

Call to Repentance — Isaiah 1-3, Matthew 4:17



Marc Chagall, Isaiah

Each prophet hammered repentance, the same message Christ brought as foundational to entering the kingdom life. The written prophets began toward the end of the divided kingdom, admonishing Israel that the call to create a healthy, blessed, prosperous, God-fearing community had failed. The messages are full of conflict, judgment, tragedy, and war, interspersed with beautiful passages of hope.

Isaiah called for repentance, warning of coming judgment for idolatry, social injustice, and ungodly leadership. Christ as a prophet also confronted hypocritical religious leaders, predicted judgment on Jerusalem, and anticipated final judgment.

Four Judean kings heard Isaiah's messages, starting with King Uzziah. Uzziah began well, seeking God and becoming successful as a result. But his power led to pride and downfall. He inappropriately burned incense in the temple, and was struck with leprosy. Though Isaiah's message was to the nation, one can hear a call to the leprous king who had invited punishment by rebelling, and who had become sick from head to foot. The incense he offered was offensive, his worship insincere. God appealed for him to do good by seeking justice and help for the oppressed. Instead of leprous snow-white skin, his heart could become snow-white.

Uzziah never responded to the offer of repentance and healing, and so died a leper. Judah and Jerusalem responded sporadically, but finally their rebellion was sufficient that the predicted judgment fell. Anticipating the mercy in Christ, Isaiah promised restoration for survivors of coming judgment. For us, repentance is always available in Christ, and it is as simple as turning around.

Do I ask Christ to cleanse my sins?

The Vineyard — Isaiah 4-5, Luke 20:15



Johann Christian Brand, Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

The prophets described disobedient Israel as a failed vineyard, and Christ used this in his parables. Despite excellent care, grapes were sour and God decided he must abandon the vineyard, tear down the fences, and allow the field to grow wild. Having warned of destruction, Isaiah wrote of hope for restoration, using the imagery of a lush, beautiful, and fruitful land. Then he turned to the vineyard which must be pruned.

Christ took the image and added characters in the parable alluded to above. The owner was still God, and the vineyard was still the people of God, but the servants caring for the vineyard were the ruling religious authorities. The owner sent servants (the prophets) to collect the rent, but each time they were badly mistreated. The owner decided to send his son (Christ), but he was killed. When Christ asked what would happen to these wicked servants, the answer was that they would be put to death and the vineyard given to others (the nations).

Isaiah began warning of coming destruction about 175 years before Jerusalem's destruction and the exile. God warned them to change their ways, but carried out judgment when they failed to do so, but he did not let that be the end of the story.

He planted a new community by allowing the survivors to return, and by sending the long-promised Messiah to start a new vineyard, the kingdom community.

Christ told his disciples that he is the vine and we are the branches, and through our union with him we give good fruit. As his followers, we desire to be in Christ and allow his life and love to flow out of us. From the grapes comes the new wine of the Spirit. In Christ we become a beautiful vineyard, giving sweet-tasting grapes that make a delicious drink. The result: joy and celebration!

Am I allowing the life of Christ to flow through me like a vine and its branches?

Isaiah's vision of God — Isaiah 6, Matthew 17:2



Marc Chagall, The Prophet Isaiah

Isaiah had a vision of God on his throne surrounded by angels, the temple shook and was filled with smoke. At Christ's transfiguration the disciples saw his glory. In the transfiguration a bright cloud overshadowed Christ. In both stories the glory of God humbled those present.

Isaiah's commission parallels Christ's commission to preach and teach as an ordinary man. Christ quoted what God warned Isaiah would be true of his ministry: people would hear but not understand. Isaiah's commissioning also foreshadows Christ's commissioning of his disciples and our own.

Isaiah's response to God's question "Who will go for us?" is "Here I am. Send me." "Here" expresses his desire to be present to God, and a hope for God to be present in his work. This communion of love can happen anytime, anywhere, and if we are like Isaiah, we respond. As we learn to be truly present in this moment with others and with God, we have the greatest chance for others to sense that we were sent to them in whatever their needs might be.

Isaiah's vision reminds us to keep our spiritual eyes and ears open, and our hearts soft so that we can receive what God wants to give us. In our own lives we need similar repeated experiences that remind us of God's holiness.

Do I gladly return to God's holy presence and accept his call in my life?

Hope for Messiah — Isaiah 7-9, Matthew 1:23



Sandro Botticelli, The Mystical Nativity

Messianic prophecies in this section of prophecy include that of Christ's miraculous birth. The New Testament text quotes Isaiah 7:14 which promises King Ahaz of Judah that God will triumph over Israel and Damascus. Layers of fulfillment mean it predicts the birth of Isaiah's son, still young when Assyria would defeat Israel and Damascus. But it simultaneously refers to Christ. The angel quoted Isaiah to Joseph to tell him to take Mary as his wife, and Joseph accepted that this prophecy was meant for him. It is a beautiful reminder that God gives signs to those open to notice them.

As an infant in a manger and also as an itinerant preacher, Jesus' poverty proved God's love for the poor. His roots in Galilee made the same point. Unlike other places with a textured history in Israel, Galilee was rural back-country. Hiram, King of Tyre, turned down Solomon's offer of 20 Galilean cities in payment for Jerusalem building projects, calling them "Dirty!" When Jesus gained attention, the Pharisees responded that no prophets had come from Galilee. Isaiah prophesied that this marginalized area would see a great light, and Matthew 4 says Jesus' arrival fulfilled this.

Here also is the prophecy familiar from *Handel's Messiah* of a king who will transform the world with his righteous rule: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders. And his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace."

These are glorious and unlikely fulfillments, a proof of the faith. We do not need to take an intellectual back seat to anyone regarding Christ.

Do I see and celebrate how Christ uniquely fulfilled ancient prophecies?

David's Son, the Savior — Isaiah 10-13, Luke 2:11



Musée Conde, Chantilly, Tree of Jesse

The angels announced the Savior born in David's line, just as Isaiah foresaw the Messiah as coming from David's family. Isaiah celebrated the salvation that the Messiah would bring, and presented God as liberator, defender of the poor, comforter, and one who judges the proud.

Having announced Israel and Judah's coming judgment and having included promises of the coming Messiah, Isaiah turned to judgment on the nations. He had warned Israel that within 65 years it would be completely crushed and destroyed. The instrument of destruction would be Assyria. But Isaiah warned that Assyria would be conquered in turn, and though Judah would be threatened by the Assyrian armies, God would protect them. These predictions came true when Assyria was defeated in Israel (701 BC), and when Babylon destroyed Assyria. (623 BC)

And yet despite this destruction, the Messiah would come with the Spirit of God on him, and he would come to defend the poor and exploited. Ultimately he would bring a Kingdom of peace where nothing destructive could affect anyone. He would be a banner of salvation for the world, a standard raised high to whom everyone could come. He would raise a flag for Israel and bring them back to their land. And most importantly, he would bring salvation, and live among his people.

The warnings of judgment are challenging to read, but the word of hope lies in the promise of Messiah and the transformation he can bring. David's son continues to be our source of hope today as we live through the political chaos of our world. Christ was the restorer of his broken family tree, and we can claim his restorative ability for our broken family trees as well. He can cause new life to grow in a family that feels it has been cut down to a lifeless stump.

Do I put all my hope in Christ?

