it becomes a rarity. Indeed, the peace and harmony that will prevail is presented in Zechariah 3:10, where we are told that “everyone will invite his *neighbor* under his vine and under his fig tree.” This tells us that while we are to enjoy our property and the fruit of our labors, these blessings are also to be shared with others.

Micah goes on to say that this time of peace and great blessing will begin with a regathering of God’s afflicted people and a restoration of Israel’s former dominion (Micah 4:6-8).

Verses 9-10, while perhaps referring to Judah’s anguish at the time of Sennacherib’s invasion in 701 B.C., could well refer to a later time. As already mentioned, the next year following the invasion, in 700, Sennacherib actually managed to regather his strength and put down Merodach-Baladan of Babylon once and for all—with Sennacherib placing his son on Babylon’s throne. This could have caused cries of anguish from the Jews. In 695, however, Sennacherib attempted a naval invasion of Elam, which failed. The Elamites attacked Assyrian-controlled Babylon and took Sennacherib’s son prisoner. Babylon was thus returned to native Chaldean rule. A major battle between Assyria and the Elamites in 692 ended in a stalemate. But in 689, Sennacherib sacked the city of Babylon, reasserting Assyrian rule over the area. This may have greatly upset the Jews, who perhaps still pinned their hopes on Babylon to overthrow the Assyrians.

Look again at verses 9-10 from this perspective. God basically says to the people of Jerusalem: What are you crying about? You’ve still got your king and leaders. So why do you act like you’re in agony? Well, guess what? You *are* going to be in agony. You’re going to be taken away by the very

ones in whom you've hoped—the Babylonians—to Babylon. But God promises to deliver them from there. While this probably referred to the ancient Babylonian captivity of Judah, it seems also to refer to the end time, considering verses 11-13. In these verses, it appears that Judah is used to beat down nations that come against Jerusalem. This could be a reference to the Israelis' military power since the state of Israel was formed. However, it seems more likely to refer to Judah's participation in battle in events surrounding Christ's return (see Zechariah 12:6; 14:14).

Then again, "daughter of Zion" in verse 13 could perhaps be taken spiritually—as a reference to the glorified Church of God at Christ's return. "I will make your horn [i.e., might] iron" and "You shall beat in pieces many peoples" (verse 13) could tie in with Christ's promise to the Church: "And he who overcomes and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give *power over the nations*—'He shall rule them with a *rod of iron*; they shall be *dashed to pieces* like the potter's vessels'" (Revelation 2:26-27).

Micah 5:1 has been interpreted in various ways. It is not clear if the "daughter of troops" refers to the Jews or the invaders. The "He" who lays siege appears to be the Lord (compare 4:13), though that is not certain. The striking of the judge of Israel has been seen by some as the treatment of Zedekiah at Jerusalem's overthrow by the Babylonians. However, others see it as a reference to the striking of the supreme Judge of Israel, Jesus Christ, by His enemies (compare Mark 15:19). In the end, Christ will triumph.

Verse 2 of Micah 5 refers to Bethlehem Ephrathah. Ephrath was the ancient name of Bethlehem (Genesis 35:19). The verse refers, of course, to the birth of Jesus in that town (see Matthew 2:4-6; John 7:42). Interestingly, Bethlehem means "House of Bread," and Jesus would come as the true bread of life on which we must be sustained to have eternal life (see John 6). It should be pointed out that this verse states that Jesus is "from everlasting"—that is, eternity past, meaning He is without beginning (compare Hebrews 7:3; see our booklet *Who Is God?*).

Verse 3 of Micah 5 says that Jesus will give up the Jews "until the time that she who is in labor has given birth." Together with verses 4 and 5, it seems clear that this is not a reference to Judah giving birth to the Messiah—since Judah was still given up to enemies at that time and even after. Rather, she who is in labor is likely the spiritual Zion, who gives birth to a "nation born at once" (compare Isaiah 66:8)—that is, the glorification of those of God's Church (His spiritual nation) at Christ's return.

Consider, then, the remainder of Micah 5:3: "Then the remnant of His brethren [or, more likely, the remnant of Israel *who are* His brethren] shall return to the children of Israel." Jesus' brethren—the members of God's Church—are the remnant of Israel, the elect according to grace (see Romans 11:5). The glorified members of the Church will be caught up to meet Jesus in the air. Afterward, Jesus and His brethren "shall return to the children of Israel"—that is, to lead and govern the returning Israelite exiles. Jesus then feeds His flock, *not* as He came the first time, in the flesh, but in divine power and majesty—bringing truth and peace to the ends of the earth (Micah 5:4-5).

The time designated as "when the Assyrian comes into our land" (verse 5) is not clear. It seems to be an end time prophecy. Perhaps the seven shepherds and eight princes refer to leaders of a Jewish or Israelite resistance of the last days—who help other forces bring about the destruction of Europe just prior to Christ's return. It is also possible that this is a reference to events that have already occurred in our time—the utter devastation of Germany in World War II—that is, if verses 5-6 correspond to the time of verses 7-9.

Verses 7-9 refer to the great military strength of Jacob (the nations of modern Israel) in the end time. This appears to refer primarily to British and American military strength in its heyday. This period of strength is seen coming *before* Jacob's military power is at last cut off during the coming Great Tribulation (compare verses 10-14). In that awful tribulation, which is yet to come, Israel's cities will be destroyed (verse 14; compare Ezekiel 6:6). But in the end, God will execute vengeance on the nations (Micah 5:15).

God's Complaint Against Israel; Future Pardon (Micah 6-7)

May 6

Chapters 6 and 7 appear to be directed primarily to Israel rather than Judah—although this could have *included* Judah. It is not clear when this prophecy was delivered. Based on the time span of Micah's ministry (see Micah 1:1), it is possible that it was actually given prior to Israel's first deportation or second deportation—and yet appended to the end of his book. However, it is also possible that it was given late in Hezekiah's reign. If the latter is true, the message would seem almost exclusively for the end time, since Israel would have already gone into captivity (yet with perhaps some application to ancient Judah, as mentioned). Of course, even if the prophecy was given before

Israel's captivity, it would still clearly apply to the end time as well, based on the details in the latter half of chapter 7.

Chapter 6 "is in the familiar form of a lawsuit which God brings against Israel" (Lawrence Richards, *The Bible Reader's Companion*, note on chap. 6). God calls the "mountains" and "hills" as witnesses (verses 1-2). While perhaps a literal reference to the land, which existed when the covenant with Israel was first made, it is just as likely that "mountains" and "hills" refers to great nations and smaller nations, as is often the case in biblical prophecy.

Actually, God makes the point that the Israelites act as if they have a case against *Him*. But He is clearly innocent of all charges. Just the opposite, God has repeatedly worked to save and help Israel. As an example, Balaam caused much grief to the Israelites by leading them into idolatry—but when used by Balak in an attempt to curse Israel, Balaam uttered many blessings and demonstrated God's love and protection for His people (verse 5; Numbers 22:2–24:25).

Micah 6:6-8 offers one of the clearest statements of a theme scattered throughout many other places in the Old Testament, as well as the New, which places the sacrificial system in its proper perspective (see 1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 51:16-17; Hosea 6:6). God did not want sacrifices just for the sake of sacrifices. And He certainly did not want the abhorrent sacrifice of children at all—though many societies of that day thought this a legitimate sacrifice, including, at times, the Israelites.

God's real goal for mankind was and is to produce righteous character. God defines true goodness, which is what He says here that He really requires of us. It is, first of all, to "do justly"—that is, to live righteously (according to God's commandments, Psalm 119:172) and to judge and deal fairly. It also includes loving mercy—having a thankful heart for God's mercy and a compassionate heart that shows mercy to others, expressing itself in a willingness to help others in need. And finally, it means to walk humbly with God, trusting Him for guidance and direction. Christ called these things the "weightier matters of the law—justice, mercy and faith" (Matthew 23:23). Justice corresponds to living justly and judging with righteous judgment. And walking humbly with God is synonymous with walking by faith—humble and trusting, as a little child.

Micah 6:16 refers to the wickedness of Omri and especially his son Ahab, who were the first kings of Israel to bring Baal worship into prominence. Of Omri the Bible states, "Omri did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and did worse than all who were before him" (1 Kings 16:25). He founded the city of Samaria (1 Kings 16:24), which was virtually synonymous with idolatry. Israel is shown to be following Omri and Ahab's evil ways. Again, this could refer to ancient Israel. But it also applies to the nations of modern Israel, as widespread false Christianity is really a modified form of ancient Baal worship. The name Baal means "Lord." Many today worship a "Lord" they believe to be the true God—yet they are sadly deceived.

As Micah 7 opens, Micah is dismayed at the lack of righteous fruit in the society. In verse 3, he mentions a corrupt prince. This seems to be part of an end-time prophecy, and perhaps just means that all of Israel's leaders in the last days are corrupt. However, if this prophecy were given late in Hezekiah's reign, it could perhaps have applied to Hezekiah's son, Manasseh—who would eventually prove to be Judah's most wicked ruler. Manasseh was coregent with Hezekiah in Judah from around 697-686 B.C.—just over a decade.

Regarding verses 5-6, Christ actually explained the meaning. Jesus often quoted the prophets when preaching—the very ones He originally inspired. And such was the case when He stated that He came not to bring peace, but a sword—referring to the fact that those who chose His way would often be greatly opposed and even betrayed by close friends and family members. He quoted Micah 7:6 in this context (see Matthew 10:34-39; Luke 12:49-53).

Verses 7-9 of Micah 7 should be of great comfort to us. Micah appears to be describing his own predicament and hope—but the same kinds of situations affect every Christian. Moreover, his words express the hope of Israel as well. Often God will allow us to experience consequences because of our sins. But upon our repentance He does forgive us—and He will ultimately save us. "She who is my enemy" (verse 10) is probably a reference to the false Christianity that has prevailed since the second century and is to dominate the world in the end time—referred to in Revelation 17 as "Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth." She—that is, this evil system—will ultimately be destroyed, God promises. Of course, a forerunner of this system existed in Micah's own day even in Israel and Judah—as Canaanite paganism, rooted in Babylon, was in many aspects nefariously blended with God's true form of worship.

In Micah 7:12, "From Assyria and the fortified cities, from the fortress to the River" could perhaps be translated "From Assyria and the cities of Egypt, from Egypt to the River [Euphrates]" (see NKJV margin). This would parallel other verses that show the Israelites of the end time returning

from both Assyria and Egypt in a great second Exodus (e.g., Isaiah 11:11). The territory of the northern kingdom will again be inhabited by the Israelites (Micah 7:14).

The second Exodus will be accompanied by great miracles, as the original Exodus was (verse 15). All nations will see and fear (verses 16-17). But the greatest testimony of the events is the measureless mercy of God—who will pardon Israel’s sins upon their repentance despite all the injustice and evil they have committed against Him (verses 18-20).

This evokes the remark of “Who is a God like You...?” in verse 18, similar to the words in Exodus 15:11, “Who is like You, O Eternal...?”—which were part of the song that the Israelites sang to God when He delivered them from Pharaoh at the Red Sea. The statement in Micah provides an interesting play on words because the name *Micah* means, “Who Is Like the Eternal?” Micah himself stood in awe of the incredible mercy of God.

Interestingly, the Jews have a traditional practice called *Tashlich*, meaning, “You will cast,” taken from the Hebrew words of Micah 7:19. For most this is done on the Feast of Trumpets, although some do it on the Day of Atonement, which seems more fitting. It involves throwing lint and bread crumbs from one’s pocket—or casting a stone—into a body of water. The concept is that in the same way, God will cast their sins away. Amazingly, it is in the ultimate fulfillment of the fall Holy Days that most of the Jewish people will at last find the redemption these customs portray.

But for all those whom God is calling in this age, redemption is available now. Consider the imagery of a stone sinking to the bottom of the ocean—never to be seen or heard from again. This is what God says is done with our sins. How grateful we should all be for His unbounded grace and mercy. What a truly wonderful God we serve.

“Comfort My People” (Isaiah 40)

May 7

Beginning with this chapter, the remainder of the book of Isaiah takes on a different tone—so much so that some have tried to claim it was really written by a different author. Part of the reason is that chapters 40–55 appear to be addressed to the people of Jerusalem while they are in captivity—and their captivity was not until many years after Isaiah’s death. However, the New Testament assigns 23 verses from all sections of this book specifically to the prophet Isaiah (1:9; 6:9-10; 9:1-2; 10:22-23; 11:10; 29:13; 40:3-5; 42:1-4; 53:1,4,7-8; 61:1-2; 65:1). So Isaiah’s message was written for the future—for Israel and Judah in their imminent captivity *and* in their end-time captivity.

The message is to comfort and console the exiles. Luke 2:25 refers to the future redemption of Israel as the “Consolation of Israel”—which was to be accomplished through Jesus Christ. In 2 Corinthians 1, the apostle Paul tells us that God comforts us so that we may comfort others (verses 3-4). Learning to be a comforter is learning to be like God. At times, chronic or serious trials can be very discouraging for a Christian, leaving one to wonder why God allows them. One of the reasons is to train us to be able to lend aid and comfort to those experiencing the same or a similar type of difficulty. A person with no experience with trials is limited in his ability to empathize and sympathize with those who truly suffer. On the other hand, the person experienced in receiving God’s comfort *while enduring trials* is well equipped to offer godly comfort to others.

Verses 3-5 of Isaiah 40 are identified by all four Gospel writers as applying to John the Baptist (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23)—who announced the first coming of the Messiah. However, Jesus indicated that John only partially fulfilled these prophecies—that their ultimate fulfillment would come in the end time (see Matthew 17:10-13, especially verse 11).

Notice the message: “Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low” (Isaiah 40:4). What does this mean? Does it mean that all mountain ranges on earth will be flattened and all valleys filled in? If so, it would mean no more Grand Canyon. No more Yosemite Valley. No more Matterhorn. No more great cascading waterfalls and other such beautiful wonders of God’s creation. A perpetually flat landscape, with only slight dips and rises. Is this what God means? No, for while there will likely be topographical changes to the surface of the earth, “every” valley and “every” hill will not disappear. If that happened, the whole world would be flooded. Indeed, Scripture says that Jerusalem itself will be an exalted mountain during Christ’s reign.

So what does the prophecy here mean? It appears to have both a figurative and a literal meaning. Mountains and hills being brought low can represent large and small nations being humbled, and valleys being raised can represent oppressed and downtrodden people being exalted (compare verses 17, 23, 29; 2:11-17; 24:21; 60:10, 14, showing that God hates pride, and how the haughty will be humbled and the humble—especially the faithful saints—will be exalted). Yet again, there is apparently a literal fulfillment as well. Consider that the passage is discussing the building of a

highway (verse 3). It is *in the construction of this highway* that mountains are brought low and valleys are raised—crooked places made straight and rough places smoothed (verse 4). Thus, if there's a mountain in the way, it is brought low; if a valley would impede the highway, the valley is raised up (compare 42:15-16; 49:11). Furthermore, since the purpose of a highway is to facilitate interchange between separated people, we can look at this figuratively as well. Any obstacles that separate and divide people will be removed (compare 19:23; 62:10).

Remember that this reference applied in part to the work of John preparing the way (the highway) for Jesus' first coming. No physical highway was then being built. Rather, John preached a message of repentance and many of his followers became disciples of Jesus. Yet John's work of preparation was a forerunner of an end-time work of preparation—preparing for the second coming of Christ. Again, it is accomplished through a message of repentance and helping people in the process of conversion and overcoming sin.

At Christ's return, the Israelites and then the whole world will be helped in the same process. When He comes, there will be a literal highway of return for the exiles from Assyria and Egypt. But more importantly, that highway will represent *spiritual* return to God—repentance—as well as harmony with other people through that way of repentance. Part of the repentance process will include people coming to terms with and turning from hatred and competition that has existed between nations for sometimes thousands of years.

Verses 6-8 are cited by Peter in discussing the solution to the fleetingness of human life (1 Peter 1:24-25). The same analogy of man's life being as the grass of the field is used by James as well—applied especially to the futility of riches as a panacea (James 1:10-11; see also Job 14:1-2; Psalm 103:15-16). Verses 9-11 show the zeal and courage the Church should have in preaching the joyous “good tidings!” Verse 13 is quoted twice by Paul (Romans 11:34; 1 Corinthians 2:16).

One of the many recurring themes in this section of Isaiah is the greatness of God's power as the Creator of the universe, of the earth and of man upon the earth (verses 12, 22, 28; for more examples see also 42:5; 44:24; 45:12, 18). In verse 26, we are told to lift our eyes upward—to the heavens. God calls all in the “host”—that is, the celestial bodies, including all the stars—by name, an amazing fact also mentioned in Psalm 147:4. It is amazing since there are at least a hundred billion galaxies of a hundred billion stars each. Scientists estimate the universe at around 15 billion years old. Yet to name every star at a rate of one per second would take more than 21,000 times that long—a mind-boggling feat that God gives but a passing mention. The greatness and awesome might of God should be of true comfort to His people.

The chapter ends with the wonderful verses about waiting on God. “To wait [on God] entails confident expectation and active hope in the Lord—never passive resignation (Ps. 40:1). Mount up...run...walk depicts the spiritual transformation that faith brings to a person. The Lord gives power to those who trust in him.... The eagle depicts the strength that comes from the Lord. The Lord describes his deliverance of the Israelites in Ex. 19:4 as similar to being lifted up on an eagle's strong wings. In Ps. 103:5, the strength of people who are nourished by God is compared to the strength of the eagle” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Isaiah 40:31). It is a remarkable picture. Through faith in God's power, our waiting can be a time of soaring.

One From the East and the North (Isaiah 41)

May 8

In verse 2 God mentions sending someone “from the east.” In verse 25 He says this person is “from the north” yet also “from the rising of the sun”—which again means from the east. So it is likely that the same person is being referred to. Yet who is this person?