Judge of the Nations — Isaiah 14-18, Matthew 25:31-32



Marc Chagall, The Prophecy of Isaiah

Christ told us in a parable that he will come as judge of the nations. Isaiah warned surrounding nations of coming judgment for their evil behavior. At the same time

he offered the beautiful promises that God will give his people rest from sorrow and fear, that he weeps with those who are refugees, that his throne is established by love, that he is a rock where we can hide, and that any judgment we experience is a form of pruning us.

Babylon would conquer Assyria, and Isaiah warned that they would in turn be conquered by the Medes. All the smaller surrounding nations would be harmed in this political upheaval: Philistia, Moab, Damascus, and Ethiopia. All the judgments foreshadowed Christ's final judgment on the nations.

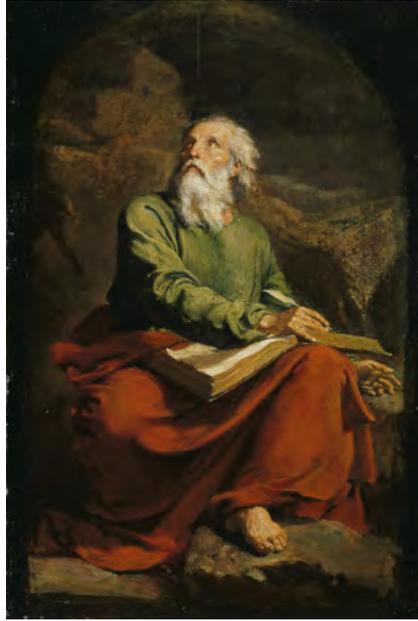
Amidst the warnings there were signs of hope, promises of the gospel: the good news is for all the world, it is a rule of love, and people will respond.

- Israel will return to their land and be helped by many nations (14:1-3)
 - God's power will reach through the world, and his plans cannot change (14:26,27)
- God promises to feed the poor and give the needy peace (14:30)
 - A faithful king from David's throne will always do what is just and right on a throne established by love (16:5)
- Suffering will cause people to turn to their Creator God (17:7)
- Nations will be converted and bring gifts to God in Jerusalem (18:7,8)

Political upheaval creates suffering that, even today, cause our hearts to weep. Through it all, God reassures us that there is a plan to bring about his Kingdom built on love.

Do I live within the promises of blessing for those in the kingdom of God?

The Gospel to the World — Isaiah 19-23, Acts 1:8



Ernest Meissonier, Isaiah

Christ commissioned his disciples to go and share the good news to the whole world. In the midst of his warnings of judgment, Isaiah foresaw the success of this message of love and hope. He showed us that God heals us when we turn to him, that if he brings trouble by threshing and winnowing us, if we show remorse for sins, he can restore a relationship with us. Any disaster we experience is designed to destroy our pride.

Isaiah warned Egypt, which fell to Assyria as predicted. (664 BC) What follows is a promise of the spread of the gospel in the early Christian era. There were many Egyptian church fathers, and the important port city of Alexandria became a center of Christian learning. Heliopolis, mentioned in the text, is a suburb of Cairo, and on maps showing the spread of Christianity one sees how it began in cities and then spread through the countryside. By 600 AD Christianity was the dominant religion from Egypt to Assyria and the promise of free mobility among those worshipping the same God was fulfilled.

Isaiah continued warning Egypt, Ethiopia, Babylon, Edom and Arabia. He warned Jerusalem of coming destruction, and reproached them for their choice to “eat, drink and be merry” since “what’s the difference, for tomorrow we die”, phrases Christ used in his parable regarding a foolish wealthy man. In a warning to a specific leader, a Messianic prophecy says one will come who can open doors that no one can shut, a phrase applied to Christ in Revelation.

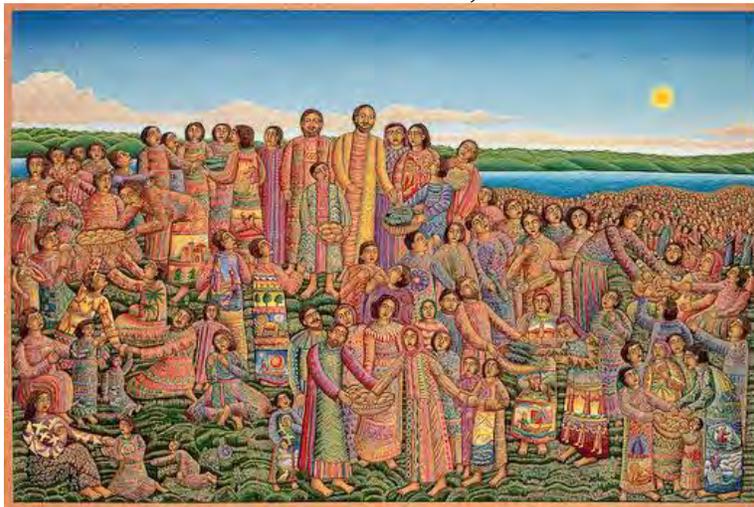
The warning to Tyre, a great commercial capital, was that they would decline for 70 years and then be revived. This happened. They were conquered by the

Assyrians (720 BC), but were able to revive again (650 BC) and successfully resist Babylon's attempt to conquer them. A final message of hope was that Tyre's wealth would be used for God. Paul spent a week with believers there in this successful port city, their generosity doubtless contributed to the mission, and so this prophecy was fulfilled.

What a remarkable vision of early successes in spreading the gospel are hidden in these grim messages. The tide turned against Christianity when Islam overcame this region, and an uneasy struggle has continued until this day. But we should not forget the miracle that loving people who had no arms conquered the most powerful world empire of that time. They used the weapons of grace that Martin Luther King, Jr. exhorted us to use in our time that the kingdom might advance.

Do I continue to use the weapons of grace to spread the gospel?

Salvation — Isaiah 24-27, I Peter 1:9-10



John August Swanson, Loaves and Fishes

Isaiah anticipated the salvation that Christ brought. The Hebrew scriptures use salvation 58 times, and 26 instances occur in Isaiah. The word salvation is prophetic—translated into Greek, it becomes the name Jesus. Isaiah's own name means Yahweh is Salvation.

Isaiah's vision extended to the end of time when God would be seated on his throne, rule gloriously in Jerusalem, and his bright light would make sun and moon seem to fade.