First of all, we need to bear in mind that this whole section of prophecy is given to comfort the exiles of Judah and Israel—in both their ancient and future Babylonian captivities. It is describing a time of punishment on their enemies. Thus, the person being sent would seem to be a deliverer sent to free them from captivity. Indeed, most commentaries equate this person with the Persian ruler Cyrus, who conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. and released the Jewish exiles. This is a sensible conclusion since Cyrus is explicitly referred to by name in basically the same role just a few chapters later (44:28–45:4).

“One from the east refers to Cyrus, king of Persia (559-530 B.C.; see 46:11)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 41:2). And as for “from the north...from the rising of the sun” and his calling on God's name (verse 25): “The conquest of Media by Cyrus (550 B.C.) made him master of the territories north of Babylon. Cyrus, who did not personally know God (45:4), nevertheless called on God's name when he released the exiles (2 Chr. 36:23; Ezra 1:1-4)” (note on Isaiah 41:25).

Yet remarkably, Cyrus is referred to in chapters 44–45 as God’s shepherd and God’s anointed. He is clearly being used as a forerunner of Jesus Christ, who is sent by God the Father to ultimately free the exiles in the end time. Jesus comes from the north since God’s throne is said to be “on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north” (14:13). And reference to Christ’s coming from the east is found in the New Testament: “For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (Matthew 24:27).

Israel is referred to as God’s servant—a servant being one who obeys a master, lord or employer. “The term was bestowed on the person chosen to administer and advance God’s kingdom (Ex. 14:31; 2 Sam. 3:18). In chs. 40–55, the title of servant is bestowed implicitly on Cyrus (45:1-4) and explicitly on God’s prophets (44:26), the nation of Israel (44:21; 45:4) and particularly on the Lord Jesus Christ (42:1-4; 52:13)” (*Nelson*, note on 41:8). We will see more on this in our next reading.

Also in verse 8, the Israelites’ blessing is shown to be rooted in their descent from Abraham, God’s *friend*. This incredible designation occurs in two other places in Scripture (James 2:23; 2 Chronicles 20:7). This friendship with Abraham extends to his descendants, and it is what ultimately brings favor and victory to Israel.

Those who are incensed against Israel (Isaiah 41:11), or war against Israel (verse 12), will be as nothing. God will help His chosen people (verses 13-14). “Exiled Israel seemed as feeble and despicable as a *worm* (Job 25:6; Ps. 22:6 [the latter verse prophetic of Christ in His final suffering])” (*Nelson*, note on Isaiah 41:14).

But God will deliver Israel—and not merely through unilaterally destroying its enemies. The Israelites would *themselves* thresh the mountains and hills (verse 15), symbolic of the nations around them and their false religions (compare Isaiah 2:2; Deuteronomy 12:2; Jeremiah 3:21-23). “The lowly ‘worm’ (v. 14) would be transformed into a threshing sledge (28:27) that removes mountains, the symbols of opposition and the location of pagan temples and palaces (Mic. 1:3-5)” (note on Isaiah 41:15). This did not happen in Israel’s ancient return from Babylonian captivity—in which only a small percentage of Jews (and none of the northern tribes) returned to the Promised Land. This shows the prophecy to be primarily for the end time.

Furthermore, God is presented as performing miracles for the returning exiles, meeting their basic needs in the desert as He did for Israel of old (verses 17-20). This also did not happen in the ancient return from Babylonian captivity. But it will happen in Israel and Judah’s future when Christ comes back. And Jesus will ultimately crush Israel’s enemies, in a much greater way than Cyrus ever did (verse 25).

Finally, God satirically shows the foolishness of idolatry. Idols cannot proclaim the future. They can’t proclaim anything at all. God challenges idols in verse 23 to “do good or evil.” What He’s really saying is: “Do anything!” But of course, they cannot. The nations were and still are mired in idolatry—or, in God’s words, “wind and confusion” (verse 29). And this is not limited to overtly pagan religions. Idolatry and many pagan practices and ideas are deeply embedded in traditional Christianity, which is really a counterfeit religion mixing some authentic Christian concepts with ancient paganism. Thankfully, Christ is coming to set all aright.

“Behold! My Servant” (Isaiah 42)

May 9

The first four verses of chapter 42 are quoted by the apostle Matthew to describe Jesus (Matthew 12:18-21), and the chapter continues in its description of this Messiah to come (verses 6-7; compare Luke 2:32; 4:18). *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary* states: “The law of prophetic suggestion leads Isaiah from Cyrus to the far greater Deliverer, behind whom the former is lost sight of. The express quotation in Matthew 12:18-20, and the description can apply to Messiah alone (Ps. 40:6; with which cf. Exod. 21:6; John 6:38; Phil. 2:7). Israel, also, in its highest ideal, is called the ‘servant’ of God (ch. 49:3). But this ideal is realized only in the antitypical Israel, its representative-man and Head, Messiah (cf. Matt. 2:15, with Hos. 11:1)” (note on Isaiah 42:1). Some statements in Isaiah 42 refer to Jesus’ first coming, some to the second.

Verses 2-3 refer to His gentleness at His first coming and toward those who are humbly seeking Him at His second coming. But verses 13-15 show another side of Jesus—His power and wrath toward evildoers during the Day of the Lord.

Returning to Christ’s gentleness in verse 3, His not breaking a bruised reed appears to mean that upon those who are lowly and hurt, having already suffered punishment, Jesus will not add to their punishment. Indeed, just the opposite, He will take special care of them and restore them to health and happiness—and even grant them spiritual vitality. “Smoking flax” in the same verse is rendered “dimly burning wick” in the RSV and NRSV (see also *JFB Commentary*). This appears to represent

those who at one time had a fiery zeal but are now as a mere smoldering candle wick about to go out—their faith and hope in God’s deliverance is almost gone. Jesus will not quench what is left in them. Again, just the opposite, He will rescue them, not only restoring their faith and zeal, but through the granting of His Spirit giving them such a fiery zeal for God as is otherwise humanly impossible.

Verse 4 says He would bring law to the world (compare 2:2-4). Verse 21 of Isaiah 42 says one of His responsibilities would be to “magnify the law and make it honorable” (KJV). In Christ’s famous Sermon on the Mount, far from doing away with God’s law as many argue, He explained the spiritual intent behind God’s law and actually made it even more binding—showing that God’s law is to regulate even our thoughts, not merely our actions (see Matthew 5:17-48).

Isaiah 42:14 shows that the punishment on Israel is painful to God, as is often the case when parents have to discipline their children. To God it will have been like birth pangs—ending with His at last “delivering” them. Rabbinic teaching refers to the time just before the Messiah comes as the “birth pangs of the Messiah.” Verses 15-16 show the miraculous way in which Christ will lead the exiles back from their captivity. It has also been suggested that this is representative of Christ leading spiritual Israel, the New Testament Church, ever since its inception to ultimate deliverance in the Kingdom of God. That may well be, as the Church is paving the way, so to speak, for the return of physical Israel and eventually all of mankind, which must be grafted into Israel as well (see Romans 11).

In Isaiah 42:18-20, the “servant” and “messenger” of God is Israel—now spiritually blind and deaf. This is clearly illustrated in the remainder of the chapter. The people sit in captivity and punishment because of their disobedience. In the ancient Babylonian captivity, Christ’s coming to magnify the law was yet future. Now He has already come and still the people do not heed. This has been the cause of the Israelites’ suffering through the ages. And it will culminate in the worst time of suffering ever. Yet even in captivity, the people will not at first repent and turn to God.

Israel’s Redeemer (Isaiah 43:1–44:5)

May 10

This section of Isaiah beautifully shows how merciful and loving, even warmly affectionate, our great God is.

We left off in chapter 42 with Israel’s obstinate refusal to obey God. “But now,” says God in Isaiah 43:1, “...Fear not, for I have redeemed you.” God emphasizes that He is the One who created and formed Israel (verses 1, 7, 15, 21; 44:2, 21). He will help them and deliver them, even though they have not relied on Him (43:22). While God declared Himself Israel’s “Redeemer” in Isaiah 41:14, it is in chapters 43 and 44 that this concept is discussed in detail. And the theme is revisited frequently throughout the remainder of the book.

God will demand the release of His people, just as He demanded it from Pharaoh in ancient Egypt (43:6). He will sacrifice other peoples for the sake of His people, particularly the Babylonians (verses 4, 14), just as He did with ancient Egypt (verse 3). Of course, God gave the ultimate sacrifice in the person of Jesus Christ—for not only Israel but for all people.

God’s judgment on other nations in the course of redeeming His people applied in small measure to the fall of ancient Babylon, which allowed the return of a small portion of the Jewish captives to the Holy Land soon after. But there were no great and awesome visible miracles accompanying the ancient return of the exiles as those described in this chapter. Thus, the prophecy is primarily for the last days.

In Isaiah 11, God explained that He would bring His people back from modern Assyria and Egypt (verse 11). This, He said, would necessitate drying up the Euphrates River for the northern captives and drying up the Red Sea (as in Israel’s ancient Exodus) for those returning from Egypt (verse 15). And in chapter 43 we again find mention of this deliverance through these waters (verses 2, 16).

Israel is to serve as witness to the fact that God alone is Savior (verses 10-13). Incidentally, it should be mentioned that some use verse 10—“Before Me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after Me”—in an attempt to disprove Christ’s divinity and to show that there will be no other future divine members of the God family. However, it should be recognized that the word “God” in the verse is *Elohim*—a name that itself denotes a plurality in the Godhead (see our booklet *Who Is God?* to learn more). Furthermore, *of course* no God could be formed before or after God—for there is *no such time* as before or after God, who is eternal.

Continuing on, God’s end-time deliverance of Israel in the second Exodus will be so great that the ancient deliverance in the first Exodus from Egypt will be little thought of (verse 18; compare Jeremiah 16:14-15). God will create the miraculous highway of return in the desert, a route provided

for with a lush environment from new springs and rivers (Isaiah 43:19-21). This represents a spiritual reality as well. God will direct the footsteps of His people back to Him spiritually. And this will be accomplished through waters in the desert—representative, as explained in 44:3, of the pouring out of God’s Spirit. Indeed, Jesus mentions “rivers of living water” in reference to the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39).

Sadly, in the meantime, Israel is still given over to unfaithfulness and disobedience—failing even to call on the true God in time of trial. In listing the Israelites’ problems, it is stated in Isaiah 43:27 that their “first father sinned.” This might be a reference to Jacob, as his name is used in this passage (verses 22, 28). However, Jacob is an example of repentance and it therefore seems odd that he would be meant here. Perhaps the phrase denotes the father of all mankind, Adam, or even the reigning monarch or other national leader (compare 1 Samuel 24:11; 2 Chronicles 29:11). “Mediators” and “princes of the sanctuary” in verses 27-28 refer to the religious leaders. Until Israel repents, the entire nation is given over to punishment—indeed, “the curse,” which they have brought on themselves (verse 28; compare Deuteronomy 27:11-26; 28:15-68).

But Israel will yet be the model nation God intended it to be—a right example for the other nations to follow. In chapter 44, God again refers to Israel as “My servant” and “chosen” (verses 1-2)—and even “Jeshurun” (verse 2), a poetic name for Israel meaning “Upright One” (see Deuteronomy 32:15), symbolizing a cleansed and purified people. The people are brought back to God through His granting them repentance and then pouring out His Spirit on them (verse 3). Willow trees, in verse 4, need a great deal of water to be sustained. Just so, God will sustain His people spiritually through a great and steady supply of the Holy Spirit.

No longer will the name of Israel and worship of the Eternal be a reproach as it was in captivity. Indeed, the people will proudly bear the names of Israel and of God (verse 5).

The Only God and the Absurdity of Idolatry (Isaiah 44:6-23)

May 11

In verses 6-8, God declares that there is no other God. The Jews use these verses to deny the deity of Jesus Christ. “Orthodox” Christians use them to argue that God the Father and Jesus Christ are one singular being. But these verses do not support either premise. Rather, God the Father and Jesus Christ do indeed constitute one God—but that one God is the *God family*. The word *Elohim*, as mentioned in the previous reading’s highlights, is a noun that is plural in form but often singular in usage, denoting, along with other evidence, that more than one being constitutes the one God. Apart from the true God family, there are no other gods. That is the point of these verses. To learn more about this subject, request or download our free booklet *Who Is God?*

Much of the rest of chapter 44 deals with the folly of idolatry. The *NIV Study Bible* points out in reference to verse 13 that, “man was made in the image of God...but an idol is made in the image of man.” In Romans 1:23 Paul stated that idolaters had exchanged “the glory of the incorruptible God” into the images of various things, including that of “corruptible man.”

The description of the craftsman who uses part of a tree to warm himself and cook his food, while worshiping the rest as a god is particularly graphic and even amusing (verses 13-17). Indeed, we can really see God’s sense of humor here, as He describes the scene (verse 15) and then twice repeats it (verses 16-17, 19). It’s almost like He’s saying: “Hello? Hello? Don’t you get it?” While idolatry is, of course, a serious matter, there is something to laugh at in the utter ridiculousness of it all. And yet God says that He has shut the people’s eyes so that they cannot see the absurdity (verses 18-19)—which really means that because of their rebellious and stubborn refusal to acknowledge obvious truth regarding God, He has given them over wholly to their own twisted way of thinking, allowing them to be further confounded. They remain willingly deceived (verse 20) by the arch-deceiver, Satan the Devil (Revelation 12:9).

The margin notes in some Bibles state that the Hebrew for “shut their eyes” in Isaiah 44:18 literally means, “their eyes are smeared over.” The New International Version renders it, “their eyes are plastered over.” This presents a graphic picture of those whose spiritual blindness is complete.

At last God will rescue the Israelites from their own foolish descent into idolatry. Indeed, among the modern nations of Israel, Roman Catholicism is widely practiced, wherein people pray to lifeless statues for help. Even those who don’t practice idolatry in that sense often do so in looking to mere created things for deliverance—such as possessions and money. God tells the people in verse 21 to remember the ridiculous word pictures He has painted in this chapter—to see the foolishness of relying on created things rather than the Creator. And now at last they will. For God will blot out their sin and redeem them (verse 22)—bringing them finally to right understanding. It will be a time of great rejoicing (verse 23).

Prophecy of Cyrus—Past and Future Fulfillment (Isaiah 44:24–45:13)**May 12**

Here we see one of the main reasons that skeptics want to divide the book of Isaiah, claiming that this part could not have been written by Isaiah the prophet—the amazingly accurate prophecy of Cyrus. As with the future Jewish king Josiah (1 Kings 13:2; 2 Kings 23:15-20), here is an instance of someone whose name and deeds are recorded by God long before his birth. Cyrus was the first ruler of the Persian Empire. He was destined to bring down Babylon in 539 B.C. and would issue the decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem (Daniel 1:21; Ezra 1:1-4). The temple and Jerusalem had not yet been destroyed, so this prophecy must have seemed strange indeed (compare Isaiah 44:28).

Herodotus, the fifth-century-B.C. Greek historian, recounts a story of Cyrus' birth and youth—which is here summarized. Asyages, son of Cyaxeres, the king of the Medes, had a daughter named Mandane, whom he gave in marriage to a Persian noble. Asyages had a dream that this daughter would have a child who would rule in his place, taking over not only his kingdom but all of Asia as well. Asyages feared the prospect of being replaced. So when Mandane had her first child, a son, Asyages ordered one of his servants, Harpagus, to have the child killed. Yet Harpagus didn't want to commit such a vile act himself and therefore entrusted it to a herdsman named Mitradates. But Mitradates, on discovering that his own child had just been stillborn, decided to rear Mandane's son as his own.

Later, when the boy was around 10, his true identity became known. The boy's grandfather, Asyages the Median king, was infuriated. He had Harpagus punished by having the man's own son killed and then revoltingly served to him at a royal dinner—after which Harpagus secretly vowed revenge. But the king made no move against the boy, who was now recognized as a Persian noble. Later, in 558 B.C., this boy, Cyrus, became a king among the Persians, yet still subject to Asyages' Median rule. Harpagus encouraged Cyrus to overthrow Asyages. Eventually persuaded, Cyrus launched a coup and led his growing forces to victory. By about 548 B.C. he ruled all of Persia and Media. And in 539 he conquered Babylon, so that the Medo-Persian Empire succeeded the Babylonian Empire. And Cyrus then issued his proclamation freeing the Jews to rebuild the temple, just as God foretold. Perhaps the above story of Cyrus' close brush with death soon after his birth, if true, represents an attempt by Satan to thwart God's specific prophecy from being fulfilled. Yet Almighty God will not be thwarted.

Indeed, Cyrus himself worshiped pagan gods. Yet God was still able to use him to fulfill His will. This demonstrates God's power. Proverbs 21:1 states it well: "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes."

In Isaiah 45:1, God explains how Cyrus would be able to conquer by way of the "double doors" (the "two leaved gates" of the King James Version). This is a reference to the surprising way that Cyrus was able to invade the seemingly impregnable city of Babylon. Indeed, when the armies of Cyrus encamped around the gargantuan city, the Babylonians, looking down from towering walls, merely laughed. They were certain they could hold out against any siege for many years. But Cyrus' men carried out a remarkable action. The Euphrates River flowed into Babylon through massive gates. So Cyrus had his men divert most of the river by removing ancient dykes that kept it in its course (referred to in 44:27). He also managed to get a spy into the city, who had the inner gates along the river unlocked. Then, in the predawn hours, under cover of darkness, Persian forces waded into the city though the mostly drained riverbed. Before sunrise, the great city of Babylon was conquered—and all according to prophecy.

It is interesting to consider that in the end-time, the Euphrates River will be dried up "so that the way of the kings from the east might be prepared" (Revelation 16:12). As mentioned in the highlights for Isaiah 21, it is likely that the Medes and Persians of the end time (along with other eastern forces) will be instrumental in inflicting a measure of terrible defeat on end-time Babylon prior to the return of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Christ will smite the Euphrates in leading the exiles of Israel back to the Promised Land (Isaiah 11:15)—to utterly supplant end-time Babylon's leaders, who will previously have been headquartered in Jerusalem.

Finally, we should consider the picture of Cyrus as a type of Israel's ultimate Redeemer—the Messiah. Indeed, Cyrus is called *Mashiach* (Messiah or "Anointed") in 45:1. The Hebrew for Cyrus here is *Koresh*. The meaning of the name is debated. In Hebrew this would appear to mean something like "Possess the Furnace." We can certainly see a tie in to the coming of the Lord as a "consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29; compare 2 Thessalonians 2:8). In Persian the name is Koorush or Korrush. (Cyrus is the Greek form.) The name in Persian is said to mean "sun" or "throne"—although this is disputed. Interestingly, Jesus is called the "Sun of Righteousness" (Malachi 4:2), in the same context

where it is mentioned that “the day is coming, burning like an oven”—that is, like a furnace (verse 1). And of course, Jesus is to inherit the throne of the earth.

As Cyrus conquered and succeeded ancient Babylon, so will Jesus Christ conquer and succeed end-time Babylon—yet in a much greater way. Some might see Koresh in Isaiah 44 and 45 as exclusively applying to Christ. Others might view it as exclusively applying to Cyrus. Yet clearly, both deliverances—anciently through Cyrus and in the future through Jesus—are pictured in this section. It is a miraculous witness to Cyrus himself that God calls him by name (45:3), and this is despite the fact that he has not known God (verse 4). Clearly, this does not refer to Christ. (Interestingly, Josephus relates in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 11, chapter 1, how Cyrus read and was motivated by Isaiah’s prophecies about him.) On the other hand, the statements about righteousness being rained from the skies and salvation being brought forth from the earth (verse 8)—that is, the spiritual conversion of Israel and then the world through the pouring out of the Holy Spirit as well as apparently the resurrection of the righteous dead from their graves—is certainly not a reference to the deliverance of Cyrus. Rather, it describes the return of the ultimate Savior.

Some use verse 7 as it is rendered in the King James Version—“I make peace, and create evil”—to argue that God is the author of evil. However, the New King James better renders this last word as “calamity.” God certainly brings calamity on the disobedient. Evil, on the other hand, is any violation of His will. He therefore did not create evil (see “Why Does Evil Exist?,” *The Good News*, Jan.–Feb. 2002, pp. 22-24). Again, “calamity” makes much more sense here. So should we then think that every single calamity is from God? Not at all. Frankly, Satan is responsible for much of the evil and calamity that exists in the world. And, tragically, people bring evil or calamity on themselves as a result of unwise personal choices and sin. Further, many people suffer as a result of decisions and actions that others make—such as children who suffer abuse from adults. (For more information on this subject, request or download our free booklet *Why Does God Allow Suffering?*)

So what’s the point of the verse in question? One of the fundamental rules of Bible study is to read a difficult-to-understand verse in its context. As explained above, in this section of Isaiah, God is confronting Israel about its corruption with idolatry, pointing out repeatedly how hollow its idolatry is in contrast with who and what He is. That’s what He’s essentially saying in Isaiah 45:7.

Pick up the context in verse 6: “That there is none besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other.” Now, continue on into verse 7: “I form the light and create darkness.” The same thought continues in the following phrase: “I make peace and create calamity.” Notice the contrast in both cases. God is basically saying: “I can make it light or dark. I can give peace and prosperity or I can bring calamity.” In other words, “I can do everything in contrast to your idols, which are incapable of anything.” Again, remember the context. God repeatedly says, “I am God; there’s nobody like Me.”

Finally, God shows His dominion over the creation in general and mankind in particular by picturing Himself as a potter working with clay. Unlike worthless idols, He controls the universe and directs the destiny of man. Yet, it should be noted, He still gives us all free will (to learn more on this subject, see the article “Twist of Fate” at www.ucg.org/brp/materials).

Verse 13 was fulfilled in part when Cyrus freed the Jewish captives, allowing them the choice to return to their homeland, and even issued a proclamation that the temple in Jerusalem should be rebuilt (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4). This decree allowed for the city of Jerusalem to be rebuilt as well—but a major effort to rebuild the city was not made until Nehemiah’s later initiative, allowed and aided by King Artaxerxes (who was the son of Xerxes and stepson of Esther, Nehemiah 1–2). Of course, a much greater fulfillment of this prophecy will be when Jesus Christ—of whom Cyrus was only a type—frees the exiles of the last days and rebuilds Jerusalem as the wondrous capital of the world.

The True God vs. Lifeless Idols (Isaiah 45:14–46:13)

May 13

Anciently, Egypt and territories south (verse 14) were not handed over to Cyrus. But they did fall to Cyrus’ half-mad son Cambyses, who was a cruel tyrant. In the end time, these areas will actually be delivered from oppression by the returning Jesus Christ. Then they will be given over to the Israelites as servants. Yet what kind of deliverance is that? Consider that their temporary servitude will actually be for their good, because the Israelites they serve will be converted Christians looking out for their interests. These servants will see the goodness of God in action. Treated so well, they and other previously Muslim peoples will at last repent of their former hatred against the Jews and other Israelites.

Verse 18 shows that God's original creation of the earth was not in vain (Hebrew *tohu*). Therefore Genesis 1:2 should properly be translated, "The earth *became* without form [*tohu*] and void [*bohu*]..." (See the Bible Reading Program's comments on Genesis 1 and pages 6-7 of our booklet *Is the Bible True?* for a more complete explanation of this often debated scripture.)

Again, we see mention of the foolishness of idolatry. It is ridiculous that supposed gods who are worshiped as supernaturally powerful must be carried around by the worshipers (verse 20; 46:7). Eventually, "every knee shall bow" to the true God (verse 23). Verse 23 is quoted by Paul (Romans 14:11) to show that we all give account individually to God, and therefore we do not need to spend our time judging our brothers and sisters in Christ (verses 10-13).

Continuing in Isaiah 46, Bel and Nebo (verse 1) are Babylonian deities. "The reference to Cyrus and his victories over Babylon now brings to mind the futile gods of that great civilization, Bel (also called Marduk) and Nebo. Babylon's defeat proves God's superiority (46:1-2). And what a different relationship He has with His people. Pagans carry their gods. The Lord carries His people (vv. 3-4). Israel's incomparable God alone shapes and reveals the future, a future that holds salvation for her (vv. 5-13)... How wonderful to have a God who holds us up, rather than an idol we must lug around on our shoulders" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, chap. summary of 46-47).

Only the true God is able to declare what will happen in the future and then bring it to pass. Incidentally, chapter 46 explains how God knows the future. It is not because the future already exists so that He is able to look forward in time. Rather, He declares what will be (verse 10) and in His omnipotence makes sure that it happens (verse 11). Yet it must be explained that He does not cause anyone to sin (James 1:13). Rather, He is able to foretell sin because He knows how demons and people will react under given circumstances—and He has ultimate control over circumstances (again, see the article "Twist of Fate" at www.ucg.org/brp/materials).

Finally, "a bird of prey from the east, the man who executes My counsel, from a far country" (Isaiah 46:11) is a reference "to Cyrus (41:2) and to the speed and power of his conquests (41:3)" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 46:11). And as already explained, the coming of Cyrus was a type and forerunner of the coming of Christ in power. It is in Christ that God's righteousness and salvation are at last brought to stubborn Israel (verses 12-13).

The Lady of Kingdoms (Isaiah 47)

May 14

Isaiah 47 deals once again with Babylon. Remember that at the time Isaiah wrote, Babylon was still subject to the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians, we may recall, sacked Babylon in 689 B.C.—late in Isaiah's lifetime. However, the portrayal of Babylon in this chapter shows her to be preeminent over the nations. So it again appears that God was speaking to Isaiah about events far in the future—but when? The chapter apparently has a dual application that is parallel to other prophecies of this section. On one level, it can be seen as Cyrus' conquest of Babylon and its later destruction under one of Cyrus' successors, Xerxes. Yet the primary application of the prophecy appears to be for the end time—the "daughter" of Babylon referring mainly to a *future* Babylon. Indeed, the parallels with the fall of end-time Babylon in Revelation 17-18 are unmistakable.

God uses Babylon as an instrument to refine Israel and His saints, but He does not hold Babylon guiltless in the face of its ruthless treatment of them and its vain confidence in its supremacy and security (verses 6-7). The arrogance and pride of this daughter in verses 8-9 are stated again in Revelation 18:7-8. The remainder of Isaiah 47 deals with this fall and the sins that bring it about.

God's punishment will come partly, He says to the daughter of Babylon, "because of the multitude of your sorceries, for the great abundance of your enchantments" (verses 9). God strongly condemns all idolatry and demonic practices (Deuteronomy 18:9-12). However, the latter part of Isaiah 47:9 could perhaps be translated, as in the New International Version, to say that God's punishment will come "*in spite of* the multitude of your sorceries..." This ties in well with the next verse: "For you have trusted in your wickedness." The adherents of this system are trusting in sorceries and enchantments in two ways—to give them supernatural protection and to give them "wisdom" and "knowledge" to guide them and to predict the future (verse 10). In verse 12, God is saying, in a sense, "Now see if your enchantments and sorceries will do you any good!"

The symbolism here in Isaiah 47 goes back to the very beginnings of the city of Babylon or Babel. Babel and its empire were founded by Nimrod, a rebel against God (Genesis 10:8-12). Based on the evidence of secular history, it is apparent that he and his wife Semiramis were the originators of idolatry in the post-Flood world, evidently resurrecting a number of false concepts present before the Flood yet adding their own embellishments. They thereby set themselves up as the greatest human

enemies of God's true servants. Incredibly, they are the fountainhead of much of the idolatry in the world today (yet still mere agents of the true author of idolatry, Satan the Devil).

Upon the death of Nimrod, Semiramis did not want to "sit as a widow" but desired to continue as "queen" and adored "lady" over the kingdoms of Nimrod's empire forever (compare Isaiah 47:5, 7-8; Revelation 18:7). So she concocted a fable wherein she miraculously became pregnant without having sexual relations—bearing her child Tammuz by a supposed "virgin birth" and claiming that he was the reincarnation of Nimrod. Her son was therefore deemed to be her husband. She promoted him as the "savior" of the ancient world. In reality, Semiramis was not a "virgin daughter" at all (compare Isaiah 47:1) but a great harlot, prostituting herself to the various kings of the empire to buy their aid in keeping her in power (compare Revelation 17:1-6).

Yet it should be noted that the denunciations in the various scriptures cited in the previous paragraph are not primarily aimed at Semiramis herself, but at a false Babylonian system to arise of which she served as a type. It is the same system we saw referred to as Tyre and the "virgin daughter of Sidon" in Isaiah 23—also typified by the pagan Phoenician queen Jezebel. And this refers, first and foremost, to a pagan false Christianity portrayed in Revelation 17—"Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth" (verse 5)—the roots of which may be traced largely to the Babylonian Samaritans of apostolic days and the idolatry of ancient Babylon before that. This type of Christianity was to eventually gain preeminent political power, which first happened when it became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. Through the Middle Ages, it dominated the Holy Roman Empire. And even today, it wields enormous authority and influence.

Interestingly, this "woman," while claiming to be the wife of Christ, is actually the wife of a false, idolatrous concept of Christ that originated in Babylonian paganism, as well as the adulterous partner of the "beast" of Revelation 17. Indeed, she is really married to the Babylonian savior figure. Yet the false gods of Babylon are going to be destroyed at Christ's return, as implied in Isaiah 46. Thus, the fallen woman will indeed be a widow. The children of this "mother of harlots and abominations"—that is, her other idolatrous creations and the false churches sprung from her—will also be destroyed (see Revelation 17:5, 16).

Babylon, it should be noted, is also the term used to represent the political and economic system that is dominated by this great false religion centered at Rome—as Revelation 18 implies. The name is also used for the city of Rome itself. The Roman-Babylonian system will experience its apex of power just before the return of Christ. But its end-time manifestation will fall with a great fall. Its "merchants" or commercial brokers and partners will be dismayed (verses 9-16; Isaiah 47:15). For in a very short time period, end-time Babylon will be destroyed—burnt with fire (verse 9, 14; Revelation 17:16; 18:9, 18).

Revelation 18:24 states that all the blood of the prophets and saints is found in her. Indeed, a trail of blood can be followed in the history of this religion. Through Babylon's fall, God will at last avenge His people for all the torment they have experienced at the hands of this evil system (verse 20). More information about this false religious system can be found in Alexander Hislop's *The Two Babylons*, 1916. While we would not endorse everything in this particular source, it is a thoroughly researched and well-documented publication—providing a great amount of detail supporting its thesis. (It can be read and searched on-line at www.biblebelievers.com/babylon/00index.htm or http://philologos.org/_eb-ttb/default.htm.)

You should also request or download our free booklet *The Church Jesus Built* to better understand the origin and development of the great counterfeit Christianity. The booklet will point you to places in the New Testament that mention the beginnings of this merger of paganism with biblical teachings, which most people now accept as Christianity. The booklet will also provide you with the means to identify God's true Church today, which Jesus promised would never die out (Matthew 16:18).

Refining and Redemption of Israel (Isaiah 48)

May 15

Regarding this chapter, one source explains: "The overall mood of comfort is abandoned for a moment, for accusation. Israel has stubbornly resisted God, and pursued idols. This treachery forced God to defend His name by sending Israel into a 'furnace of affliction' (48:1-11). Yet all this is a backdrop for grace. God presents Himself anew (vv. 12-16), expresses His yearnings for Israel (vv. 17-19), and dramatically announces the good news of coming redemption (vv. 20-22)" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, chap. summary of Isaiah 48-49).

God says one of the reasons for telling Israel, and all of mankind, what would befall them is so they could not successfully argue that their idols caused their fate (verses 3-5). “It was not enough that Israel stubbornly refused to respond to God. They tended to credit His works to other gods (cf. Jer. 44:15-19). Spiritual blindness persists, and today we may credit gracious acts of God in our own lives to luck or to our own genius or hard work. How important to sense God’s hand in our lives, to be responsive to Him, and to acknowledge His works for us” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on Isaiah 48:5).

Of course, one way to be sure of God’s involvement in world affairs is to study the prophecies of His Word. Here in Isaiah, God says He is giving Israel new prophecies, ones they have not heard before, and ones they have not anticipated (verses 6-7). Indeed, as we have seen, a dominant Chaldean Babylon features prominently in Isaiah’s prophecies (see verses 14, 20), and yet Assyria was the dominant power at the time he preached.

There are strong messianic themes in the chapter. God identifies Himself as the One who was born as Jesus the Messiah (compare verse 12 with Revelation 1:17 and verse 13 of Isaiah 48 with Hebrews 1:8-12). And notice verses 14-15 of Isaiah 48. After God asks, “Who among them [your idols] has declared these things?,” He then states, “The LORD loves him; He shall do His pleasure on Babylon, and His arm shall be against the Chaldeans.... I have called him, I have brought him, and his way will prosper.” But who is “him”? The New International Version renders the first part of this as “The LORD’s chosen ally [because allies are elsewhere referred to as “lovers” in Scripture] will carry out his purpose against Babylon...” Thus, it is likely a reference, once again, to Cyrus on one level. But, as already explained, Cyrus was a forerunner of the ultimate Messiah, Jesus Christ, who will overthrow end-time Babylon at His second coming. And this is the primary reference here. Indeed, in verse 16, the pronoun changes from Him to “Me”—showing Jesus directly speaking as having been sent by the Father through the Holy Spirit.

God laments the Israelites’ past disregard of Him and His commandments. Verse 8 reveals that God was displeased with Israel right from the start (“from the womb”)—before they even left Egypt. Yet He preserved them—clearly not because of great righteousness on Israel’s part. Rather, it was because of His promise to Abraham, His prophecies, His promise of delivery and to show His great power and His great mercy to all nations—all of which had to do with preserving His name, His own reputation. “For My name’s sake...,” God explains (verse 9). Indeed, in interceding for Israel, Moses made this the basis for His plea (see Exodus 32:11-14; Numbers 14:13-19).

In Isaiah 48:18, God says how much better for the Israelites it would have been if they had obeyed Him. In verse 19, the statement that they would have been as the sand does not mean that Israel has never had great numbers. It is referring to the fact that so many of Israel’s great numbers will have perished in the coming Great Tribulation. “His” name being cut off and destroyed in the same verse refers to the destruction of *Jacob’s descendants* that will have taken place because of national disobedience.

In verse 20, God gives a responsibility to His servants to proclaim a message to the ends of the earth. Indeed, it is a responsibility His Church of the end time is to be carrying out still, telling people to come out of Babylon (as representative of this sinful world) and announcing the good news of how God through Christ will redeem His people and deliver them from captivity with miraculous help to a joyful life of peace and freedom. Remembering God’s mighty acts of the past should inspire complete faith (verse 21)—a vital key to this way of peace. But in the last verse, the chapter soberly warns that there is no peace for the wicked, a fact repeated in Isaiah 57:21. Once delivered from its past evil ways, Israel must not go back to those former ways. The same applies to us.

Restoration and Future Expansion (Isaiah 49)

May 16

The Lord’s Servant here steps forward. “The ‘law of double reference’ may apply in interpreting this prophetic passage, which may point in part to Cyrus, but certainly [and more directly] describes the mission of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Christ was called to His mission and named long before His birth (49:1). His first efforts were unrewarded (v. 4), but He is destined to bring Israel back to God (v. 5) and bring salvation to all peoples (v. 6). Although despised, He will ultimately be honored by all (v. 7)” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on chap. 49).

The chapter thus begins as a prophetic quote from Jesus Christ, describing elements and allusions to His work (verses 1-7). In verse 3, He is referred to as “Israel.” Jesus was an Israelite, of course. He purchased Israel with His blood. He is the King of Israel, and a king, in the Scriptures, is often equated with the nation he rules. Moreover, Israel means “Prevailer With God,” and Jesus is the *quintessential* Prevailer with God. But also, God intends the *nation* of Israel to ultimately assist Christ

in setting an example of righteousness for the whole world. They have failed at this in the past. But once the Israelites have themselves learned true righteousness through Christ, they too will collectively become God's servant—represented by Christ their King—and a light, a beacon, for other nations to follow.