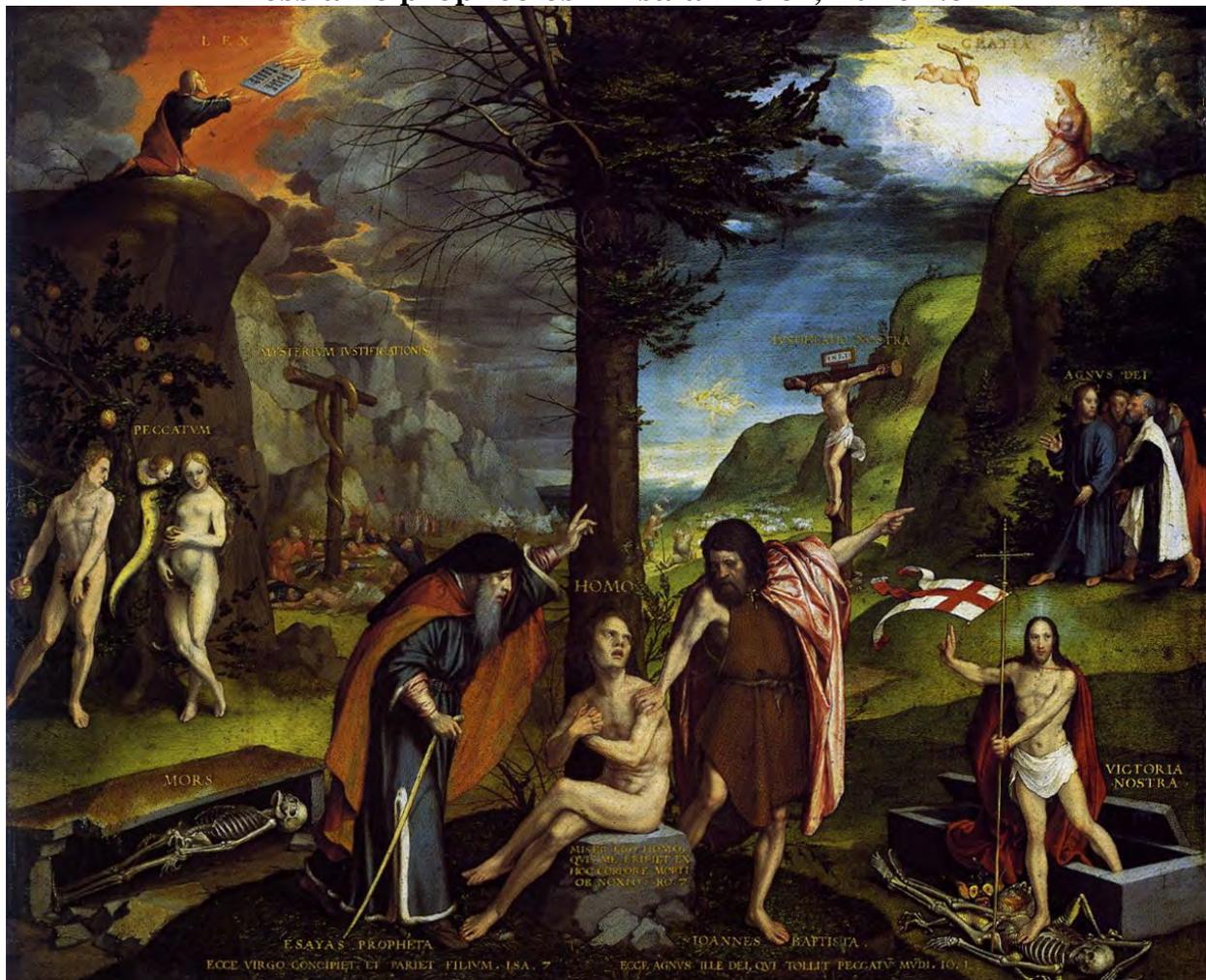
Beyond salvation from earthly trials he looked forward to a great feast in Jerusalem when death had ended and people would proclaim that God had saved them. Surely

the Eucharist fulfills this prophecy, as will the marriage supper of the Lamb. He also foresaw resurrected life, clear assurance that the bodies of those who belong to God will rise again.

Christ announced salvation's immediacy, but we simultaneously look forward to it in the last day. Salvation is not just my individual ticket to heaven; it is social, comprehensive, includes creation, and includes all nations. We look forward to the new heaven and earth when everything has been set to right, and we celebrate complete salvation.

Do I celebrate my salvation and seek to extend it in the world?

Messianic prophecies — Isaiah 28-32, Luke 1:32



Hans Holbien the Younger, An Allegory of the Old and New Testaments

Isaiah presented Christ as Messiah, as a healer, and as a man from among the poor. At least 36 of Isaiah's prophecies present the Messiah in his conception, birth,

redemptive suffering, character, healing, and ultimate triumph. The scope of his vision of Christ is remarkable throughout the book.

In these chapters we see the following allusions to Christ:

- 28:5 Lord of Heaven's Armies will be Israel's glorious crown, pride and joy
- 28:16 A foundation stone placed in Jerusalem, a precious cornerstone
- 28:29 The Lord of Heaven's Armies is a wonderful teacher
- 29:2 Jerusalem will become an altar (place of Christ's death)
- 29:13 Jesus quoted this in Matthew 15:8
- 29:14 Astounded people with his miracles
- 29:16 He is the potter and we are the clay
- 29:18 Deaf will hear
- 29:18 Blind will see
- 29:19 Poor will rejoice
- 30:19 He will be gracious if you ask for help
- 30:20 You will see your teacher with your own eyes
- 30:21 A voice will say, "This is the way you should go." (Holy Spirit)
- 31:5 The Lord will protect Jerusalem like a bird protecting its nest
- 32:1 A righteous king is coming!
- 32:3 Eyes to see and ears to hear the truth
- 32:15 The Spirit will be poured out from heaven

There are lists of 365 Messianic prophecies in scripture, and odds of fulfillment are astronomical. As we have seen, there are even more allusions and imagery prefiguring Christ beyond specific verses. In our skeptical, secular age, we need to examine this honestly and help others see this evidence.

Among many promises we can claim for ourselves Isaiah 30:18. This beautiful verse tells us that there is mutual waiting between us and God. God waits for us to come to him so he can show us his love. We wait for God and he helps us. If we are praying for something, waiting for God, this reassures us that God is faithful, loving, compassionate, and we can expect his blessing. Never give up!

Do I praise God for the miracle of fulfilled prophecy? Do I trust him to do miracles in my life?

Preview of Paradise — Isaiah 33-35, Revelation 22:1-2



Jan Brueghel the Elder, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden

Israel as fruitful land both predicts Christ's paradisaical Kingdom and looks back to Eden. In addition, there is a straightforward Messianic prophecy of healing the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the mute. Christ used these miracles to affirm himself as Messiah.

Once more messages of judgment on Assyria and Edom stand in contrast with Messianic promises: he will bring mercy and salvation, will show his power, we will see him as a king in his splendor, and he will forgive our sins.

Perhaps the prophecies of a fruitful land inspired the Jewish people who returned to Israel. They have planted forests in the desert, and flowers from the desert are exported to Europe. Isaiah predicted that the desert would blossom with flowers, and there would be abundant water. Israel's thriving flower export business, and creative water projects in the desert beautifully fulfill these prophecies. This looks forward to a future when the environment is whole and can never again be damaged in the new heaven and new earth.

When we succeed in making the land beautiful today it is an act of worship. Our gardens, small or large, are a celebration of the forward look to paradise. A restored creation is a sign of Messiah, and restored bodies are as well, and as ordinary people, we can be part of this. Having seen Christ heal the lame, it is beautiful that Peter and John had the confidence to follow him and do the same for a man born lame in Acts 3. Today we continue healing the lame with prosthetics, the deaf with hearing aids, the sight-impaired with surgery or corrective lenses, and so on. These may feel mundane and scientific, but they do continue the blessings promised here. No work on behalf of the ill is wasted.

To the extent that I can, am I helping expand God's will on earth as in heaven?

Resurrection — Isaiah 36-39, Matthew 28:6



Paris Psalter, The Healing of Hezekiah

Hezekiah's rescue from inevitable death to unexpected life bears a resemblance to the story of Jonah in that the recovery took place in three days. Christ used the story of Jonah as analogous to his coming death and resurrection.