The Church of God now serves as a forerunner in this, being the spiritual Israel of God (compare Galatians 6:16). When Paul and Barnabas first arrived in Antioch of Pisidia, they preached in the synagogue, but drew the attention of the gentiles as well. This caused the Jews to be filled with envy and they attempted to discredit Paul. The two apostles responded by saying that the Lord had commanded *them* to be a light to the gentiles, quoting Isaiah 49:6 (Acts 13:47) as the passage where they found this command (compare Acts 13:14-52).

In 2 Corinthians, Paul quotes Isaiah 49:8 and then goes on to state that, for them at least, the “acceptable time” and “day of salvation” was “now” (2 Corinthians 6:2). Some attempt to use these verses to argue that now is the *only* day of salvation. But they do not say that. Indeed, the New Revised Standard Version translates both verses as stating that now is “*AN* acceptable time” and “*A* day of salvation.” Indeed, God is not drawing the whole world to salvation at this time. (To learn more on this subject, see the article “Twist of Fate” at www.ucg.brp/materials and “The Last Great Day: Eternal Life Offered to All,” *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*, pp. 51-57).

Still, “*the* acceptable time” could perhaps be a reasonable translation—if it has the same sense as “the acceptable year of the LORD” in Isaiah 61:2, a reference to the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord is the time of God's judgment on the nations and His redemption and salvation of Israel. Yet Peter related a prophecy of the end-time Day of the Lord as having an application to the beginning of the New Testament era in Acts 2:14-21—Christians being spiritual forerunners of Israel's future salvation. Perhaps Paul was indicating something similar in 2 Corinthians 6—that for Christians it is as if the time of God's intervention is already here, as indeed it is on a personal level. There will be more on this in the highlights for Isaiah 63.

Isaiah 49:10 speaks of God's ultimate deliverance. Just before the seventh seal of the book of Revelation is opened, one of the 24 elders before God's throne in heaven describes a group of people as having come out of the Great Tribulation, finding deliverance at last. He uses the words of Isaiah 49:10 in doing so (Revelation 7:16-17).

The remainder of Isaiah 49 deals mainly with the return from captivity of Israel and Judah following the return of Jesus Christ. In verse 11, we see the image of the road and highway of chapter 40—here plural, as the return from exile is from more than one place and, considering highway in its figurative sense, relations will need to be developed between many nations.

In verse 12, we see where the exiles return from. First from the north and west—meaning northwest, as Hebrew has no specific word for this direction. And also from the land of Sinim. “Sinim was a district on the southern frontier of ancient Egypt” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 12). Also, the Latin Vulgate translates the word as *Australi*, meaning “south.” There are perhaps two indications here. One is that Israel is returning from their captivity in Central Europe (modern Assyria), which is northwest of the Promised Land (not *northeast* as ancient Assyria was) and from Egypt and other African lands to the south (compare Isaiah 11:11).

Yet some will be returning from *beyond* Central Europe and Egypt. The word translated “coastlands” in Isaiah 49:1 is rendered “islands” in the earlier King James Version. Jeremiah 31:10 gives this as “isles afar off,” clearly related to those coming “from afar” in Isaiah 49:12. The isles northwest of Jerusalem and even of Europe are the British Isles. Some will be returning from here. And there are important isles in the south of the world too, one being a continent actually called Australia. Some will be returning from there as well. (To learn more about the Israelite identity of these nations, download or send for our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.) Indeed, besides the lands of their captivity, some Israelites will be returning from islands and coastlands all over the world—the places to which the descendants of Israel have spread abroad and colonized.

Verses 20-21 are rather interesting. God had prophesied that the Israelites would be great colonizers (see Genesis 28:14; 49:22). Notice Isaiah 49:20: “The children you will have, after you have lost the others...” This is referring to new children born during the coming reign of Jesus Christ—after Israel has lost many of its people in the Great Tribulation, which will befall it just before He returns. These new children “will say *again* in your ears...”—indicating that it is a repetition of an earlier occurrence. And they say, “The place is too small for me; give me a place where I may dwell.” Indeed, Israel's burgeoning population in the Promised Land under the reign of

Christ will necessitate they be given other lands to dwell in. And indeed, at that time, “Israel shall blossom and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit” (Isaiah 27:6).

But again notice that this is a repetition of something that occurred sometime in the past. When? Not apparently while Israel dwelt in the Promised Land in ancient times—for they did not then expand abroad in significant numbers. It seems to refer to something that occurred much later, when the “isles” of the northwest in which many of the Israelites settled—the British Isles—became too cramped for their growing numbers, making it necessary to expand and colonize abroad. British historian Colin Cross states: “One of the unexplained mysteries of social history is the explosion in the size of the population of Great Britain between 1750 and 1850. For generations the British population had been static, or rising only slightly. Then in the space of a century it almost trebled—from 7.7 million in 1750 to 20.7 million in 1850. Why it happened is unknown.... It must just be recorded that human reproduction and vitality follows unpredictable patterns.... Britain was a dynamic country and one of the marks of its dynamism was the population explosion” (*The Fall of the British Empire, 1918-1968*, 1968, p. 155).

On a lesser scale, other nations of northwest Europe—also of Israelite descent—experienced a population increase and some spreading abroad as well. But by far the greatest growth in population and territorial expansion was experienced by the birthright tribes of Joseph—today the United States and British-descended peoples (again, see our booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*). From the small homeland of the British Isles, the people went forth and colonized the North American continent, Australia, New Zealand, parts of South Africa and numerous islands and territories besides. The timing of this was rather significant, fitting exactly in the period in which God decreed that the birthright blessings of national greatness would eventually be bestowed on His people (see “Birthright Blessings Delayed for 2,520 Years” at www.ucg.org/brp/materials).

Given all this, we can see what God apparently means in Isaiah 49:20. Here it is quoted with further explanation in brackets. To Israel God says: “The children you will have [increasing population of the land of Israel during the millennial reign of Christ], after you have lost the others [great numbers of people in the terrible tribulation just before Christ’s return], will say again in your ears [as the people of Britain and other Israelite lands did when their populations increased and they needed to expand in colonial times], ‘The place [the land of Israel in the Middle East] is too small for me; give me a place [other areas to expand to] where I may dwell.’”

How wonderful that though the Israelites will be severely cut down in population just prior to Christ’s return, they will *again* expand and grow during His peaceful reign—perhaps eventually even recolonizing and repopulating many of the lands they have inhabited in this age (rebuilding the old ruins and waste places that many of these areas will have become following the great wars and massive population deportations of the end time).

“Where Is the Certificate of Your Mother’s Divorce...?” (Isaiah 50–51)

May 17

God—that is, the preincarnate Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 10:4 and our free booklet *Who Is God?*)—was *married* to the nation of Israel by covenant. Isaiah 50:1, as commentaries generally agree, implies that He maintained this relationship and did not issue a certificate of divorce to His people. “Though the Lord had put away Israel, as a husband might put away a wife, it was for only a short period of exile (see 54:5-7; 62:4) and not permanently. Permanent exile would have required a certificate of divorce (see Deut. 24:1-4)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Isaiah 50:1). Yet this would seem to contradict Jeremiah 3, where God stated that He did indeed issue a certificate of divorce. How do we resolve this?

In Jeremiah 3, it is clear that God divorced the northern tribes of Israel (verse 8), but not the southern nation of Judah—the Jews. “No prophet suggested that God had completely broken His covenant; rather, they predicted God’s faithfulness to a remnant who would return (Mic. 4:9, 10). Your mother [in Isaiah 50:1] refers to Jerusalem, more specifically, the inhabitants of the preceding generation that had gone into exile” (*Nelson Study Bible*, same note). This is important to recognize. While God had divorced the northern Kingdom of Israel, he maintained His covenant with the “mother” of all Israel—Zion or Jerusalem, the center of His true worship and the faithful remnant it represented.

Indeed, even in Jeremiah 3, God tells those of the northern tribes who would return to him that they would be considered joined to Zion and still married to Him (verse 14). God has never divorced all of Israel completely. He retained the Jews as the faithful remnant of Israel. Yet they ultimately proved unfaithful as well and He sent them into captivity in Babylon. But He still looked to a small minority of the Jews as the faithful remnant of Israel to whom He was still married. Thus, He brought

a small group of Jews back to the Promised Land from Babylon. But these ultimately proved unfaithful as well, even murdering Him when He came in the flesh as the Messiah, Jesus Christ. So God finally raised up a spiritual people—His Church—still considered the faithful remnant of Israel (compare Romans 11:5; Galatians 6:16), spiritual Jews (see Romans 2:25-29)—“Jew” being, as it was following the northern tribes’ divorcement, a designation of the faithful remnant (compare Hosea 11:12).

Of course, it should be noted that the Old Covenant marriage between the preincarnate Christ and Israel did come to an end with Christ’s death. This allows Him to remarry—but, amazingly, to remarry the same “woman” Israel, yet one in which she would be spiritually transformed as part of the terms of a new covenant (see Romans 7:1-4; Isaiah 54; Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Returning to Isaiah 50, notice the reference to creditors in verse 1—clearly an imaginary scenario since God cannot be indebted to anyone. “If the Lord had sold Israel to creditors (see Ex. 21:7; 2 Kin. 4:1; Neh. 5:5), He would not have any authority over their destiny. But the Israelites had sold *themselves* because of their own iniquities (see 42:23-25). Therefore God as their Redeemer could buy them back (see 41:14; 52:3)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, same note, emphasis added).

Continuing on, while Isaiah 50:4-9 may be describing some of Isaiah’s own anguish in delivering his prophecies, it is more clearly part of the speech begun in verse 1. This means that it is still the Lord who is speaking. And it shows that He, the Creator of the universe, was going to come and be stricken across the back, have patches of His beard painfully yanked out, and be spat upon. These are things Jesus would suffer at the hands of human beings (verse 6; Matthew 26:67; 27:30)—which He went through to redeem these very same people, indeed to redeem us all.

Isaiah 50:10-11 exhorts Israel to trust in God and obey His Servant—again, referring to Christ. Verse 11 criticizes those who walk by the light of their own fire (relying on themselves) rather than by the true light—the Word of God, both living (Jesus Christ) and written (Scripture). Their lives will end in punishment. From other passages we know that God will later bring them back to life to give them their only opportunity for salvation. (Request or download our booklet *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy* for the scriptures that explain how God will invite even former rebels to salvation.) However, if they persist in rejecting Him even then, their lives will be ended permanently.

Awake to Righteousness (Isaiah 50–51)

May 17 Cont’d

Chapter 51 begins with three requests for those who are God’s people and know righteousness to “listen to Me” (verses 1, 4, 7). It ends with three commands for Jerusalem to “awake, awake” (verses 9, 17; 52:1). This ties in with Paul’s admonition to the Church in 1 Corinthians 15:34: “Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.” Those who know God must live in accordance with His commands. Indeed, those who don’t obey Him don’t really know Him (see 1 John 2:4).

In verse 1, Zion being dug from the hole of a pit is not a negative connotation. It simply denotes the same thing as the previous clause, being hewn from rock. The image is one of being quarried from a pit or mine as precious gems or metal. And the fact that the people of Israel are meant is clear from verse 2—those brought forth of Abraham and Sarah. At this time, the Church (spiritual Israel or Zion) is in mind here. Spiritually deriving from Abraham and Sarah (Romans 4:11; Galatians 3:29; 4:21-31), true Christians are the only ones who really know God’s righteousness and have God’s law in their hearts (Isaiah 51:7). But eventually, starting with the time of Christ’s return, the rest of Israel (physical Israel) will become part of spiritual Israel—as will then the entire world.

In stark contrast to this instruction for us to look to Abraham and Sarah, most of modern Christianity goes to great lengths to separate its theology from the Old Testament. In doing so, it breaks the continuity that exists throughout Scripture and loses much spiritual understanding. Here, we see that Christians ought to look for and learn from that unbroken continuity, which runs seamlessly from the Old Testament through the New. The roots of true Christianity spring from the Old Testament.

In verse 3, Zion is to be comforted with the fact that it will be a paradise like the Garden of Eden (see also Ezekiel 36:35)—as indeed the whole world will become under the rule of Jesus Christ, with God’s holy “mountain,” or kingdom, of Zion growing to fill the whole earth (compare Isaiah 11:6-9; Daniel 2:35). In verses 4-6, “the heavens and earth of the material universe are contrasted with God’s salvation and righteousness. The material is impermanent and will ‘vanish like smoke.’ God’s salvation will remain forever. How vital to anchor our hopes in salvation than anything in this passing world” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on Isaiah 51:4-6)—see also 2 Peter 3:10-13 and Hebrews 12:25-29.

Directly *tied* to salvation here is God's righteousness. But what *is* righteousness? King David defined it as obedience to all of God's commandments (Psalm 119:172). And that is certainly the implication here in Isaiah: "...you who know righteousness, you people in whose heart is My law..." (51:7). Many today, even many who profess Christianity, want to do away with God's law—to abolish it. Yet God says, "My righteousness [i.e., His law] will *not* be abolished" (verse 6). Indeed, God's law defines His way of life—the way of love. And while many things will pass away, love never will (1 Corinthians 13). Only those who ultimately choose to live by God's perfect law of love will experience salvation from eternal death to enjoy eternal life with Him forever.

Of course, obedience to God's law of love should never be construed as some stern duty. True, godly love is an expression of outflowing concern that comes from the heart. It includes devotion and loyalty to God and deep care for others as the focus of our deepest emotions. The New Testament instruction about the New Covenant reveals that God wants our hearts to be in the covenant and the covenant to be in our hearts. He wants to be a Father to us and for us to be His children in a loving family relationship.

Verses 9-11 of Isaiah 51 show that God will deliver His people as He delivered Israel from Egypt in ancient times. Rahab here is a reference to Egypt (see 30:7). The name signifies "fierceness, insolence, pride" ("Rahab," *Smith's Bible Dictionary*). Egypt is called a "serpent" in the King James Version and a "dragon" in the Revised Standard Version. It is the same Hebrew word *tanniyn* (Strong's No. 8577) used for the pharaoh of Egypt in Ezekiel 29:3, there translated "monster" in the NKJV. "The imagery [of Ezekiel 29] pictures a crocodile" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 4-5). Indeed, the protector god of Egypt was the crocodile god Sobek—whose name in Egyptian meant "rager" (Michael Jordan, *Encyclopedia of Gods*, 1993, p. 240, "Sobek."), of which *rahab* seems a reasonable Hebrew equivalent.

God delivered Israel from Egyptian captivity in ancient times. He later, as promised through Isaiah, delivered the Jews from Babylonian captivity. And in the end, God will deliver Israel and Judah from an end-time Assyro-Babylonian captivity. The punishment on His people will come to an end (51:22). Humbled, they will at last be ready to repent and "awake to righteousness." Then it will be time for Israel's *enemies* to suffer affliction for their evil in turn (verse 23)—until they too are ultimately brought to repentance.

It should be recognized that the deliverance from Babylon spoken of here and in the next chapter, while literal as mentioned, is also figurative of the deliverance from sin that Christians now have in Christ. In one sense, God has rescued believers from spiritual Egypt and Babylon—sin and this world. But in another sense, this is an ongoing process, as we overcome throughout life with His help. Finally, in an ultimate sense, deliverance and salvation will come when Christ's followers are glorified at His return. In fact, even the terrible trial and suffering mentioned in this section will befall a number of people in God's Church (compare Revelation 12:17; Revelation 3:14-19). God's message to all of us: "Be zealous and repent" (verse 19). Indeed, "Awake to righteousness, and do not sin."

The Good News of Zion's Redemption (Isaiah 52–53)

May 18

Chapter 52 begins by describing Zion or Jerusalem in a state of bondage and captivity from which it is to be freed and then exalted. The statement in verse 2 to "arise and sit down" is not a contradiction. She is to rise from the dust and sit on a throne. As the New International Version phrases it: "Shake off your dust; rise up, sit enthroned, O Jerusalem." Once again, we should notice the parallel between national Israel's physical deliverance and spiritual Israel's salvation—which physical Israel will eventually experience as well, following *its* conversion into spiritual Israel.

God allowed His people to be taken captive in ancient times and will do so again at the end. But the gentile captors do not understand themselves to be agents of God's punishment. In fact, they glory in their power and terribly abuse God's people, saying such things as "So where is their God?" (see Psalm 115:2). In this way, God's name is continually blasphemed throughout the duration of His people's captivity (Isaiah 52:5). God will make Himself known to all nations through His awesome deliverance of His people.

The apostle Paul quotes verse 7, mentioning what is written there about how beautiful the feet are of those who preach the gospel, or good news, of salvation (Romans 10:15). This concept is addressed as well by the prophet Nahum (Nahum 1:15). And in Ephesians 6:15, Paul explains that our feet are to be clothed "with the preparation of the gospel of peace," which is what makes them beautiful—a poetic expression for the fact that good news (the gospel) is being brought by the feet of the bearer. By extension, we could view this as applying to whatever means is used to transmit such

information (today including an automobile conveying a minister to deliver a sermon, a postal delivery truck bringing a magazine proclaiming God's truth, a radio station carrying a program on which the good news of God's Kingdom is announced, etc.).

God led the apostle Paul to draw upon the prophecies of Isaiah because they still directly apply to the life of a Christian, as well as provide an outline of the events yet to unfold in the history of mankind. Again, we see continuing evidence that the Old Testament, and not just the New, is for Christians.

The command to be "clean" and to depart and separate ourselves from that which is unclean (Isaiah 52:11) is referred to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:17. It is a theme echoed in the book of Revelation as well—to come out of Babylon, as a type of that which is unclean (Revelation 18:2, 4). God says moreover that those who bear His "vessels" are to be clean. This appears to refer to priestly duties. God told Moses to tell Aaron and his sons: "Whoever of all your descendants throughout your generations, who goes near the holy things which the children of Israel dedicate to the LORD, while he has uncleanness upon him, that person shall be cut off from My presence: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 22:1-3). The priests thus had to remain ritually clean to carry out their duties. Yet this was merely symbolic of the spiritual purity God requires of His spiritual priesthood, His Church (see 1 Peter 2:5, 9).