There are many instances where the symbolism of three days can be seen as prefiguring resurrection. Here are six stories that include the detail of three days which prefigure Christ by taking place at the right time, the right place, or with resurrection imagery in prayer.

Abraham and Isaac	At Mount Moriah
Crossing Red Sea	Three days after Passover
David's plague ends	At Mount Moriah
Hezekiah's illness ends	Resurrection psalm
Esther's intercession	Three days after Passover
Jonah	Resurrection psalm

It is fitting that Christ's death and resurrection after three days are the seventh and perfect instance of the reversal of death and judgment. While only one reference in Hosea seems to speak directly of resurrection after three days, these stories, the imagery of the new creation on the eighth day, and allusions to resurrection in the wisdom literature and prophets served as preparation for this climactic event of history.

Do I see any physical or emotional healing as a kind of resurrection?

Hope of all the world — Isaiah 40-44, Matthew 12:21



El Greco, Healing of the Man Born Blind

Isaiah's prophecies of Messiah are fulfilled in Christ, and Matthew selected a quotation here to emphasize that Christ is for all people.

The tone of Isaiah changes so dramatically here at Chapter 40 that many see it as a second book by an author writing during the exile. Honoring the first prophet, a third author may have composed Chapters 56-66 after the return from the exile.

Isaiah 40-44 is rich with allusions to Christ, and among those are four references to making the blind see. This had never been done, and Christ did so repeatedly, noting it as a sign. When John the Baptist asked if he was Messiah, Christ responded that these miracles made his case. Lepers had been healed, and the dead had been raised in the Hebrew scriptures, but there were no instances of healing the blind, lame, deaf, and mute, all of which Christ did.

Each Advent we prepare our hearts to celebrate Christ's coming as a child, and many perform Handel's *Messiah*. I deeply appreciate the exquisite annual candlelight performance in a partially restored baroque-era church in our town. The first three passages sung are the first five verses of chapter 40. The tenor calls out: "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people..." and we are comforted. He goes on to announce that the way is being prepared for the coming of the Lord, and then the chorus sings loudly and triumphantly that "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

Isaiah 44:22 comforts us that God has forgiven our sins. Two images of things that dissolve and disappear--clouds and mist--describe what God does with our sins. They were there, visible and obvious, and then they were just gone. Forgotten and not able to be reconstructed, making nothing to carry around and worry about.

Do I celebrate the glory of the Lord fully revealed in Christ? Do I celebrate that sin has disappeared?

Fulfilling Prophecy — Isaiah 45-48, Matthew 12:17



Claudel Audron the Younger, Cyrus Hunting Wild Boar

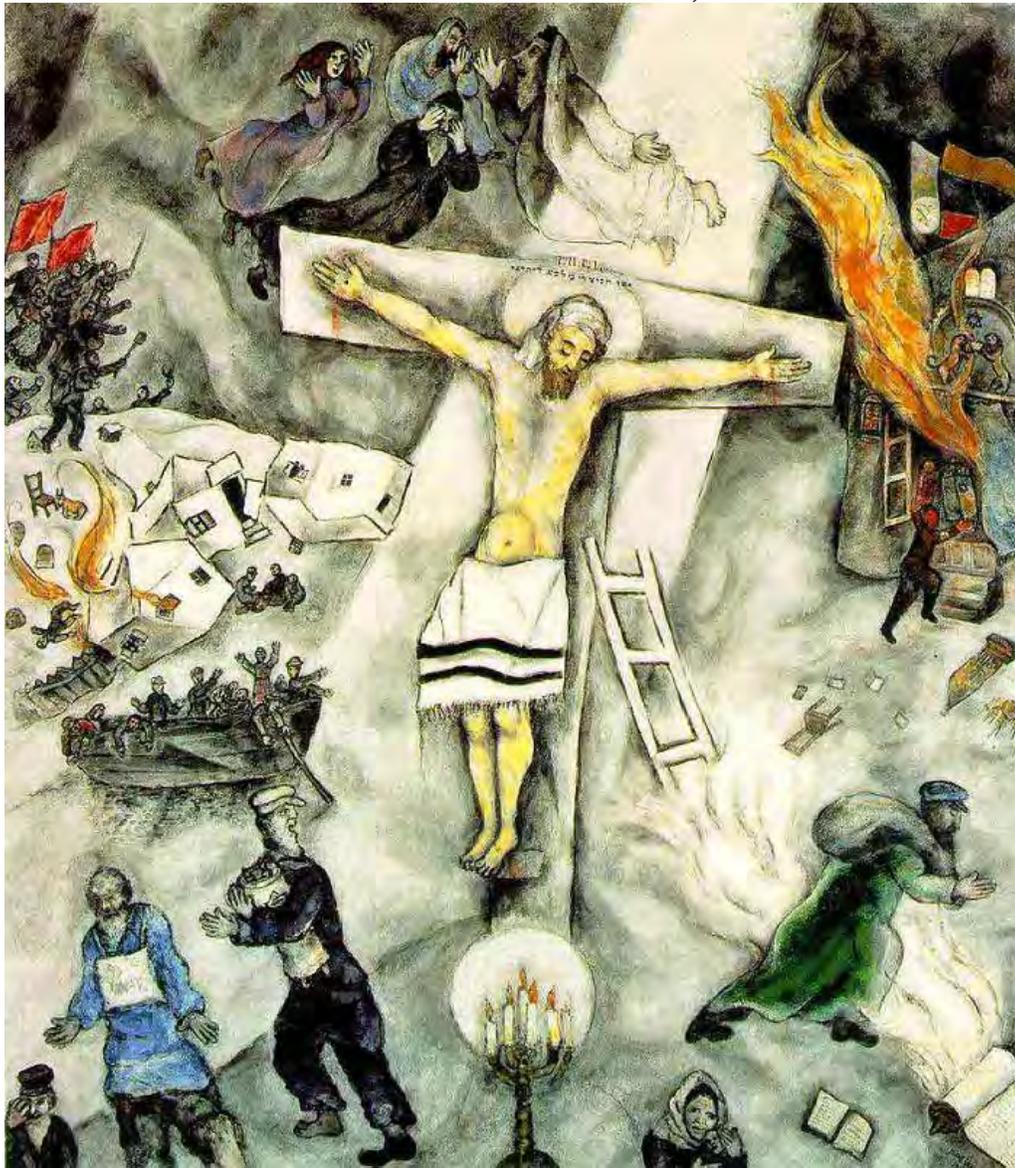
The gospel writers repeatedly identify Isaiah's prophecies as being fulfilled by Christ. He was promised as our redeemer, one who cares for us, refines us with suffering, and one whose promises will be fulfilled. Precursors identified as "anointed ones", or Messiahs, will culminate in Christ.

One such anointed one was Cyrus the Great. Starting at the end of Isaiah 45, he was identified as God's shepherd who would command that Jerusalem be rebuilt and allow the temple to be restored. If this section of Isaiah was written during the exile, perhaps Cyrus had already begun his reign as King of Persia. He ascended that throne in 559 BC, conquered the Medes ten years later, conquered Babylon ten years after that, and allowed the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple the following year. This perfectly fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy of a return seventy years after captivity.

As we have seen over and over, God uses macro-politics to carry out his purposes. While Cyrus became great and ruled over more people than any other ruler has done, he was still a servant to the greatest ruler. This prophetic moment reminds us to see the macro-politics of our own time as something within God's hands, potentially carrying out his purposes.