The Suffering Servant (Isaiah 52–53)

May 18 Cont'd

Beginning with Isaiah 52:13, we have a section giving some of the remarkable prophecies of the Messiah's sufferings and other aspects of His life at His coming—that is, His *first* coming. We have seen that God will redeem His people (verse 2). And now He tells us how. While ultimate deliverance would come by a miraculous force of awesome power (at the Messiah's *second* coming), redemption would *first* come through a great sacrifice out of the depth of unfathomable humility. The Lord—the Creator of mankind, Jesus Christ (see Ephesians 3:9)—would come in the flesh and die for the sins of those He created. God the Father would thus give His only begotten Son for redemption of the whole world (John 3:16). It is truly mind-boggling to contemplate.

"Amidst a declaration of the Lord's coming salvation (see 52:7-12; 54:1-10), Isaiah [through God's inspiration] places a portrait of the Suffering Servant (52:13–53:12)... Three other passages in Isaiah focus on the Servant and [the four] are called the 'Servant Songs' (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9). The first song celebrates the Servant as the One who will establish justice for all (42:4). The second highlights the deliverance that the Servant will provide. He will restore Israel and become a 'light to the Gentiles.' The third emphasizes the God-given wisdom of the Servant. All this culminates in the description of the suffering and death of the Servant in ch. 53, the final 'Servant Song'" ("INDepth: The Suffering Servant," *Nelson Study Bible*, sidebar on Isaiah 52:13–53:12).

Many of the Jews looked for the triumphant Christ to come and save them from their enemies, but they did not recognize the true Messiah when He came to save us first from our sins. Even now, all too many who adhere to at least the form of biblical Christianity look more to the triumphant coming of Christ to give them victory and rulership over the world and fail to grasp the critical importance of eliminating the unclean elements from their lives first. Many, sadly, will find themselves on the outside in that day (see Matthew 7:21-23; 25:1-13)—until they have learned to recognize the meaning of Christ's first coming in their lives.

Because of the conflicts with the Jews over Jesus being the Messiah, it is not surprising that the New Testament writers quote quite a bit from this section of Isaiah.

In discussing his ministry to the gentiles, Paul cites Isaiah 52:15 to show that Christ was fulfilling this prophecy through him in preaching to those who had not yet heard the gospel (Romans 15:21). Right after Paul cites the passage about preaching the gospel mentioned above (10:15; Isaiah 52:7), he quotes from this same section of Isaiah, asking, "Who has believed our report?" (Romans 10:16; Isaiah 53:1). John also quotes this verse in Isaiah as being fulfilled by Jesus when the Jews of His day did not believe in Him.

The apostles Matthew and Peter quoted Isaiah 53:4-6, which deals with Jesus taking our sins on Himself (see Matthew 8:17; 1 Peter 2:24-25). Peter also quoted from verse 9 of Isaiah 53 in the same place (1 Peter 2:22). In Isaiah 53:4, some margins correctly state that an alternate translation of the Hebrew word for "grief" is "sickness," and an alternate translation for "sorrows" is "pains." Indeed, the New Testament quotes the verse: "He himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses" (Matthew 8:17). Here, then, is an important foundation for divine healing—that Christ's physical suffering, together with His death, was to not only pay for our sins, but also to take upon

Himself the suffering of our diseases and injuries. (For more on this subject, compare Matthew 8:16-17; 1 Peter 2:21-25; 1 Corinthians 11:29-30; James 5:14-15; Psalm 103:1-3.)

When Philip was sent by God to talk with the Ethiopian eunuch in the desert south of Jerusalem, the man was reading a passage from Isaiah that he asked Philip to explain to him (Acts 8:26-35). The specific section he was reading was verses 7-8 of Isaiah 53.

In verse 12, “poured out His soul [physical life] unto death” refers to His dying from blood loss, “for the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Leviticus 17:11).

Jesus, when preparing to leave the upper room where He kept His last Passover with His disciples before His death, quoted Isaiah 53:12 about being numbered with transgressors as a verse He needed to fulfill, and a reason to take swords with them (Luke 22:35-38). Mark cites the crucifixion between two thieves as actually fulfilling this prophecy (Mark 15:28).

It is sobering to read this passage, particularly when we see that Jesus was to be beaten into terrible disfigurement (Isaiah 52:14). Having inspired Isaiah to write this prophecy, Jesus, in the moments before His arrest on the night of the Passover, was fully aware of the suffering that lay ahead of Him. Yet through it all, He remained cognizant of His mission—and dedicated to it. He remained the ultimate, giving Servant of His Father. And indeed, He came to serve us too, to the point of suffering indescribable betrayal and agony and finally dying in our place. Let us all accept the justification His death has made available to us (53:11). But, realizing that it is our sins that necessitated His death, let us leave our sinful ways behind with Him in His death—and come *out* of sin through the power of His resurrected life (compare Romans 5:9-10; Galatians 2:20).

“For Your Maker Is Your Husband” (Isaiah 54–55)

May 19

Paul uses verse 1 of Isaiah 54 in his allegory of Sarah and Hagar (Galatians 4:22-31). The barren woman, he says, is like Sarah with the prophecies given her about having many descendants. According to Paul, she represents the New Covenant marriage, to which no children were yet spiritually born—referred to by Paul as “Jerusalem above, the mother of us all.” This New Covenant is actually mentioned in Isaiah 54, as will be explained in a moment.

The “married woman” signified the Old Covenant marriage that already was—physical Israel with its millions of children. This was parallel to Hagar, who bore a son to Abraham while Sarah was yet barren. Yet the child of Hagar was produced apart from faith. God promised that Sarah, though barren, would produce a child through whom His promised blessings would come. The Church will give birth to its children at the return of Jesus Christ. And eventually, as more and more become part of, and are eventually born of, the New Covenant, the children of the woman who was barren will eventually outnumber those of her rival who are those born of the flesh in ancient Israel. For people of all nations will be made part of spiritual Israel.

Isaiah himself goes on to say that the physical Israelites will no longer be forsaken in their marriage to God, will be accepted of God and will grow to fill the earth—when they, too, are joined to Him and brought forth according to the New Covenant (verses 4-8), which will be accomplished through the Holy Spirit, as we learn in chapter 55. Indeed, in verses 2-3 of Isaiah 54 we see reference to Israel’s expansion, earlier prophesied in Genesis 28:14. Yet, while physical on one level, the subject of the previous verse in Isaiah seems to make it primarily a reference to the expansion of *spiritual* Israel, the family of God—parallel to Christ’s assurance that in His Father’s house are many dwellings (see John 14:2).

Verses 11-12 of Isaiah 54 are reminiscent of the description of the New Jerusalem recorded by the apostle John in Revelation 21:18-21. The eternal dwelling of the Church of God, the wife of Christ (see Ephesians 5:22-33), the New Jerusalem is itself referred to as the bride (Revelation 21:9-10)—again showing “Jerusalem above” to be synonymous with the Church.

The New Covenant is specifically mentioned in Isaiah 54:10, where God calls it “My covenant of peace” and relates it to His mercy. “This expression is also found in Ezek. 34:25-31. It is linked with the New Covenant of Jer. 31, for its benefits become possible only after the Messiah forgives the sins of God’s people and makes them righteous. Some of the benefits overlap: God will Himself teach the people, and they will be established in righteousness (cf. Jer. 31:31-34). Yet the focus of this covenant [here] is on security. God throws a protective covering over His people so that they will be safe” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on Isaiah 54:10). In verse 9, God equates the surety of His covenant of peace with Israel to that of His covenant with Noah that He would never again flood the whole earth (see Genesis 9:8-17).

In John 6:45, Jesus referred to Isaiah 54:13, showing that when the Father decides to teach someone His way, they will understand Jesus’ role in His plan of salvation. And eventually, all will be

taught that way. The last verse in Isaiah 54 gives us a most important factor in this regard. God explains that the righteousness of His servants comes not from themselves but from Him. It is God who draws us to Himself. It is He who actually grants us repentance. It is He who then forgives us and imputes us as righteous through the atoning blood of Christ. It is He who then lives in us through the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to actually live in righteousness—that is, in obedience to His law. Of course, this does require our participation. If we ultimately refuse God’s work in us, then He will not redeem us.

“Come to the Waters” (Isaiah 54–55)

May 19 Cont’d

Chapter 55 begins with the analogy cited by Jesus in the New Testament of the water of life—the Holy Spirit (see John 4:10-14; 7:37-38; Revelation 21:6; 22:1, 17). This ties back to earlier references in Isaiah, such as 12:3 and 44:3. We are told to buy even though we have no money. It is a totally free gift—albeit a gift with conditions. God requires only true repentance accompanied by faith and then baptism (see Acts 2:38; Hebrews 11:6). Of course, what many do not understand is that repentance is more than just being sorry for past sins. It also involves a lifelong commitment to obeying God.

“Wine and milk [in Isaiah 55:1] are symbols of complete satisfaction (v. 2). Not only does God’s salvation supply what is necessary for life, but it also provides what brings joy” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 1). As Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10)—meaning now and on into eternity beyond. “Abundance” is directly mentioned in verse 2 of Isaiah 55. Notice also that the invitation to “eat” and “delight” in abundance can be likened to a banquet. Jesus gave parables that picture salvation as partaking of a banquet (see Matthew 8:11; Luke 14:15-24). Isaiah 55:2 mentions the bread analogy used by Jesus as well (see John 6:48-58).

Verse 3 of Isaiah 55 mentions the “sure mercies of David.” Paul explained in his speech at Antioch of Pisidia in Acts 13:34 that this referred to Jesus being raised from the dead, and he goes on to cite Psalm 16 of David, which is full of many promises of future inheritance, blessings and pleasures. These “sure mercies” are also described here as an “everlasting covenant” that God is willing to make with all who “thirst” and come to God. And David was a witness of these promises (Isaiah 55:4). Indeed, there may also be a reference here to the Davidic covenant itself—wherein God promised David an eternal offspring, throne and kingdom. This, of course, is ultimately fulfilled in Christ—who was destined to inherit the throne of David. Yet this promise is for us as well—since Jesus said that His followers would share His throne with Him (see Revelation 3:21; compare Romans 8:17).

Isaiah 55 goes on to say that even the wicked may seek and find God if they forsake their wrong way and “return” to Him—the Old Testament term for repent. God says He will have mercy, immediately followed by a statement that His thoughts and ways are higher than *our* thoughts and ways. In its note on verses 6-7, *The Bible Reader’s Companion* states: “It is in the free pardon that God offers the wicked that the sharpest difference between God’s thoughts and our thoughts are seen. We feel anger and outrage and call for revenge. God feels compassion and love and extends mercy. Thus God’s word is gentle and life-giving; in Isaiah’s analogy, like the gentle rain that waters the earth and causes life to spring up. What a warm and wonderful view of God (v. 10).”

The chapter ends with God’s people leaving their exile. Again, this should be understood as having multiple applications: the Jews leaving Babylonian captivity; Israel and Judah leaving their end-time captivity; spiritual Israel receiving its deliverance through Christ today; the ultimate deliverance of spiritual Israel in its glorification at Christ’s return; the spiritual deliverance of physical Israel and all mankind when they are joined to spiritual Israel through Christ; and finally their ultimate deliverance when they are glorified as well. Commentators explain this chapter as being the last one addressed to the people in captivity. The remaining chapters of Isaiah are claimed by many to be addressed to a post-exilic audience.

Keep from Defiling the Sabbath (Isaiah 56–57)

May 20

From chapter 56 on, the book of Isaiah is believed by many commentators to be addressing the Jews who had returned to the Promised Land following the Babylonian captivity—around 150 years or more from when Isaiah preached. Of course, some of Isaiah’s prophecies in this section were probably meant, at least in some sense, for those of His day. And some were likely also addressed to people who lived much later—even people of the end time.

Chapter 56 begins with an exhortation to “keep justice, and do righteousness” (verse 1)—a major theme in the book of Isaiah. Verse 2 says the man who does this is blessed. And then a real

problem is presented for those who believe that God's Sabbath was just for Israel and only for Old Testament times.

Isaiah quotes God in describing the importance of not defiling the Sabbath, which God gave as a sign identifying Him and His people (Exodus 31:13-17). This theme is further elaborated on in the following verses, regarding eunuchs and foreigners. "The eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant" (Isaiah 56:4) are to receive a great reward, being brought within God's walls. This is significant because, under the Old Covenant, eunuchs were not allowed to "enter the assembly of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 23:1). Thus, the prophecy in Isaiah mainly looked forward to New Covenant times—and, of all things, the Sabbath is singled out as important to keep. Ironically, many today mistakenly contend that the Sabbath is the *only* one of the Ten Commandments no longer in force under the New Covenant.

So, too, the foreigner "who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast My covenant" (Isaiah 56:6), was promised to be brought into God's house—His temple. Deuteronomy 23 listed certain foreigners who were not allowed to enter the assembly of the Lord. Yet in Isaiah God says His temple is to be "a house of prayer for *all* nations" (verse 7), and He lets Israel know that there will be others gathered together besides Israelites. Again, this clearly looked forward to New Covenant times, when salvation would be offered to the gentiles. And again, the Sabbath is made an important focus. It is clear from the verses above, and from Isaiah 58:13-14, that keeping the Sabbath is an important part of what is expected of *all* those with whom God is working. Christ Himself explained that the Sabbath was made for *man*—i.e., all mankind—and not just for the Jews (Mark 2:27-28).

(For more on this important weekly Holy Day, send for or download our free booklet *Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest*.)

Shortly before His crucifixion, Jesus entered the temple and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers. In doing so, He stated that the temple was to be a house of prayer, not merchandise, and cited Isaiah 56:7 (see Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46).

Sorceress, Adulterer and Harlot (Isaiah 56–57)

May 20 Cont'd

According to its note on Isaiah 56:9-12, *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* states: "Dumb dogs, sleeping dogs, greedy dogs... characterize the spiritual leaders (*watchmen*; cf. Ezk. 3:17), while shepherds is an OT term for rulers [although it could signify spiritual leaders as well]. The sequence is instructive: spiritually, to have no vision (v. 10a; cf. 1 Sa. 3:1) is to have no message (v. 10b) and to drift into escapism (v. 10c) and self-pleasing (v. 11a); meanwhile the civil leadership (vv. 11b, 12) will improve on this example with stronger excess and blither optimism."

Isaiah 57:1-2 shows that the death of God's true followers is often misinterpreted. Probably some see it as evidence that they were misled. Yet it is not always the wicked who die prematurely. The righteous may also die early—because of God's mercy, in order to spare them from hardship that they might otherwise have to experience. This is not to say that they could not endure the evil—it is just that they don't need to for their personal character development, and so God chooses to shelter them in the grave, where they unconsciously await the resurrection.

Of verses 1-13 the same commentary just quoted states: "The watchmen have relaxed (56:9-12), and evil has duly flooded in. The times could well be those of Manasseh, Hezekiah's apostate son, whose persecution of the innocent (2 Ki. 21:16) would accord with v. 1, and whose burning of his own son (2 Ki. 21:6) matches the revival of Molech-worship here (vv. 5b, 9)." Of course, these aspects of Manasseh's reign transpired after the death of Hezekiah himself, which puts it beyond the date of Isaiah's actual preaching (Isaiah 1:1)—thus still requiring divine foresight.

It is sad, in light of all that we've read concerning Israel's wonderful future, to again read of the awful apostasy of God's people—viewed by Him as an adulterous wife. Even today, the descendants of these same Israelites are rife with paganism and idolatry. While children are not literally sacrificed as they once were (verse 5), the unborn are murdered, aborted in a terrible holocaust at the altar of convenience and personal freedom. And living children are still offered over to the evil ways of our society from a young age—setting *them* on the *path* of death instead of God's *right* path of *life*.

Then notice verse 8: "Behind the doors and their posts you have set up your remembrance." The verse goes on to show this to be pagan. In Deuteronomy 6, God said of His instructions, "You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (verse 9). Many took this literally. *The Bible Reader's Companion* explains: "The religious Jew attached small tubes containing bits of Scripture to his doorpost. Isaiah complains that while these symbols of piety are present, behind your doors there are pagan symbols. It's what's inside our homes, and our hearts, that counts"

(note on Isaiah 57:8). Even today, many claim to follow the Bible—yet they set up pagan symbols such as Christmas trees right in their living rooms. Indeed, this is the norm in modern Christendom.

Verses 7-9 portray an adulterous wife seductively seeking lovers. The “king” of verse 9 could refer to the pagan god Molech (meaning “king”). Equated with the Roman god Saturn, his birthday was observed at the winter solstice with child sacrifice and evergreen trees (such as in verse 5). Indeed, in many respects, while the great false Christianity of this world claims to worship Jesus Christ, they are actually worshiping the wrong king, the false savior of the Babylonian mysteries—the sun god Baal or Molech. (It should perhaps be mentioned that some commentaries suggest that “king” in this verse could also indicate a foreign ruler the Israelites appeal to for aid rather than God. This happened in ancient times, and it appears from prophecy that it will happen again in the end time—this last time with the ruler of the European “Beast” power foretold elsewhere in Scripture, who will himself be directly tied to the false worship system already mentioned.)

The remainder of the chapter contrasts the fear and punishment of the wicked with the peace and reward of the righteous. Yes, even despite Israel’s idolatrous rebellion, God in His unbounded mercy looks to the future redemption He has planned. Verse 15 is a comforting passage. God is “high and lofty,” yet He dwells with us as we pursue our mundane affairs here below. God will be as intimately involved in our lives as we allow Him to be. This contrasts with the way pagan gods were depicted in some ancient cultures—as distant from the people: “Epicurean philosophy [in Greece] depicted the gods on Mount Olympus...in detached unconcern for the world” (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verse 15).

Paul cites verse 19 about preaching peace as applying to Jesus (Ephesians 2:17). And the chapter ends with the same words that ended chapter 48: There is no peace for the wicked.

Proper Fasting and Honoring God’s Sabbath (Isaiah 58–59)

May 21

Chapter 58 begins with a command from God that Isaiah—indeed, all of God’s messengers—cry out a warning of His people’s need to repent of their sins. The proclamation of this message of repentance is compared to the blowing of a trumpet, which is loud and clear—and often a signal of impending calamity (verse 1; compare Ezekiel 33).

Verse 2 of Isaiah 58 is more understandable in the New International Version: “For day after day they seek me out; they *seem* eager to know my ways, *as if* they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God” (emphasis added). Yet it was all a pretense. All of their rituals and displays of religion were just that—rituals and displays. Their heart was not one of truly and sincerely serving God.

Starting in verse 3, God gives the example of fasting. While supposedly honoring God through self-denial of food and drink, the same people were dealing wrongfully with others and even using fasting itself for selfish advantage—as a show of their own righteousness and to criticize and deal heavy-handedly with those who didn’t fast as they did (verses 3-4). Worse still, they viewed their fasting as a way to force God to hear and help them (verse 4). God would not—and will not now or ever—accept such fasting (see Luke 18:9-14).

Fasting is supposed to help us draw close to God—to make us more mindful of the need of His constant provision for us. It is to be an exercise of genuine *humility*—not one of exalting ourselves over others with penance and self-righteous displays of our supposed piety. Indeed, fasting should involve not only our relationship to God, but also our relationship with our fellow man. We are to seek an attitude of giving, service and esteeming others highly, with the goal of ceasing from malicious talk and finger pointing (Isaiah 58:9; compare James 3:8-10). God says this is especially true with our “own flesh” (Isaiah 58:7; compare 1 Timothy 5:8)—which may indicate our close relatives but could mean our community or nation or even the entire human race, since we are all one family. Overall, this passage emphasizes that fasting should indicate our willingness for self-sacrifice for others, not self-exaltation.

Because of religious hypocrisy among God’s people, both physical and spiritual Israel, a time of darkness and drought is coming, as can be discerned from Isaiah 58:10-11 (God here warns of such a time, telling His people the attitude they need to have to be preserved through it). Indeed, from other prophecies about coming droughts and national calamities, it is clear that many of His people will be *forced* to “fast” in the future—that is, they will suffer hunger and thirst because there will be very little to eat and drink. They will be *forced* into humility—but this will be a *genuine* humility. Then they will cry out to God, and He will answer (as in verse 9). He will rescue His people—giving them drink and nourishment, signifying both physical and spiritual sustenance. Indeed, the Holy Spirit will be poured out upon them and its fruit will flow out from them—they themselves being like

springs of water. (Here and in other passages, God is, in a sense, basically telling us to draw close to Him in fasting with genuine humility now—so that we are not forced to do so in the difficult times ahead.)

The prophecy of verse 12 about rebuilding the waste places is primarily for the last days. Yet, while literal, it also indicates a ministry of spiritual reconciliation and restoration.

Continuing on, it is interesting that in a last-days context we should find a command to properly observe God's Sabbath (verses 13-14). This is yet another blow to those who argue that the Sabbath is abolished in Christ. Indeed, we can see here another instance of the religious hypocrisy that this section of the book of Isaiah is denouncing. And as with the other matters Isaiah brings out, this denunciation was not only for the people of his day. In fact, it is primarily for our time now. In the modern nations of Israel today, there is a great deal of religious observance supposedly done in God's honor. But they don't observe the *only* day of the week God actually commanded people to keep—the seventh-day Sabbath. Furthermore, even many who do keep the Sabbath—Jews and various seventh-day observing Christian organizations—often fail to properly observe it. They either overly ritualize it into a burden or look for loopholes to get around keeping it as God intended it to be kept. (We might note that even fewer give proper attention to God's *annual* Sabbaths, listed in Leviticus 23 and commanded in various other passages).

We examine the scriptures commonly used to argue against Christian observance of the Sabbath, as well as God's plain instructions throughout Scripture about keeping it, in our booklet *Sunset to Sunset—God's Sabbath Rest*. For the same type of information on the annual Sabbaths, see our booklet *God's Holy Day Plan—Hope for All Mankind*. You can read them online, download them or request a copy of each to be mailed to you.

According to verse 13 of Isaiah 58, we aren't to be doing our own pleasure on God's Holy Day—or, perhaps better stated, doing as we please. In giving the Sabbath command, God said we are to rest and cease from our work—be it your occupation or occupational concerns (with the exception of God's ministry, compare Matthew 12:5), personal business, housework (besides minor meal preparation and light tidying such as making the bed) or any exhausting activity (except in emergencies). But there is more to it than resting from work. Indeed, while God gives us the Sabbath as a time that can be used to get extra physical rest, this doesn't mean sleep the day away or while it away on “doing nothing” or on personal pursuits. Rather than emphasizing what one should *not* do on the Sabbath, often there needs to be more focus on what *to* do, such as “honor Him” (verse 13) and *doing good*, as Jesus Christ emphasized and exemplified during His earthly ministry.

The Sabbath is a day we must treat with reverence—as holy time. And that doesn't just mean the period during which we attend worship services in accordance with God's command (Leviticus 23:3). For the entire seventh day, we must—as Isaiah 58:13 explains—stop pursuing our “own ways” (the things we normally do), seeking our “own pleasure” (just doing what we want) and speaking our “own words” (everyday things we talk about that don't involve God). This involves actually regulating the way we *think* on this day, since “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). We must focus our *minds* on God throughout His Sabbath.

This doesn't preclude doing any enjoyable things on the Sabbath since we are to find “delight” in it. But whatever we do, God must be an intrinsic part of it. The Sabbath is not a personal holiday. It is a day to meet with, and spend time with, our Creator. It is a day for Christ-centered family togetherness and spiritual fellowship. Again, God's Sabbath is not to be a rigid burden. Indeed, as surprising as it may seem, Adam and Eve's wedding night was on the Sabbath. The Sabbath should be regarded as a joyous blessing, a rest from ordinary daily pursuits providing spiritual and mental rejuvenation.

Yet we must be careful in our use of the waking hours we have on this weekly Holy Day. The problem comes when people start making allowances for this and that and this and that—until the Sabbath is gone and very little time has been devoted to God. The Sabbath should be a time of extra prayer, extra Bible study, extra meditation on God's teachings, and extra discussion with family and fellow believers about God and His truth. In its note on Isaiah 58:13-14, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* quotes from another commentator: “These verses describe the strictness and the gladness of the sabbath-keeping God desires.... The sabbath should express first of all our love of God (though both the foregoing passage and the sabbath practice of Jesus insist that it must overflow to man). It will mean self-forgetfulness...and the self-discipline of rising above the trivial.”

Other scriptures explain a little more about Sabbath observance (e.g., Mark 3:4; Luke 13:15-16; 14:1-6). God does not dictate precise terms, yet the attitude of an individual is revealed in the care He takes in striving to serve and please God by obeying the instructions He has provided. Of course,

all that God commands us is for our good. Indeed, the Sabbath is for our benefit. Only when we develop a lifestyle of observing it as God instructs will He grant us the wonderful blessings of Isaiah 58:14.

“Your Iniquities Have Separated You From Your God” (Isaiah 58–59) May 21 Cont’d

Chapter 59 is a continuation of a catalog of Israel’s national and individual sins (in addition to those already described in chapters 57–58). It is sin that cuts people off from God and leaves them groping in confusion and darkness (59:1-2). When Paul cited a string of statements from the Psalms regarding the wickedness of man (Romans 3:10-18), he also included a passage from Isaiah, taken from 59:7-8.

The New Bible Commentary: Revised states in its note on verse 15: “Perhaps the most revealing touch [of how bad things are] is the victimizing of the decent man, the only one out of step. It is a worse breakdown than that of Am[os] 5:13 [see verses 12-15]; i.e., not only public justice has warped, but public opinion with it.”

In the midst of this evil, God finds no one to intercede and “wonders” at it (see verse 16). “The Lord’s concern is even sharper than our versions suggest. *Wondered* should be ‘was appalled,’ as at 63:5” (*New Bible Commentary*, note on verse 16). So God Himself will intervene, symbolically putting on the spiritual armor Paul elaborates on in Ephesians 6:10-17 (Isaiah 59:16-17). We will see a description of this taking place in Isaiah 63:1-6, which foretells the righteous war Jesus Christ will make at His return (see Revelation 19:11). Paul says Israel will eventually be saved (Romans 11:26), citing Isaiah 59:20 to support his statement.

“At v. 19 they [the Israelites] are introduced as making an ample confession of their sins, and deploring their wretched state in consequence of them. On this act of humiliation a promise is given that God, in His mercy and zeal for His people, will rescue them from this miserable condition; that the Redeemer will come like a mighty Hero to deliver them; He will destroy His enemies, convert both Jews [i.e., Israelites] and Gentiles to himself, and give them a new covenant, and a law which shall never be abolished” (*Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, note on chap. 59).

In verse 21, the New King James Version and some other modern translations refer to God’s Spirit as a “who.” But the word should be “that,” as it is in the earlier King James Version and in the New Revised Standard Version. (To learn more on this subject, download or request our free booklet *Who Is God?*)

“Arise, Shine; for Your Light Has Come!” (Isaiah 60) May 22

Chapter 60 focuses on the glory of Zion to come. It begins and ends with allusions to the light that will come—the light being God Himself, and His glory (verses 1-3, 19-20).

Several of these verses were cited by John in the book of Revelation as he described the New Jerusalem of the final age. Yet the millennial Jerusalem, prior to the New Jerusalem, will experience a limited measure of this glory. The gates will not be shut, so that the wealth or glory and honor of the nations can be brought in (verse 11; Revelation 21:25-26). There will no longer be a need for the sun to give light, and the light of God will continue day and night (verse 19)—true of the millennial Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:7) and the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:23; 22:5).

And those who have afflicted the city and its people, or at least the descendants of the guilty, will come and bow down at the feet of its inhabitants (Isaiah 60:14). Several passages in this chapter and elsewhere in the Bible describe people flowing to Jerusalem and generously bringing fine gifts. God’s purpose for this seems twofold—for the humbling of those who in the past have been hostile to physical and spiritual Israel, and for the building and beautification of Jerusalem and God’s temple.

While the bowing down by others may occur in a limited sense toward the human Israelites of the millennial age, it will occur in a much more profound way toward the truly converted Christians of this age who will be the glorified inhabitants of the Holy City. Jesus said they will even be worshiped, showing that they will have been elevated to divine existence (Revelation 3:9; compare 19:10; 22:8-9).

The Acceptable Year of the Lord; A Married City (Isaiah 61–62) May 23

Chapter 61 begins with “the song of the Lord’s anointed. Although the term ‘the Servant of the Lord’ is absent from this song...it seems artificial to make the ‘me’ of v. 1 a new speaker” (*New Bible Commentary*, note on verses 1-4). Indeed, God was speaking in Isaiah 60:22. And He is still speaking in the next verse, 61:1. Yet He mentions another here as God. This makes sense only when we understand that God the Father and Jesus Christ are *both* God (see our free booklet *Who Is God?* to learn more).

When Jesus was visiting the synagogue of Nazareth, He read from the scroll of Isaiah (Luke 4:18-19). The passage He read was the beginning of chapter 61. This passage—concerning the proclamation of liberty, release and time of acceptance—is also reminiscent of the year of jubilee (Leviticus 25:9-13). Indeed, this ties back to the “acceptable time” of Isaiah 49. There it was referred to as the “day of salvation.” Isaiah 61:2 says, “acceptable *year* of the LORD, and the *day* of vengeance of our God.” Isaiah 34:8 says, “the *day* of the LORD’s vengeance, the *year* of recompense for the cause of Zion.” Isaiah 63:4 says, “the *day* of vengeance...and the *year* of My redeemed.” A day in this usage represents a year—apparently the final year before Christ’s return.

But the Day of the Lord can have a broader application. In one sense, it represents all of future eternity from the time of God’s intervention. In another sense, it can even be seen to have started with the New Testament era for the Church—the forerunners in God’s plan of spiritual redemption. Indeed, as mentioned in the highlights for Isaiah 49, Peter related a prophecy of the “last days” and “Day of the Lord” to the Church’s beginning in his day (see Acts 2:14-21). Indeed, the seven-day week is thought by many to represent 7,000 years in God’s plan for mankind (each day representing a thousand years, compare 2 Peter 3:8)—thus, 6,000 of man’s history followed by a seventh 1,000-year period (a millennial Sabbath day, compare Hebrews 3–4). In such a plan, anything beyond the midway point—as apostolic times were—would be the “last days” (though “last days” is normally a clear reference to the period much closer to Christ’s second coming).

In quoting Isaiah 61:1-2 in Luke 4, Jesus explained that He came in fulfillment of this prophecy. Included in what He quoted was the part about the acceptable year of the Lord—but He did *not* quote the next phrase regarding the day of vengeance. This perhaps indicates that, while the Day of the Lord was actually in the future, it would have a measure of advance fulfillment for some in His day (just as Peter indicated in Acts 2 regarding another end-time prophecy)—that is, the liberty and acceptance of redemption would begin for some in Christ’s day. But the vengeance-on-the-nations aspect of the Day of the Lord was not to come in any sense in His human lifetime. It was completely for the future. He would fulfill it at His return to earth in power and glory.

The remainder of Isaiah 61 speaks of a future time of renewal, both physical and spiritual. God hates “robbery and iniquity” (verse 8, NIV)—“robbery for burnt offering” (NKJV) apparently being a mistranslation (see also *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary*, note on verse 8, available on-line at www.biblestudytools.net). But He loves judgment and truth (same verse). He will clothe the city in righteousness (verse 10; see also Revelation 21:2)—clothing in Scripture often representing spiritual condition. And righteousness and praise will spring forth (verse 11).

Isaiah, and by extension God, will not rest in continuing the warning until righteousness has been established (62:1-2, 6-7, 10-11). At that time Jerusalem will no longer be called “Forsaken” and “Desolate” but *Hephzibah* (“My Delight Is in Her”) and *Beulah* (“Married”). Hephzibah was “the name of Hezekiah’s wife [2 Kings 21:1], a type of Jerusalem, as Hezekiah was of Messiah (ch. 32:1)” (*JFB Commentary*, note on Isaiah 62:4).

God is seen as married to Jerusalem and its land—although it should be understood that physical Jerusalem is also symbolic of the spiritual Zion, the Church, the bride of Christ. Yet all of Israel and Judah are to eventually come into the same covenant marriage with Him—their God (see 1 Corinthians 10:4). There seems to be some confusion in the metaphor in verse 5, where Jerusalem is told, “So shall your sons marry you.” The *JFB Commentary* explains: “Rather, changing the [vowel] points, which are of no authority *in Hebrew* [since they were not part of the original Hebrew text], [the phrase “your sons” should actually be translated] ‘thy builder’ or ‘restorer,’ i.e., God; for in the parallel clause, and in vs. 4, God is implied as being ‘married’ to her; whereas her ‘sons’ could hardly be said to marry their mother; and in ch. 49:18 they are said to be her bridal ornaments, not her husband” (note on 62:5). The *NIV Study Bible*’s note on the same verse also states that “the Hebrew for ‘sons’ could be read as ‘Builder.’”

God will at last not only deliver His people, but establish them forever.

Winepress of Wrath; A God of Great Mercy (Isaiah 63–64)

May 24

God is pictured as returning from battle with Edom, Bozrah being the chief city of Edom. This ties in with many prophecies of Edom’s destruction at Christ’s return. Indeed, Obadiah states that there will be no Edomites left alive during Christ’s reign (Obadiah 18). Yet, in context here, Edom seems to be used as a general representation of Israel’s enemies since God mentions treading down the “peoples” (verses 3, 6). As was explained in the comments on Obadiah and Isaiah 34, there may be a connection between Edom and the future Babylon, the preeminent national foe of the end time—that is, a significant portion of Edomites may end up being part of this system.

Christ's garments are stained with blood because of the vengeance He has taken on the enemies of His people, something He has had to take care of by Himself since no one was found to help Him (verses 1-6). The winepress imagery—squeezing out the “blood” of grapes—as a figure of judgment can also be found in Joel 3:13, Lamentations 1:15, Revelation 14:17-20 and 19:15.

Then, in a moving description, Isaiah tells of the loving-kindness (Hebrew *hesed*, “covenant faithfulness” or “steadfast love”) God has for His people, in spite of their depraved behavior (Isaiah 63:7). God is quoted as saying: “Surely they are My people, children who will not lie” (verse 8; see Exodus 24:7). He is pictured as trusting their honesty in remaining faithful to Him as they had promised, and He helped them in all their trials. Their rebellion grieved Him tremendously, yet God still remembers the old days fondly. And Isaiah reminds God of this in His appeal for mercy and help.

God putting “His Holy Spirit within them” in Isaiah 63:11 can also be translated as God putting “his Holy Spirit within *him*” (KJV and J.P. Green's Literal Translation)—that is, within *Moses*, who is mentioned earlier in the same verse. Indeed, this must be the case since God's Spirit was not given to the Israelites as a whole.

Israel's prayer for mercy and deliverance is continued in chapter 64. Verse 4 is quoted by Paul in describing the ignorance of those who crucified Jesus, not understanding the wisdom of God, and explaining that we, however, can understand through His Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:6-11).

In Isaiah 64:6, the people confess that their own righteousnesses—that is, their attempts to obey Him without His spiritual help and their living by what they themselves consider righteousness as opposed to true righteousness—are as worthless and repulsive as “filthy rags.” Says the *JFB Commentary*, “lit[erally] a ‘menstruous rag’” (note on verse 6). Or *The Nelson Study Bible*: “Garments stained during menstruation...making a woman unclean (Lev. 15:19-24; Ezek. 36:17)” (note on verse 6). Paul describes Israel's dilemma in this regard in Romans 10:1-3—and explains in the following verses that the answer they need is *Christ* for righteousness. That is, they need the justification that comes through His sacrifice and the ongoing obedience that comes from His living in people—as He transforms them as a potter does clay (Isaiah 64:8).