Do I trust that God is far greater than any political figure, working out his purposes?

Preview of Messiah — Isaiah 49-53, Acts 8:32-35



Marc Chagall, White Crucifixion

Isaiah presented Christ as the suffering servant. Until Christ came it was a mystery how Messiah could both be a suffering servant and a triumphant king. The cross and resurrection resolved the paradox.

Christ is visible everywhere in these chapters, and yet the same promises can apply to us. They make excellent sticky-note-on-my-mirror material: a promise that God called us by name from the womb, that at the right time he will respond to us, that he comforts and has compassion on us in our sorrow, that those who wait for him will never be put to shame. We are promised he will save our children, open our understanding to his will, allow us to triumph, keep us from fear of scorn, and put

his words in our mouths. Most beautifully foreshadowing Christ, God promises to reveal his name, and says that people will come to know its power.

There are at least 15 direct quotes from these chapters in the New Testament. But it is not hard to find allusions and parallels that are not direct quotes. For example, Isaiah 49:3 says “you will bring me glory” and Christ prayed in John 17:4 “I brought you glory here on earth...” But then he draws all of us in, as well. Referring to his disciples, he says, “they bring me glory” (vs. 10), and for all of us, “I have given them the glory you gave me” (vs. 22). Finally he says he wants us to be with him so we “can see all the glory you gave me.” (vs. 24)

Every line in this section tells us important things about Christ and the crucifixion and our salvation are so fully prophesied that these passages reward us. Others chapters in Isaiah may be a struggle; there is no struggle here because Christ is seen so clearly. We are told that he carried our sins, not his own; he was beaten so that we could be made whole. When I feel great sorrow and weakness beyond my ability to bear, knowing Christ carries my grief comforts me. All my sin, rebellion, brokenness, and illness were placed on him on the cross. I can turn any hard thing over to him and not carry it as my burden.

Has Christ forgiven me and made me whole? Does he carry my burdens?

Call to Joy — Isaiah 54-58, Luke 10:21



Van Gogh, Wheatfield with cypress

Christ brings joy. Joy, rejoice, and delight are all keywords in Isaiah, only following Psalms in number of occurrences. No other books come close.

	<i>Isaiah</i>	<i>Psalms</i>	<i>All scripture</i>
Joy	33	57	242
Rejoice	20	43	154
Delight	14	29	105

In these chapters sources of joy include family, God's protection, God's word prospering, being in God's house, healing and comfort, and honoring the Lord's Day.

The litany of things elsewhere in Isaiah that are said to bring joy include: harvest and ripened fruit
wine and good food
water and streams in the desert, and the wilderness in bloom
salvation and the gift of righteousness
God's presence, his acts, his creation, and his glory
God's comfort and compassion
Sabbath rest
celebration festivals, music, worship, and singing
resurrection,
the lame leaping, the mute shouting
being rescued and returned to the land, and Israel's redemption of Israel
God's return to Jerusalem, and the city itself
children, and marriage
triumph, riches, success, mourning reversed, honor,
trust in God, fear of God, humility, and prayer

And most importantly of all, Messiah himself brings joy. In Isaiah 58 a list of good deeds includes the promise that one's light will shine in the darkness as a result of them. Christ offered the same imagery, saying our good deeds that bring God praise make us lights.

Are joy and light obvious markers of my life?

Sin, Savior, Spirit — Isaiah 59-61, Luke 4:12-19



Van Gogh, Rocks with Oak Tree

In his first public sermon, Christ used Isaiah's prophecy to announce his arrival as Messiah, bringing a glorious new kingdom where joy replaces mourning. In his quote, Christ stopped short of the line predicting God's vengeance, focusing on the good news, signaling that God's vengeance is suspended in Christ.

These three chapters teach us the good news. Chapter 59 begins with our problem: our sins have cut us off from God. Justice is nowhere to be found, our sins are piled up before God, so he must act. God promises that a Redeemer will come to buy back those who turn from their sins, and His Spirit will be one with them.

Isaiah 60 says the nations will come to the light of God in Jerusalem, beginning with an allusion to the wise men at Christ's birth. Mighty kings will come to see his radiance, arriving on camels, bringing gold and incense. There are then more promises for Israel's final restoration. A public prayer celebrating the light of Christ coming is possible every year in listening to Handel's *Messiah* as the chorus urges

us to “Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.” The bass continues the next two verses of Isaiah 60 promising that the “Gentiles will come to thy light”. I am one of those Gentiles, one of the nations, who has been brought into this story of a rescuing Messiah.

Chapter 61 is one of the most beautiful in the book. In addition to the verses Christ quoted, there are promises of beauty for ashes, joy instead of mourning, praise instead of despair, and people like strong and graceful oaks. The blessings including restoring ruins, receiving treasures from the nations, prosperity, joy, honor, blessing, salvation, and justice. What a litany of promises to speak out in faith, celebrating what God longs to give those who have turned from sin to the Savior.

So often there are things that bring grief and cause us to mourn. And, in fact, I have learned that we really have to mourn our losses so that we don't get emotionally stuck in them. Some of that can include repentance and sorrow for our own failures, but also just for circumstances or the actions of others or just life or things we just plain cannot understand. In the beatitudes Jesus said that those who mourn are happy because they will be comforted, and his comfort is available in the midst of mourning. But this chapter speaks not only of "comfort to the brokenhearted" but actual changed circumstances: “a time of favor to those who mourn, beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, praise instead of despair.” When I am praying and hoping that mourning will turn to joy I sometimes get disheartened wondering how long it will take. But when I remember things I mourned over in the past that turned to joyous blessing, I am encouraged. I have a long and encouraging litany of times when my mourning turned to joy.

Has God given me beauty for ashes?

Prayer for Jerusalem — Isaiah 62-66, Revelation 21:10



Samuel Lawson Booth, Jerusalem

The earthly Jerusalem and its restoration and glory are forerunners of the holy city of God at the end of time where Christ reigns. The Psalmist tells us to pray for peace in the earthly Jerusalem, something that has been elusive. Those who do love the city are promised that they will prosper.

Chapter 62 celebrates Jerusalem and the return of the Jews to the land, and ends with final judgment in chapter 63, a world harvest and new heavens and earth in chapter 65, and God reigning from his heavenly throne in chapter 66. We are promised that God blesses the humble and contrite.

In the last chapter we have a prophecy for modern Israel, a nation born in a day. At midnight May 14th, 1948 nationhood was proclaimed, and a United Nations vote confirmed it in the morning. In one day, people who had not had a nation for nearly 2,000 years were part of something new.

We live in astonishing times when we can compare newspapers and scripture and begin to see things shaping up for the grand finale.

In Isaiah 64:4 we are promised that God is one who works on behalf of those who wait for him. He welcomes those who cheerfully do good. If any of us have the experience of waiting a long time to see God answer our prayers and act on our behalf, this reassures us that he will act, and that meanwhile we can stay cheerful, doing all the good we can do.

Do I eagerly wait for Christ to act on my behalf? Do I eagerly await Christ's final victory?

Jeremiah's Call — Jeremiah 1-2, John 7:16-18



Marc Chagall, Jeremiah receives the gift of prophecy

Jeremiah and Jesus were called as prophets to deliver God's word. There was a specific moment of commissioning for their public ministries, Jeremiah with visions and a voice, Jesus with the descent of the dove and God's voice at his baptism. Their messages included hope, but the religious and political leaders resisted them for the judgment they proclaimed, causing both much suffering.

This is a very personal story. In contrast to Isaiah, whose name occurs 20 times in his book, Jeremiah's name occurs 147 times in his, and there are at least 60 other personal names. Hence, rather than Messianic prophecies, the prophetic aspect is Jeremiah himself, his life foreshadowing that of Christ.

Like Jeremiah we may be called to do something we feel is far too difficult for us. God's promise to Jeremiah to be with him and take care of him can help us. Responding to God's call, discerning our vocation, and remaining faithful in it are all critically important in our spiritual development. Jeremiah's example reinforces that God has a purpose for each one of us.

But Jeremiah makes very difficult reading since the sense of impending doom and tragedy is unrelenting. He was a melancholy prophet with a gloomy message his listeners did not want to hear. Israel had already disappeared into Assyria, and now Judah was on the verge of capture by Babylon. He alerted the people that repentance could still avert the coming tragedy as it had in the past, but they did not listen.

Much as we may hate to admit it, Jeremiah's message of gloom is appropriate for us. We too have many potential coming disasters in international politics, the ecology of the planet, gap between rich and poor, nuclear threat, our addictions, and the distortions of our faith we tolerate. We also need to wake up. Jeremiah, hard to read as it is, may be the medicine we need.

Am I willing to face the hard and negative realities of the world?

God Our Father — Jeremiah 3-6, Matthew 6:9



Pompeo Batoni, Return of the prodigal son

Jeremiah referred to God as Father, and this became Christ's preferred way of referring to God. Jeremiah expressed God the Father's frustration with rebellious and difficult children. In contrast, Christ was the Father's perfectly obedient son.

Jeremiah relentlessly called for repentance. He warned of coming disaster, using the word 37 times, about a third of all uses in the scripture. Because of their stubborn disobedience, war, famine, disease, destruction of the city, and exile would come. If they would repent, God would change his mind. Twelve times, God warned that he would bring disaster.

God's unconditional or unfailing love seems hidden by Jeremiah's barrage of critique and demands for change. On a human level, we can see that parents may go through something similar with a child choosing addiction, and in tough love make a decision the child must move out. The painful loss of relationship includes a hope for reconciliation and restoration. This imagery comes through clearly in Christ's story of the waiting father, eager to embrace his returning prodigal who chose a life away from home. In Jeremiah, God promised he had plans for good and not for disaster. The prerequisite was to come home.

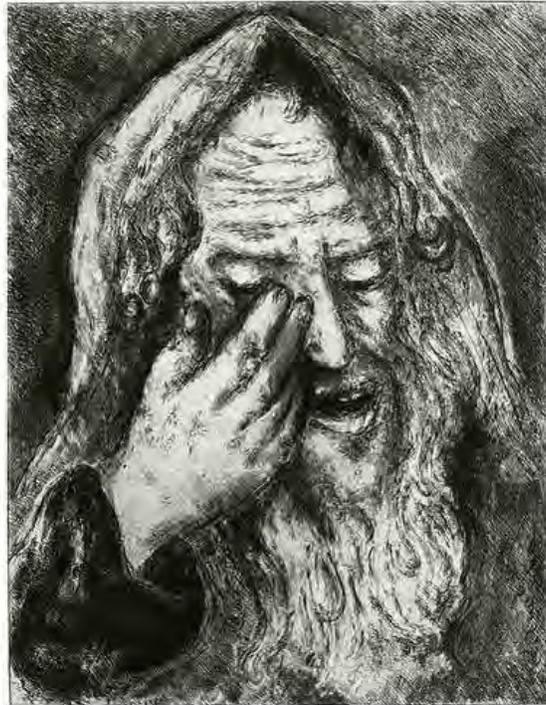
In Chapter 4 Jeremiah warns of a very contemporary issue: impending ecological disaster. Our over-consumption has put us in a precarious position in our care of

the earth. In subsequent chapters he cries out over the impending destruction of war. We only need to see an image of a city destroyed by airstrikes to know these are contemporary issues.

In a reflection on hearing Jeremiah read aloud, Kathleen Norris wrote: "A prophetic task is to reveal the fault lines hidden beneath the comfortable surface of the worlds we invent for ourselves, the national myths as well as the little lies and delusions of control and security that get us through the day. And Jeremiah does this better than anyone."

Am I eager to come home to the Father and to bring others with me?

The Broken Covenant — Jeremiah 7-13, Luke 22:20



Marc Chagall, Sufferings of Jeremiah

Israel's broken covenant with God became a new covenant instituted by Christ. Nearly 1000 years of disobedience were coming to a climactic end with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. In Chapter 11 God made the case that judgment was for breaking the covenant. He also reinforced that if they repented, he was more than willing to change his plans to send disaster. He could simultaneously say that his love is unending and warn that he would bring Jerusalem to ruin. His love could not tolerate their unfaithfulness and his justice required that he abandon them and scatter them like chaff. What a challenge for us to examine our own hearts and see if we are inviting discipline by our own choices to sin.

Jeremiah offered his warnings with vivid images of the people and their sin: cracked cisterns, corrupted wild vines, prostitutes, wayward children, and rejected silver. His images of destruction are equally vivid: lion from the forest, wolf from the desert, leopard lurking, burning wind, storm wind, billows and waves.

Reading Jeremiah can be painful, since not only is his message difficult, but he suffered, got depressed, and felt overwhelmed. Reading the prophets all at once is hard. They were intended for specific situations over a 400-year time-span and a wide geographic area. They are tough medicine in the overall story, critical testimony of God's faithfulness in calling for repentance and offering mercy at every juncture.

Jeremiah's complaints about the sins of his time have an alarmingly contemporary feel. In Chapter 7 he expresses horror at the practice of people sacrificing their own children. Some of us feel that same visceral revulsion over abortion or child abuse. All agree that something is seriously wrong in our care of the next generation. In Chapters 8-10 Jeremiah laments the twisting of God's message by religious people who do not really love God. Painfully, we can share Jeremiah's grief over distortions of the faith so prevalent in our time.

Am I willing to humbly repent on behalf of the sins of my culture?

Jeremiah's Imagery — Jeremiah 14-19, Matthew 4:19



James Tissot, The Prophet Jeremiah

Jeremiah used vivid images that Christ re-used in his parables. Jeremiah spoke of assembling fishermen to fish for his people. When Jesus called his disciples he invited them to become fishers of men. In a parable, he used the imagery of fish being caught sorted into those unfit to eat and those to be saved.

Jeremiah and Jesus compared godly people to fruitful trees. They both compared shepherds to spiritual leaders. Both spoke of living water. Jesus used it to refer to the Holy Spirit, and Jeremiah spoke of God as a fountain. Jeremiah's visit to the potter's house spoke of God's control of the nations, and Paul took this image and applied it to us as individuals.

In Chapter 18 the image is used that if God decrees that a nation should be uprooted, but there is repentance, God will relent. If he plants a nation, making it strong and great, he will not bless it if it turns to evil. This is a theme that threads through the book. In Jeremiah's call in Chapter 1, he was commissioned with a message to uproot kingdoms and plant others. In Chapters 31 and 32 there is a promise that God will replant Israel after uprooting her. Christ used a similar theme in the parable of the tree that was not giving fruit, suggesting it be fertilized

and given more time before uprooting it, a warning that these images still apply to us today.