Isaiah is able to see, through the visions God has given him, the eventual destruction of Jerusalem, including the temple: “Our holy and beautiful temple, where our fathers praised You, is burned up with fire” (Isaiah 64:11). It was something very distressing to him, and added to his emotional turmoil.

Judgment on Iniquity; A New Creation (Isaiah 65)

May 25

Verse 1 begins God's answer to Isaiah's entreaty that concludes with 64:12. The Israelites seek God but don't find Him because of their rebellion against Him. Instead, God is found by others. The first two verses of chapter 65 contain some phrases quoted by Paul in his discourse regarding the future restoration of Israel (Romans 10:20, 21). Verse 1, where God mentions “a nation that was not called by My name” is referring, according to the apostle Paul, to gentile converts grafted into Israel spiritually (through becoming part of the Church) that God uses to provoke the natural Israelites to jealousy (Romans 10:19; see Romans 11).

The verses that follow in Isaiah 65 then refer to the rebellious people of Israel, who would not respond to God's appeal and outstretched hands. Some of the rebellious actions of the people are described—practices of those who have forsaken God's true religion. While some of the actions mentioned may have applied literally in Isaiah's day, it is likely that the sins here have some application for our time. In verse 3, sacrificing in gardens could simply refer to worshiping in pagan sanctuaries, i.e. false Christian worship places. Incense is symbolic of prayers in Scripture and could here signify prayer in false worship. In verse 4, sitting among the graves and tombs could refer to vigils and candle burning still carried out in segments of modern Christendom for the dead. Or it could refer to séances and other occultism. The eating of unclean food such as pork (verse 4; 66:17) is replete throughout the nations of modern Israel today. And the “holier than thou” attitude of Isaiah 65:5 is all too common. In verse 11, the people honor *Gad* and *Meni*—the pagan deities Fortune (or Luck) and Destiny (or Fate). Consider how many rely on luck and fate even today. God pronounces His determination to punish His rebellious people.

But He will not destroy them all, throwing the good grapes out with the bad (verse 8), for His “elect” and His “servants” of Israel will inherit and dwell in the land (verse 9). Sharon (verse 10), in the west, is the coastal plain between the modern cities of Tel Aviv and Haifa. The Valley of Achor (see Joshua 7:24-26), in the east is near the plain of Jericho. Thus, the whole land is meant. Throughout this section, a contrast is made between the rebellious people and God's “servants.”

The new heavens and new earth (verse 17) are mentioned by John in Revelation 21:1 as coming at the time the New Jerusalem descends to earth. Yet here in Isaiah 65, the time described is one in which human beings still live on the earth in the flesh (verses 21-25; see also chapter 66:22-24).

How, then, are we to understand this? It would seem that the millennial reign of Christ will experience a *measure* of a renewed creation—in anticipation of the *ultimate* new heavens and new earth that will follow man's final judgment. Indeed, the millennial picture of peace in nature and among people (Isaiah 65:25) is repeated from Isaiah 11:6-9. And all of this will continue over into the last judgment period immediately following the 1,000 years of peace (see Revelation 20:11-15). Indeed, some see verse 20 as an indication that this time of judgment will last 100 years.

Reward for God's Servants and Indignation to His Enemies (Isaiah 66)

May 26

In Acts 7:49-50, Stephen quotes from the first two verses of Isaiah 66. They are the last words he says before exasperation takes over and he says things that directly result in his being stoned. Jesus also referred to heaven and earth as God's throne and footstool (Matthew 5:34-35).

The contrast between those who obey God and those who don't continues. In verse 2, God says He is looking for those that are "poor and of a contrite spirit" (lowly and repentant in mind) and who tremble at His Word (properly fear to disobey God's instructions in Scripture). Service, gifts and prayers to God from those of a wrong heart and attitude are actually loathsome to God (verse 3). Those who "tremble at His word" will rejoice to see Christ appear, while those who don't will be ashamed (verse 5). Indeed, the rebellious in heart will see their worst fears become reality (verse 4).

Verses 7-9 use an analogy of Zion in childbirth. The time of birth pangs is seen elsewhere to symbolize the period of trial and tribulation on Israel leading up to Christ's second coming. With that in mind, notice that the "male child" is born before the time of pain and that the rest of Zion's "children" are born from "the earth" as a nation "at once" *after* she experiences the birth pangs. The "birth" here, then, appears to refer to the spiritual glorification of God's people, resurrected from the grave to immortality. The spirit birth of the "male child"—Christ's resurrection from the earth—occurred long before Israel's tribulation. But the rest of His brethren, the Church, will not be spiritually born (i.e., changed into Spirit beings like Him) until the time of the resurrection of the just at Christ's return.

God will reward His servants and destroy His enemies. All nations will at last learn to honor God. Israelites will be returned to God from around the world by nations that have not known Him before (verses 18-21). Verse 22 is perhaps a reference to the ultimate new heavens and new earth, which God "*will make*" *after* the Millennium and Last Judgment period—its permanence being used to parallel the permanence of God's redeemed people. In verse 23, "all flesh" of the Millennium and last judgment period will come to honor God according to *His* timekeeping scheme—the new moons (which define the beginning of months on His calendar) and Sabbaths.

The end of those who continue to transgress against God will see their flesh consumed by worms (maggots) and burned up by fire (verse 24; see also Mark 9:47-48). We will consider the specific wording here further when we come to the New Testament. Says *The Nelson Study Bible*: "Although the Book of Isaiah depicts God's coming salvation, it closes with a strong statement of the judgment of the wicked." Indeed, it is a rather sobering conclusion.

The Apostasy of Manasseh (2 Kings 20:20-21:18; 2 Chronicles 32:32–33:20)

May 27

Hezekiah, one of the greatest Jewish kings ever, died—at the end of the extra 15 years God had promised him. He was buried next to David and Solomon.

But though Hezekiah had been one of Judah's greatest kings, his son Manasseh was one of the worst. He was to reign longer than any other king of either Israel or Judah. "Manasseh...came to the throne as sole regent [upon the death of Hezekiah] in 686 and remained in power until 642. That he ruled for fifty-five years implies that he shared regal responsibility with Hezekiah from about 696 to 686. Why his father promoted Manasseh to this place of authority at the tender age of twelve must remain a matter of speculation. It is possible, of course, that Hezekiah's near-fatal illness (ca. 702) prompted him, as soon as his son reached a suitable age, to take measures insuring the dynastic succession" (Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 433).

Manasseh's evil deeds (though he repented of them at the end of his life), are well documented in these passages from Kings and Chronicles. He totally rejected his Creator, even to the point of practicing child sacrifice and setting up an idol right in the house of God. "Manasseh's shedding of 'innocent blood' refers not only to human sacrifice, but probably to the martyrdom of God's holy prophets. Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book] X, 37 {iii.1}) affirms that Manasseh not only slew all the righteous men of Judah but especially the prophets he slew daily until Jerusalem 'was

overflowing with blood.’ Uniform Jewish and Christian tradition holds that Manasseh had Isaiah sawn asunder (cf. Heb 11:37)” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, footnote on 2 Kings 21:16). If true, this further illustrates Manasseh’s moral depravity, as Isaiah had been such a trusted friend and spiritual advisor to his father.

Of particular note is the reference to Asherah (2 Kings 21:7), known in Babylon as Astarte or Ishtar (which has come down to us as “Easter” in English). We will see more about this pagan fertility goddess and her association with modern Christianity when we read Jeremiah 7 and 10, which will be coming up soon in the Bible Reading Program.

Besides worshiping pagan gods, Manasseh became entrenched in demonic witchcraft and all its associated practices—which is, sadly, all too prevalent today. God was not going to let Manasseh get away with all this evil; he would be deported to Babylon. “Some scholars argue that the deportation site of ‘Babylon’ is an error for Nineveh, but that is not necessary. Esarhaddon had rebuilt Babylon after his father Sennacherib had destroyed it and made it once again a part of the Assyrian Empire around 648 B.C. The Assyrian texts show that Manasseh was a vassal of Ashurbanipal as early as 667 B.C. Accordingly, he must have violated his agreements with Ashurbanipal to merit being deported to Babylon by the Assyrians in 648 B.C.” (Walter Kaiser Jr., *A History of Israel*, 1998, p. 382).

Secular proof of Manasseh’s vassal status comes from archaeology. “Manasseh King of the Jews’ appears in a list of twenty-two Assyrian tributaries of Imperial Assyria on both the Prism of Esarhaddon and the Prism of Ashurbanipal” (E.M. Blaiklock and R.K. Harrison, *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, 1983, “Manasseh”).

His deportation in hooks and fetters would have been a humiliating experience. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (“Hook”) mentions that the use of hooks was a common practice in handling captives. It was usually inserted in the victim’s nose or jaw, but the Assyrians held captives by a ring in the lip attached to a cord.

Manasseh had wielded a lot of power in Judah and, though his father had been a righteous king, the people of Judah were easily led astray. Even after Manasseh repented and tried to restore right religion in Judah, the people remained essentially evil and were ultimately to suffer the same fate as Manasseh. “Manasseh’s personal though belated repentance reminds us that it is never too late for the individual to return to the Lord. Yet the O[ld] T[estament] makes it clear that Manasseh’s years mark the point of no return for Judah. Second Kings 23:26 says, ‘The Lord did not turn from the heat of His fierce anger, which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh had done to provoke Him to anger’ ([NIV] cf. Jer. 15:4)” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on 2 Chronicles 33:1-20).

Amon; Josiah’s Initial Reforms (2 Kings 21:19–22:2; 2 Chronicles 33:21–34:7) May 28

Manasseh was succeeded for a short period by his son Amon. While his father had attempted to put things right in Judah, Amon followed in Manasseh’s earlier evil ways—and he did *not* repent. He evidently became unbearable to his servants, who conspired in assassinating him. But it seems obvious from the scriptural account that this was not a popular move. We know from reading Kings and Chronicles and the prophecies of the time that the people remained hostile to God and wanted the pagan ways to continue. Possibly they thought they could continue their pagan practices by appointing a boy as king. But they were soon to learn that the young Josiah was not like his father and grandfather.

Of course, God was involved in Josiah’s ascendancy—to preserve the line of David and to fulfill a specific prophecy. Josiah became king around 640 B.C. at the age of 8. He obviously didn’t get off to a good start in life. His father Amon was only around 16 when his son was born, and he was set in evil-doing. It is likely that Josiah was raised by his mother Jedidah—and possibly his grandmother Adaiah.

By the age of 16, Josiah began to seek God. And four years later, when he was 20 (around 628 B.C.), in an enthusiastic surge of youthful vigor he showed that he wasn’t about to be controlled by a pagan populace and took dramatic steps to purge the nation of its evil religion.

It’s interesting to note that his purge wasn’t just in Judah, but extended into the northern territory of Israel (2 Chronicles 34:6). Naphtali was in Galilee and was part of the Assyrian province of Israel (see verse 9). But how was this possible? Author Stephen Collins explains: “In approximately 624 B.C., the Scythians [near the Black Sea] launched a massive invasion to the south, and occupied Asia Minor, Syria, Media, Palestine and much of Assyria. They conquered as far south as Egypt, but spared that nation when the Egyptians offered them tribute money. In the words of Werner Keller [author of *The Bible as History*], the Scythians ‘inundated the Assyrian Empire.’...

[They] held Western Asia and the Mideast under their dominion for only a short time, twenty-eight years according to [5th-century-B.C. Greek historian] Herodotus, and just ten years according to [the assessment of] Werner Keller” (*The “Lost” Tribes of Israel—Found!*, 1992, pp. 186-187). Indeed, the Scythians proved instrumental in bringing down the Assyrian Empire in the years soon to follow.

The Scythians were, in the main, the northern tribes of Israel, who had been taken captive by the Assyrians a century earlier (see our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* for more explanation). Collins suggests: “The motive for the Scythian invasion was likely two-fold. The primary motive was the desire for revenge against the Assyrians who had forced them off their land and destroyed the old kingdom of Israel.... Indeed, the desire to liberate those Israelites who were still captives of the Assyrians may have served as a further strong motive for the Scythian invasion. A second reason for Scythia’s invasion was apparently the reoccupation of the old Israelite homeland of Palestine. The fact that some Scythians charged straight south through Asia Minor and Syria into Palestine gives weight to this conclusion.... While the Scythians waged a total war against the Assyrians in Mesopotamia, Herodotus records that on their march through Palestine and Syria: ‘...the majority of the Scythians marched by, doing no harm to anyone.’

“It is significant that while marching through Palestine, the Scythians took no action to attack or harm the Jewish capital of Jerusalem. If the Scythian motive was simple conquest, why did they spare the Jewish capital? Since the entire Assyrian army could not stand before the Scythian onslaught, Jerusalem had no might to resist them. The obvious conclusion is that the Scythians *chose* to spare Jerusalem. This makes sense only if the Scythians were the descendants of the ten tribes of Israel, who knew the Jews were one of their related tribes. This indicates that while the Scythians were intent on destroying Assyria, their purpose was to ‘liberate’ Palestine. One city in Palestine (Beth-Shan) was renamed ‘Scythopolis’ in honor of the Scythians, and the local population retained that name even after the Scythians left the area....

“This Scythian occupation, which included Palestine, occurred during the reign of King Josiah (circa 639-608 B.C.). The Bible does not mention ‘Scythians’ in Palestine at that time because ‘Scythian’ was a Greek term. However, the Bible refers to them as Israelites....” (pp. 187-190). Indeed, we will later see not just the Jews but people “of Manasseh and Ephraim, and all the remnant of Israel” giving to the restoration of the temple and attending Josiah’s famous Passover (2 Chronicles 34:9; 35:18). What were Israelites doing in the land, considering that they had been carried away by the Assyrians a century earlier? The answer is that these were the Scythians—Israelites who had returned, some now desirous to honor God. Of course, this represented only a small percentage of the Israelites who had been taken into captivity, certainly not fulfilling the many prophecies of God gathering Israel back to the Promised Land. Indeed, they did not ultimately stay—perhaps because Israel was no longer the land of milk and honey it had once been and they preferred their far northern territories.

In any case, it was the presence of returned Israelites that enabled Josiah to carry out his reform even in the territories of the former northern kingdom. Indeed, the Scythian presence explains other things too, as we will see.

Introduction to Zephaniah—the Days of Josiah (Zephaniah 1)

May 29

The prophet Zephaniah prophesied during the days of King Josiah. We have no knowledge of his background except for what is given in verse 1 regarding his lineage. He was a fourth-generation descendant of Hezekiah. Most sources believe this refers to Hezekiah the king, which would make him a cousin of Josiah, though others correctly maintain that we can’t know for sure. In favor, however, is the fact that his lineage is traced back four generations. Commentator Charles Feinberg remarks, “No other prophet has his pedigree carried back so far” (*The Minor Prophets*, 1990, p. 221). Thus, the Hezekiah mentioned would seem to be someone of distinction.

Zephaniah’s theme is the Day of the Lord, the time of God’s intervention and punishment on the nations. “He uses the expression more than any other prophet of the Old Testament” (p. 221).

Zephaniah prophesied for a few years, beginning some say in the same year as Jeremiah, who began to prophesy in 627 or 626 B.C. Others place Zephaniah at a later date. Because there is no hint of Josiah’s reformation in his writings, most scholars believe Zephaniah prophesied before the reforms began, though some believe the reformation was already underway. The words of the prophet in 1:2-6 do seem to indicate that he prophesied prior to any significant repentance by the nation of Judah—though this could be because the prophecy was meant primarily for the end time, the time of the Day of the Lord.

Indeed, Zephaniah's utterances have dual application. The Day of the Lord was a warning to seventh-century-B.C. Judah that God would punish them when their sins came to a climax—but, more directly, the words of the prophet mainly allude to the coming great Day of the Lord that is in the future. The language of 1:15 is identical to the description of the Day of the Lord as described in Joel 2:2: "A day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness." The prophet Ezekiel will later use language similar to Zephaniah 1:18, describing the time of the end when a man will deem his wealth (silver and gold) as totally worthless because it provides no shield against the terrible wrath of God (Ezekiel 7:19).

The message of doom apparently brought Judah to a degree of repentance, along with the warnings of Jeremiah and the leadership of King Josiah. Their great reform is described in 2 Kings 22:3–23:25. The repentance was short-lived though, lasting only through the lifetime of Josiah. After this, the people of Judah fell back into grievous sin, and the warnings of the prophets came to pass in some measure through the horrendous invasion by the Babylonians.

Idolatry Then and Now (Zephaniah 1)

May 29 Cont'd

God states that He will "utterly consume all things from the face of the land" (verse 2), including the "stumbling blocks" (verse 3)—"figurative of idols" (NKJV margin). A large reason for God's anger is Baal worship (verse 4) and because the people "swear by Milcom" (verse 5), an Ammonite god known elsewhere as Molech (see "Milcom," *Smith's Bible Dictionary*). The worship of Milcom or Molech was reprehensible to God. It included gruesome acts of infant sacrifice (2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 32:35).

Of course, this did fit the situation in the wake of the evil reigns of Manasseh and Amon over Judah. Yet Zephaniah's prophecy, it must be remembered, is primarily for the end time, as it concerns the coming Day of the Lord. How, then, does the prophecy apply in these last days? Notice that God is going to stretch out His hand "against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (verse 4). Jerusalem today is a city of Jews, Muslims and various Christian denominations. Can these groups be labeled as idolatrous? Indeed, they can. As surprising as it may seem, many of their doctrines and practices are derived from paganism.