Christ's metaphorical thinking from reading the prophets re-emerged in his teaching in ways to fit his time which can inspire us to re-imagine creative presentation of good news today. We are nurtured by knowing Christ has fished for us, sought us as lost sheep, planted his seed in us, made us fruitful trees, put living water in us, given us a cup of salvation, and that he is the potter forming our lives.

Does the imagery of scripture reach deep into my heart?

Imprisonment—Jeremiah 20-25, Matthew 26:50



Horace Vernet, Jeremiah on the ruins of Jerusalem

Christ's message was resisted by religious leaders and resulted in his arrest and death. Jeremiah's message was also not well received and he spent much of his prophetic career in prison. His first arrest was temporary when he was placed in stocks at the temple gate. Later imprisonments would include the courtyard of the royal palace, Jonathan the secretary's house, a dungeon cell, a muddy cistern, and the palace prison.

Jeremiah's life experience has always seemed to me analogous to political opponents of modern oppressive regimes, his imprisonment similar to that of modern political prisoners. One such person was Aleksandr Solzhenitzyn, imprisoned and exiled for eleven years in Stalin's Gulag simply for privately expressing his criticisms of the regime. He experienced an isolated cell, a small cell shared with a few other prisoners, and various work camps.

Both men wrote books that told of their prison experiences, and critiqued the evils of their society. Jeremiah used the word wickedness 31 times, evil 46 times, and sin 72 times, making him a strident witnesses against the world's wrongs. Jeremiah's

message included the warning that Judah would experience 70 years of captivity, much like imprisonment.

Jesus, Jeremiah, and many political prisoners did not deserve their treatment. Judah, however, did deserve captivity for the evil that had become pervasive in their society. But the purpose of their captivity was purification, and mercifully they returned from exile. The gospel is that we all deserve exile and imprisonment for our sin, yet Christ, the innocent prisoner, took that upon himself and freed us.

Do I know that I am a sinner who deserves judgment?

Canceling Disaster — Jeremiah 26-28, Matthew 23:13



Gustave Dore, Jeremiah preaching to his followers

Jeremiah and Jesus condemned the religious leaders of their day and were both greeted with cries of “Kill him!” Their messages angered people who thought they were better representatives of God. Both were taken to court and accused. Both warned of coming destruction for the temple and the city. Both had a message of a way out. For both of them, observers insisted they did not deserve death. God told Jeremiah that perhaps they would listen and he could cancel the disaster.

Jesus came with such kindness and compassion for those who were humble enough to realize they could not escape condemnation on their own and needed his grace. He was equally hard on those who were proud and thought they were above repentance. It is far too easy as a Christian to fall into that second category and suppose that we are good, above reproach, and thereby become the very people that Jeremiah and Jesus targeted with their message. In our time some who think they are speaking up against evil like Jeremiah have actually become more like his accusers.

But the message of the gospel is that God has canceled the disaster in Christ. Just as in Jeremiah's time, we must be willing to turn back to him to receive this gift. Our poor choices have led us away from where we should be, and we must turn back.

Have I received the cancellation of disaster in my life?

New Covenant — Jeremiah 29-33, II Corinthians 3:6



Sieger Köder, Last Supper

Jeremiah predicted the new covenant that Christ would bring. Chapters 30-33, called the Book of Consolation, contain many promises of restoration. Prefaced by correspondence between Jeremiah and the captives, he encourages them to be part of life in Babylon and to work for its peace and prosperity.

Jeremiah was told that God would give rest to the weary and joy to the grieving, and he woke up saying his sleep had been very sweet. In this context the promise of a new covenant was given with laws to be written in our hearts. Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 in chapter 8, and repeated verses 33 and 34 in chapter 10 to emphasize that the new covenant spoken of was brought to us by Christ.

In these four chapters are fifteen repetitions of the promise, “I will bring you home.” I took this touching comfort to heart. Though working for peace and prosperity in the United States, it opened hope for a return to Guatemala where I had done similar work. To my delight, the hope of return was fulfilled. For each one of us, our ultimate home is heaven, but our hearts find security in earthly homes as well.

Jeremiah wrote that we are God’s darling children, that he rejoices in doing good for us, and that he restores us. We truly can claim the promise of having a future and hope. The deepest aspect of that hope is the new covenant in Christ which allows us to live with the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts, guiding us, consoling us, changing us, and filling us with power beyond ourselves, restoring health and healing wounds.

Am I living in the comfort of the new covenant?

Integrity — Jeremiah 34-35, Matthew 5:37



Dali, Jeremiah prophesies against the king

Jeremiah condemned not keeping promises and commended keeping them. Christ's ethics also teach integrity, and he recommended we be straightforward in what we say and do. However, if we do not live with integrity, God can send disaster as a way of correcting us.

King Zedekiah made a contract to free slaves, and people obeyed the order. They then changed their minds, and in a stroke of startling cruelty, took people back into slavery. God challenged them for having shrugged off their oath in not freeing their countrymen. The rebuke to slavery in this passage was not taken seriously by Christian slaveholders in our country. Instead they interpreted references to slavery as Biblical justification for injustice.

Earlier Jeremiah had offered the Recabite family wine. They refused out of respect for an ancestral command. God pointed out the contrast between the Recabite obedience for their ancestor and the peoples' refusal to listen to him

Our culture readily accepts a lack of integrity so this call to take the problem seriously is for us.

Do I commit myself to live with integrity and confess any failings in this regard?

Jeremiah's story — Jeremiah 36-40, John 5:39



Marc Chagall, Jeremiah in the pit

Jeremiah's experiences as a rejected prophet point to Christ's rejection, and his imprisonment seems symbolic of death and burial. As Jerusalem fell, Jeremiah was freed from imprisonment in a moment symbolic of resurrection. Jeremiah made relatively few Messianic prophecies, but his whole life was prophetic.

Called to preach "Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my spokesman to the world." (1:7)

Suffered opposition "I am suffering for your sake." (15:7)

Confident of God's care "All will be well with you...I will rescue you from their cruel hands." (15:11, 21)

Arrested and whipped "So he arrested Jeremiah and had him whipped and put in stocks..." (20:2, 37:16)

Mocked "Now I am mocked by everyone in the city." (20:7)

Tried in court "They rushed over...to hold court." (26:10)

Message rejected "Neither the king nor his officials showed any sign of fear or repentance at what they heard." (30:24)

Protested innocence as arrested (cf. comments in the garden Matthew 26:55):
“What crime have I committed? What have I done against you, your officials, or the people that I should be imprisoned like this?” (37:18)

Leaders appealed for his death “So these officials went to the king and said, ‘Sir, this man must die!’” (38:4)

Ruler abdicated authority (cf. Pilate): “So King Zedekiah agreed, “All right,”
he said, “Do as you like. I will do nothing to stop you.” (38.3)

Placed in a “tomb” The officials...lowered him by ropes into an empty cistern in the prison yard. (38:6)
Raised out of the “tomb” They pulled him out. (38:17)

Rescued from judgment (Cf. resurrection)
Released from chains of prisoners. (40:1-6)

Because the means of extending God’s rule was the suffering of the cross, God expects us to extend the kingdom through love that bears suffering. Jeremiah’s life serves as a model of how to faithfully give a difficult message even when it is rejected, and how to suffer redemptively.

Is redemptive suffering a reality in my life?