Judaism was eventually corrupted by Babylonian and Greek religion. Mainstream Christianity adopted many of the same concepts and, to gain preeminence over the Roman Empire, embraced still more and more from paganism. Islam arose out of a blend of Jewish and false Christian concepts and Arab mythology. Notice that the people are guilty of syncretism—worshiping God but with pagan concepts and practices, which is viewed by God as their worshiping false deities (compare verse 5).

Consider that Molech is "probably to be equated with...the Roman god Saturn or Mithra" (Jan Knappert, *Encyclopaedia of Middle Eastern Mythology and Religion*, 1993, p. 206, "Molech"). Mithra has been identified with Baal, the sun god. His birthday was celebrated in ancient times on December 25. The modern holiday of Christmas derives from this ancient celebration and the Roman Saturnalia—in honor of Saturn, essentially the same god—which immediately preceded it. (To learn more, download or request our free booklet *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*)

In verse 4, the phrase "idolatrous priests" is left untranslated in the King James Version. It is the Hebrew *chemarim*. "The Hebrew root means 'black' (from the black garments which they wore or the marks which they branded on their foreheads)" (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary*, note on verse 4). As we will soon read, Josiah removed the chemarim of his day (see 2 Kings 23:5). Yet it is interesting to consider that such "black-robed priests" could designate various groups today—from Catholic priests to Greek Orthodox presbyters to orthodox Jewish rabbis to many Muslim imams. This may be the "foreign apparel" of verse 8—in that case denoting gentile religious garb—although the subject of verse 8 could also be people who exploit others to become wealthy, enabling them to purchase exotic foreign clothing.

In Zephaniah 1:9, God says He will punish "all those who leap over the threshold." *The Nelson Study Bible* says this "may refer to a pagan practice like one mentioned in 1 Samuel 5:5. The priests of Dagon would not step on the doorway of the temple to Dagon because the hands and the head of Dagon had fallen there." Are there *modern* participants of Dagonism? Surprisingly, a case can be made that "the two-horned mitre, which the Pope wears, when he sits on the high altar at Rome and receives the adoration of the Cardinals, is the very mitre worn by Dagon, the fish-god of the Philistines and Babylonians" (Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, 1916, 1959, p. 215).

The “Fish Gate” of verse 10 “received its name from the fish market which was near it. Through it passed those who used to bring fish from the lake of Tiberias and Jordan” (*JFB Commentary*, note on verse 10). Perhaps this is actually a figurative reference here to those by whom the fish-god Dagon, alluded to in the previous verse, has come into Jerusalem. In the same context we are told of punishment to befall the “merchant people”—“lit[erally], the ‘Canaanite people’: irony: all the merchant people of Jerusalem are very Canaanites in greed for gain and in idolatries” (note on verse 11).

Yet for all this, far too many sit complacently, believing “the LORD will not do good, nor will He do evil” (verse 12)—meaning He won’t do anything. The apostle Peter referred to such people as “scorners...in the last days” who say, “Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:3-4). Yet, as the book of Zephaniah makes clear, the scoffers are sorely mistaken. Those sacrificing to false gods (participating in false worship) will themselves become a sacrifice of God if they fail to repent (verses 7-8; compare Isaiah 34:6; Revelation 19:21), slain for the sake of all mankind.

The Meek of the Earth Hidden (Zephaniah 2–3)

May 30

In verses 1-3 of chapter 2, Zephaniah addresses an “undesirable nation,” calling them the “meek of the earth.” The latter expression would seem to denote the Church of God—particularly when we view the prophecy in context as dealing mainly with the end time. Moreover, these people are described as those who have upheld God’s justice or righteous judgment, thus walking by His laws—again pointing to true Christians. The Church is described as a spiritual *nation* in the New Testament (1 Peter 2:9-10). And it is certainly undesirable in the eyes of the world—as God’s people are, as Christ was, *despised, hated and persecuted* by the world (see John 15:18-20).

If these Christians will *gather together* (Zephaniah 2:1; compare Hebrews 10:25), *seek God* in prayer and study of His Word (see Zephaniah 2:3), and seek *righteousness* (obedience) and *humility* (same verse), they have an opportunity to be hidden and protected during the time of God’s punishment—in line with other prophecies that describe God’s faithful people being sheltered in a place of refuge in the end time (compare Revelation 12:14). Interestingly, Zephaniah’s name means “The Eternal Hides” or “Hidden of the Eternal”—which may have factored into the wording of Zephaniah 2:3.

Verses 4-5 foretell divine retribution to come on the people living in the land of the Philistines, here synonymous with Canaan—which, in an end-time setting, would appear to indicate the modern Palestinian people. The Jews, returning from captivity, will be given the former Philistine seacoast, including the Gaza Strip, which is now occupied by the Palestinians (verses 6-7). In verses 8-10, ruin is prophesied to come upon Moab and Ammon, which are areas of modern Jordan, still the homeland of these ancient peoples. And this is said to be because of their pride and because they will have reproached God’s people and threatened their borders. It is not clear whether the reproached and threatened people of God here are the physical Israelites or the spiritual people of God referred to in verses 1-3. If the latter, the whole passage would seem to be parallel with Isaiah 16, where Moab is apparently punished for refusing to hide God’s outcasts (see highlights for Isaiah 16).

Verse 11 again shows the passage to be primarily an end-time prophecy, as people from all the shores of the nations will come to worship God after He utterly wipes out idolatry.

The chapter culminates with judgment against Assyria and its capital city Nineveh (verses 13-15). Babylon and other forces conquered ancient Assyria and laid waste to her proud capital in 612 B.C. No doubt this prophecy did in part refer to that ancient overthrow—as it was yet a few years away when Zephaniah wrote. But realize again that this is mainly a prophecy of the end of this age. Nineveh is directly parallel here with end-time Babylon, speaking the same words and suffering the same penalty (verse 15; compare Isaiah 47:10-11). So it is likely that the prophecy is primarily aimed at Assyria of the last days—a German-dominated European superpower also known as Babylon (see highlights for Isaiah 10)—and its future seat of power. The prophet Nahum, as we will later see, prophesied against Nineveh around this time too. And in his prophecy there is also a very close parallel between Assyria and end-time Babylon.

Zephaniah 3 begins with an indictment against Jerusalem, probably representative of the Jewish nation as a whole—and perhaps even of all Israel in the end time, since Jerusalem was the ancient capital of all 12 tribes. Four specific charges are brought against the people. Verses 3-4 indict four classes of leaders for their corruption, and God promises He will bring them to justice. The priests not only don’t teach the laws of God, “they have done violence to the law”—they despise and ridicule God’s law as being a yoke, burden and curse that has been “done away with” or “annulled.” God warns

that He has judged other nations and His nation should expect no less. Yet sadly, the people continue to rebel (verse 7). In Zephaniah's day, there was a measure of repentance at the time of Josiah's reforms. And in the future, all Israel will at last repent, as we see later in this chapter.

Verse 8 describes the return of Jesus Christ to fight the nations gathered against Him (compare Revelation 19:19). An interesting feature about Zephaniah 3:8 is that, according to Charles Feinberg, it is the only verse in the Old Testament that contains all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

The chapter then progresses forward into the wonderful, peaceful reign of Christ over all nations—that is, over all those who are left after the cataclysmic wars of the end time. Verse 9 describes God providing a “pure language” for the peoples of the earth, much better suited for praising and serving God. Today's languages are filled with pagan references and other ungodly elements. That won't be so in the language of the future. The tone of the book from this point on is quite positive, as conditions that will exist on earth under the rule of the Kingdom of God are described. Verse 15 prophesies, “The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst.”

Feinberg states that the “appointed assembly” of verse 18 refers to the “feasts of the Lord” (p. 235). This parallels Zechariah 14:16, which tells us that the Feast of Tabernacles will be observed at that time. The chapter ends with the wonderful truth that, though God will bring national punishment on the Israelites, He will still regather those who are left to at last be the model nation Israel was intended to be (verses 19-20). They will then be, as verse 12 shows, the meek and humble people of God.

Introduction to the Book of Jeremiah

May 31

The Old Testament mentions nine different people named Jeremiah. The man God used to author this book was a priest and one of Israel's greatest prophets. Because of several biographical narratives in the book of Jeremiah, more is known about Jeremiah than any other prophet.

The Hebrew name Jeremiah apparently means “Exalted of the Eternal” or “Appointed by the Eternal.” It may relate to the fact that the prophet was one of only a few people whom the Bible reveals to have been sanctified by God before birth for a special purpose—the others being John the Baptist, Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul (Luke 1:13-14; Isaiah 49:1, 5; Galatians 1:15). Jeremiah 1:5 may mean that, like John and Jesus, Jeremiah was chosen even before his conception for his commission.

Jeremiah's father Hilkiah (1:1) was apparently not the high priest Hilkiah of 2 Kings 22:8. The priests who lived at the priest-city of Anathoth (about 3 miles northeast of Jerusalem) were of the house of Ithamar (compare 1 Kings 2:26) while the high priests, since Zadok, were of the line of Eleazar.

Jeremiah's ministry began in the 13th year of Josiah (Jeremiah 1:2)—ca. 627 or 626 B.C.—when Zephaniah is also believed to have preached. The book bearing Jeremiah's name relates his words and works during the reigns of the last five kings of Judah—a span of about 40 years—and on into the first years of Judah's Babylonian captivity (verses 1-3). Josiah was a righteous ruler who was apparently close to Jeremiah—the king's great reformation coming five years after Jeremiah's preaching began. Upon Josiah's death, Jeremiah lamented for him (2 Chronicles 35:25). But the mostly superficial benefits of Josiah's reforms were soon replaced by moral and spiritual decay. Following him were four wicked rulers—Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and, finally, Zedekiah, whose reign was ended by Babylon's invasion of Judah.

“According to the traditional date, the time of [Jeremiah's] call (year 13 of Josiah's reign—Jeremiah 1:2) coincided approximately with the death of the last great Assyrian ruler, Ashurbanipal, an event which signaled the disintegration of the Assyrian empire under whose yoke Judah had served for nearly a century. Against the waning power and influence of the Assyrians, Judah asserted its independence under Josiah” (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, “Jeremiah, Book of”). This was no doubt assisted by the arrival of the Scythians, which soon followed. But following their eventual withdrawal, Judah found itself in a vulnerable position between two powers contending for dominance—Egypt and the Neo-Babylonian Empire—and the latter would emerge supreme.

Jeremiah was appointed “a prophet to the nations” (verse 5)—to “all the kingdoms of the world” (25:26). And chapters 46–51 are directed to various gentile nations. However, “nations” would seem to refer primarily to the people of Judah and Israel. His preaching was, of course, in large measure directed to the people of Judah where he lived. But Jeremiah also prophesied to *the house of Israel*—which God had punished and sent into captivity *nearly a century before he began preaching*. Obviously, then, God's message is for Israel of the end time. Jeremiah wrote of a time of *national*

trouble that is yet ahead for the modern descendants of the lost 10 tribes of Israel. A number of passages in Jeremiah clearly refer to events that will occur just before and after Christ's return at the end of this age.

One of the greatest values of this book is its universal application in understanding the righteous nature of God and the rebellious nature of man, desperately in need of transformation. According to *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, "Jeremiah preached more about repentance than any other prophet" (introductory notes on Jeremiah). For a time, Jeremiah's message was for the people of his day to repent or else be taken captive by Babylon. Yet, because the response was resentment rather than repentance, God revealed to Jeremiah that Jerusalem's fall and the people's captivity had become the inevitable punishment. Following that revelation, Jeremiah continued to exhort the people to repent, but he also preached that God's will was for them to submit to Babylon—with assurance that, if they did, they would receive mercy. However the populace, especially the authorities, viewed this message as pessimistic, heretical, unpatriotic and even treasonous. As a result, Jeremiah repeatedly suffered rejection, hostility, ridicule, persecution, and threats against his life. For a while he was actually imprisoned.

Besides this book that bears his name, Jeremiah is also credited with writing the book of Lamentations—a term that has become almost synonymous with the prophet. Indeed, much of the book of Jeremiah can be described as a lament about the people's lack of obedience to God and the tragic fate awaiting them. Based on the prophet, the English language contains the word "jeremiad," defined as "an elaborate and prolonged lamentation or a tale of woe" (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 1969). That should not be surprising. The Jeremiah of popular imagination is a stern and gloomy doomsayer. But that is an extreme and unfair characterization of the prophet. His messages, which were critical of the people's conduct and warned of punishment, were not his own inventions. Rather, he was conveying *God's* messages. Moreover, these messages included the wonderful promise of mercy and deliverance if the people would repent. And Jeremiah 1:10 clearly reveals that his commission was to include positive *and* negative—constructive *and* destructive—elements. His book also contains joyous prophecies of the coming Messiah, a new covenant and a blissful new age to come.

Part of the unfair portrayal of Jeremiah's personality is the picture of a chronically depressed person. Yet while he did suffer frequent melancholy, this was a reflection of the great stress and sacrifices of his life, not of inherent weakness. A prophet's lonely life of being the bearer of bad news was a heavy and depressing burden to bear, especially for one so deeply concerned and tenderhearted as Jeremiah. He felt anger and disgust at the apostasy and idolatry of the people, but he grieved as well, knowing the ominous fate awaiting his beloved countrymen. Added to that, he felt perplexed and humiliated when many years were passing and his prophecies were not materializing.

Jeremiah is sometimes called the "weeping prophet" (see 9:1, 10; 13:17; 48:32), but mourning for others over their wickedness and future suffering is a spiritual *strength*, not a weakness (Ezekiel 9:4; 21:6; Amos 6:6; Matthew 5:4). Other strengths of Jeremiah were his faith in God, devotion to prayer, faithfulness in fulfilling his calling, and unflinching courage in the face of hostility and danger. Jeremiah's life has parallels with the life of Christ, who was a "Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3; Matthew 16:14).

Eventually, Jeremiah will see his prophecies of the immediate future come to pass. Following the righteous reign of Josiah, a period of national decline will end with Judah's fall to the Babylonians. But the prophet's work does not end with that calamity, as we will see.

Of all the prophetic books, Jeremiah is the longest. It "is longer than Isaiah or Ezekiel, and the Minor Prophets combined are about a third shorter. The claim has been made that it is the longest book in the Bible" (*Expositor's*). It is also the most complex of the prophetic books. It is not arranged chronologically or topically. That may partly be because Jeremiah was mainly a preacher rather than a writer, who later dictated events and messages after the fact. (Jeremiah dictated much of the book to his secretary Baruch.) As it is, "the organization of the oracles, prose sermons, and other material is based on content, audience, and connective links" (*Nelson Study Bible*, introductory notes on Jeremiah). The Bible Reading Program will not cover the chapters in the biblical order, but will rather put the sections in the apparent chronological order to follow the story flow of Jeremiah's life—placing his messages in that context.

Jeremiah's Calling and Commission (Jeremiah 1)

May 31 Cont'd

When God called and commissioned Jeremiah, he was modest and reluctant, citing his youth as a handicap to speaking from experience and with authority. *The Bible Reader's Companion* states,

“He was called by God as a *na’ar* (1:6), a youth some 16 to 18 years old” (note on verse 6). However, youthfulness is relative and his age was not important, since his safety and success was dependent on God, not on himself (verses 7-8, 17-19). Indeed, this would have provided evidence of God’s direction and inspiration—as well as serving as a point of shame for the nation’s elders who had been failing in their responsibilities. The king on the throne now was young too—and he would lead the nation in wonderful reforms.

Jeremiah’s young age at his calling should also serve as an inspiration for any young person reading God’s Word who understands the truth and is stirred with a strong conviction to act on what he or she knows. God calls and works with young people too.

In verse 10 God gives Jeremiah a mysterious commission: “See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (New Revised Standard Version). “The words *root out, pull down, destroy, throw down, build, and plant* are repeated at key points in the Book of Jeremiah to reaffirm Jeremiah’s call (18:7; 24:6; 31:28; 42:10; 45:4)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 10). Based on Jeremiah’s life hereafter, it is easy to ascertain what God meant by plucking up, pulling down, destroying and overthrowing. This great prophet repeatedly warned the Jews to repent of their disobedience—but they scorned him. So God used him to pronounce judgment on the nation: the people and the kings of David’s line would be overthrown in the Babylonian conquest and uprooted—to Babylon.

But the latter part of the prophet’s commission yet remained: “to build and to plant.” What did this involve? From Jeremiah 45:4 we can see that building and planting in this context originally entailed God’s planting His people in the land and building a kingdom of them there—now to be pulled up and destroyed. So the commission would seem to involve planting people in another place in order to establish a kingdom elsewhere. We will examine this question further toward the end of the book.

God here gives the sign of an almond tree, “which blossoms when other trees are still dormant... as a harbinger of spring, as though it ‘watched over’ the beginning of the season. In a similar fashion, God was ‘watching over’ His word, ready to bring judgment on Israel” (note on 1:11-12). Jeremiah also saw a boiling pot tilted southward, “indicating the direction in which the pot’s contents would be spilled. The calamity suggested by this vision was an enemy attack on Judah and Jerusalem from the north. In 20:4, Jeremiah finally identifies this enemy as Babylon. Babylon was itself east of Jerusalem, but the road went around the desert and approached from the north” (note on verses 13-14). Interestingly, the enemy to the northeast when Jeremiah started prophesying was still Assyria. But that would soon change. Indeed, the book of Jeremiah refers to Babylon 164 times, more references than in all the rest of the Bible. Jeremiah foretold that Babylon, the destroyer of Judah, would herself be destroyed by the Medes and Persians, never to rise again. Some of the prophecies in this regard are dual, referring also to the rise and fall of the end-time political, economic and religious system called Babylon—located to the *northwest* of Judah (thus still north)—while some prophecies refer *exclusively* to the end time.

Preaching God’s message brought Jeremiah a great deal of suffering, but God emphatically charged him, “Do not be afraid of their [intimidating] faces” (1:8, 17)—as He, the Almighty Deliverer, would provide impregnable defense (1:18-19). We too can take encouragement from these words as we carry out the commission God has given His Church to preach His true gospel to the end of the age (see Matthew 28:19-20).