Protection amidst disaster—Jeremiah 41-45, Matthew 23:37



Peter Paul Rubens, Jeremiah dictating the word of God to Baruch

Amidst Jeremiah's unrelenting predictions of disaster are promises of protection for those who love God. Christ's image of protection—a mother hen with her chicks—shows God's tenderness for his people even in the midst of disaster, and parallels Jeremiah's imagery. We are also told that God sorrows over the punishment he brings, and while he uses political chaos to achieve his purposes, he protects those who love him in the midst of it.

Jerusalem had fallen and those who remained in the land assassinated the appointed ruler. They hoped to escape to Egypt, but Jeremiah's message from God was that they should stay in the land and God would not uproot them. But the people rebelliously said they would not obey this command, and defended their idolatrous reverence for the Queen of Heaven. Jeremiah warned they would suffer war and famine and all of them would die.

Jeremiah's secretary, Baruch, had received a very different message earlier, which was recorded here in chapter 45. He was overwhelmed with the messages of disaster he was helping deliver. God's tender response was for him not to be discouraged but to be aware that God would protect him in the midst of disaster. God had given a similar hopeful message to the man who rescued Jeremiah from nearly certain death in the cistern. Even though he would see the destruction of the city, God would rescue him.

I would prefer to be like these men, obedient and protected in difficult political circumstances, than be like those disobediently fleeing to Egypt. We are not

promised a trouble-free life in an easy environment, but we can grasp this promise to Baruch that God will protect us in the midst of great difficulties.

Do I turn to God for protection when surrounded by trouble?

Idolatry in the Nations — Jeremiah 46-51, I John 5:21



Sieger Köder, Mercy

Jeremiah called the nations to repent of idolatry. Christ never used the word idols, but the spiritual world behind them was evident as he overcame demonic forces. In Christ these spiritual forces were defeated at the cross, and they are empty, able to be overcome today. Even in the midst of judgement on idolatry, he expressed mercy for widows and orphans, redeemed captives, and was like a lawyer, pleading our case.

Each nation had its own idols: Egypt revered Amon, Moab revered Chemosh, Ammon revered Molech, and Babylon revered Bel and Marduk. Other forms of false worship challenged are more similar to our own temptations today. Edom relied on pride, and the nomadic tribes were self-sufficient. Jeremiah warned surrounding nations that Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was coming. Just as God's people were to receive correction and judgment, the nations were subject to the same principles.

When called, Jeremiah had been told he would give messages to nations and kingdoms. In Eugene Peterson's beautiful reflection on Jeremiah's life, *Run With the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best*, he points out that the ten kingdoms to whom Jeremiah wrote covered 750,000 square miles. The experts say the messages are great poetry, and show "extraordinary knowledge of the geography, the history and the politics of these nations...This feature makes our understanding of the

message more difficult, for many of the geographical features and political alliances can no longer be determined. But every difficulty we encounter in reading the text represents a local detail in which the Philistines and the Babylonians recognized that they were being addressed with attentive and personal seriousness.” Peterson points out how un-ethnocentric Jeremiah was in these messages, and applies this to our call to be skilled at crossing cultural boundaries.

A poem about God the creator who is contrasted with idols is repeated twice in the book. It is like a set of bookends. Idolatry is a profound rejection of the living God when we put other things in his place. We need to be quick to notice when the creator is being displaced in our lives with created things.

Is my cry for mercy for any ways in which I allow God to be displaced in my heart?

Jerusalem’s Fall — Jeremiah 52, Lamentations 1-2, Matthew 27:45-46



Rembrandt van Rijn, Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem

Jerusalem's destruction foreshadowed Christ's passion and crucifixion. The agony of suffering in Lamentations captures our painful experiences: loss, death, rejection, no one to help, feeling God's rejection, or a tragedy that provokes repentance. The dark night of suffering profoundly transforms us if we walk through it with God.

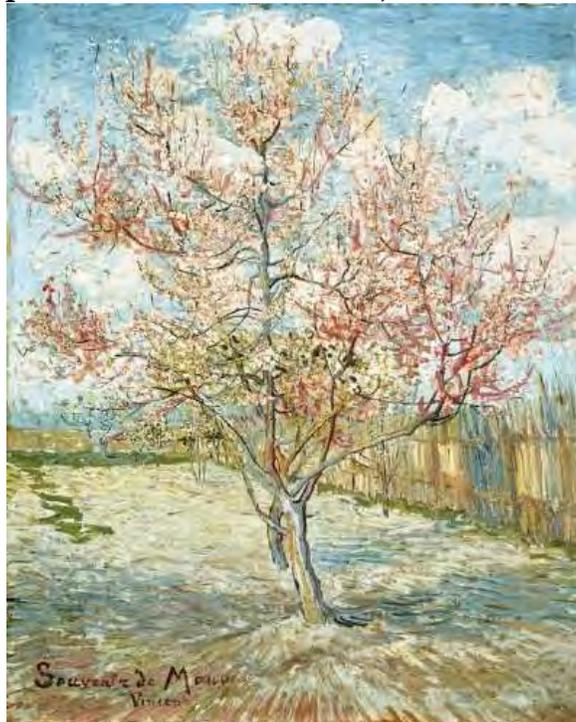
God's temple was burned, the city burned, walls knocked down, silver and gold stolen, and prisoners from the leaders were killed in cold blood. The king was captured, his sons were executed, and he was blinded and taken to Babylon in handcuffs. Judah went into exile, orphaned from her land. Those who remained were afraid and left for Egypt after another bloody massacre.

Our times of suffering are part of this bigger story that ends well with resurrection, triumph and joy as the final reality. I do not need to deny any pain, but its reality is transfigured knowing it fits into a bigger story. In the midst of the pain, Lamentations exhorts us to quietly hope for God's help, not to give up, to choose solitude and silence and prayer, to let go of our questions, and to face the trouble honestly.

In Jeremiah the prophet had complained nine times of incurable wounds, and here he plaintively asked, "Who can heal?" We now know the answer that it is the wounds of Christ that heal our incurable wounds.

Have I asked Christ to heal my incurable wounds?

Hope — Lamentations 3-5, Matthew 12:21



Van Gogh, Peach trees in blossom

Christ represents hope for all, and even in the midst of this cry of depression and despair over the loss of Jerusalem and the nation, there is a word of hope.

We, too, can experience feeling that God has been angry with us, plunge into emotional darkness, and fall into deep sorrow. Most of us can identify with the cry that all we have hoped for from God has been lost, and that we will never forget such an awful time of loss as we grieve. Though God brings us into deep darkness, he hears our despairing cries.

In the midst of this despair the prophet affirms that God's unfailing love never ends. In twelve beautiful verses there is wise thinking for anyone in despair. There is further affirmation that things do not happen without God's permission, that he hears our cries. In these beautiful promises we receive encouragement to seek God and to wait quietly for him. Quiet implies calm confidence rather than the anxious nagging that I have sometimes mislabeled as prayer. The resting heart knows God is trustworthy.

After more laments in Chapters 4 and 5 the prophet ends with the confidence that God remains the same. Even if we feel forgotten, feel rejected, feel he is angry with us, we can still pray for restoration and joy. These are practical sources of comfort, since all of us experience dark times in our lives. We need this model when our joy has ended and our dancing has turned to mourning. We can look to God's promises to turn our mourning into dancing.

Am I in a dark time, or has God turned my mourning to dancing?