

A Hopeful Painting for Exiles

Isaiah 66.12-24

Lord's Day 19, Q/A 52

Rev. Shane Lems

Tonight, we see the clouds rolled back as a scroll. Tonight, the future is painted before our very eyes. The prophet Isaiah gives us graphic details. He gives us a pictorial prophecy, one that points us forward. We're directed to look ahead with the Israelite exiles around 700BC and forget our situations for a moment. Yahweh, through Isaiah, says to his people, "Stop! Forget what's going on around you for just a moment, and let me show you your future."

In all your distress and persecution, dear Christian, turn your eyes to the heavens and wait confidently! This is what Isaiah is doing in this text. This text is doing something; it is comforting the church through graphic pictorial language. It was for Israel in exile and is for the church in exile.

Here in Isaiah 66.12-24 we are given a two-fold picture: one of blessing, one of cursing. We're given good news and bad news – that's what Isaiah is painting for us here. It is that simple: bad news awaits the wicked while good news gives hope to those who trust in Christ. Isaiah wants to comfort God's people with heavenly pictures and frighten the wicked with hellish colors. First, let's scan the horizon of the good news.

Good News for the Exiles (verses 12-14, 18-23)

The good news here in chapter 66 can only be true because of what Isaiah's already preached. He's already preached the gospel. He's already preached about the Man of Sorrows, the Prince of Peace, the Servant of Yahweh, the Anointed One, and so forth. He's already told us that there will be one who will bear iniquities and made many to be accounted righteous (Is 53). He's told us of one who will clothe many with robes of righteousness, salvation, and life (Is 61). He's told us, in the words of Q/A 52, of one who "has stood trial in the place of his people and so removed the whole curse from them."

Isaiah uses legal language: Isaiah preaches justification by faith alone because of Christ's work alone. Isaiah is one of the many places in the Bible where our catechism gets its legal language. Legal language is biblical language. Our catechism uses biblical legal language – just read the first 20 questions! Reformed theology uses legal language. The language of “judge” and “trial” and “curse,” this legal language is found in Isaiah, and must be presupposed as we look at Isaiah 66.

Isaiah tells us of the results of that gospel in terms of the future, the end. In verse 12, Isaiah preaches of peace flowing like a river. This is a word picture of superabundant peace to Jerusalem, God's city. This painting makes peace something that can surround a person and soak him or her like a flowing torrent. Is there turmoil now? Soon, Israel, there will be peace surrounding you like a fast-flowing river that washes away chaos and turmoil.

Do you remember Isaiah's Prince of Peace? The punishment that brought us peace was upon him. He is the Man of Sorrows so we can be people of peace and joy. Again, these beautiful promises are ours because of this Man of Sorrows – Jesus Christ. This beautiful painting presupposes Jesus' saving work. Dear Christian, we have peace – eternal peace – because of Jesus' life and death.

Isaiah continues by preaching comfort. He uses a mother and her child imagery in verses 12-13. This is a familiar illustration: what better picture do we have of earthly love? Can't you just picture a mother cuddling her helpless newborn baby, enwrapping him or her in love and warmth, in songs of love and heartbeats of joy? It awakens your imagination and creates a world of comfort!

Isaiah preaches this comforting picture to exiles: remember the big picture! Stop for a moment! Hang on here, exiles. Stop thinking about all your trials and tribulations and remember that Yahweh is the God of all comfort. Forget about the Assyrians for just a second and remember that God will comfort his people. Eternal comfort is not too far away! It is like the poet's words: this is my comfort in affliction, that God's promises give me life (Ps 119).

And then sight. We'll see in that day (v14). See what? Well, "see" is used four times in our verses. And three of those have to do with seeing God's glory. 1 John 3.2 and Revelation 22.4 say the same thing – that one day we will see the glory of Christ, the glory of the ascended Jesus. And that day will be one of unobstructed peace and comfort and warmth, hope and blessedness.

But not now. Now we walk by faith. Now we walk by believing and trusting and resting in Christ. But then we will walk by sight, as 2 Corinthians 5 says. Now we cannot see this glory so much, but then we will. Now we suffer, now we cry; now we weep, now we have broken hearts, but then there will be glory. Then we will see the face of Christ, and his face will chase away all our worries and cries and tears and broken hearts. Suffering then glory, faith then sight – it's the truth of our Christian earthly exilic existence.

Notice also the rejoicing and flourishing imagery; it is a vision of heavenly joy and bliss. Isaiah here is not just giving us a list of propositions or principles. He's stimulating the right side of our brain, so to speak. Rather than say, "Heaven is this or that," Isaiah paints a picture to make us use the artistic side of our brains, to evoke Christian imagination. He doesn't give us a doctrinal list to adhere to, but a picture to step into, a picture that paints comfort on our hearts. You could tell a child that Disneyland has five roller coasters, or you could use your imagination to describe the excitement of them. The imaginative way makes the child excited for and long for it. That's what Isaiah's doing here: stimulating our imaginations so we long for our exile to be over.

Now we have weak bodies, now we need to take medication, now we need insulin, now we need chemo. Now we don't know exactly what the "hand of the Lord" is doing. Now we don't know why we suffer. But look past these things! Yahweh promises that you shall flourish! The Lord promises that one day your bodies will not be weakened by disease and sin.

Now we can't see his glory so much, can we? Think of what Israel saw! They saw the wicked Assyrians carry the Northern kingdom into a horrible exile. They saw the temple burned to the

ground, Jerusalem crushed, and their own brothers and sisters being beaten and killed and sent off to a foreign land! And what about us? Now we see suffering, we see war and hunger and poverty and so on. We see no glory now.

But then. Then your bodies will flourish like lush green grass growing in a Montana prairie field. Then we will know what his hand is doing! Then we walk by sight! This is new creation language, where wickedness is gone and we can see how our rocky exilic paths lead us to glory. Suffering then glory. Suffering then glory. In answer 52, we are said to face trial and tribulation now, but joy and glory when Jesus returns.

Isaiah preaches more good news. The gentiles will be gathered (verses 19-20). The time is coming to gather people from all nations. Think Abrahamic Promise here! Missionary work is in view. The good news goes forth to gentiles. Think Paul's ministry in Acts here! The gentiles will see the light, messengers will tell all peoples of God's glory.

This is a surprise! Yahweh surprises the Israelites in many ways here. Surprise! Gentiles will be grafted into the covenantal tree! Surprise, I love gentiles too! Surprise, some of them will even be priests and Levites (verse 21). Ephesians three reminds us that believing gentiles are not strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens and members of the household of God because of the Messiah's work. Jesus didn't just die for one class of people, but peoples from all nations – peoples who speak different languages.

Verse 19 tells us about people from Tarshish and Pul and Lud and Tubal and Javan. This means earth's remotest regions. This is what the catechism means when it says, "all his chosen ones." Jesus' "chosen ones" are believers from all over the whole world. And verse twenty is a graphic painting of people from all nations going to the holy mountain. "All his chosen ones" are going to worship the Lord on his holy mountain. These are the elect.

Why is this section good news? Because you and I are products of this mission work. You and I are in that heavenly train. You and I are the ones painted in this picture; you and I who are gentiles! You and I are in the picture, we are the ones riding on these horses and in these chariots, in mules and so on. We are on our way – “me and all his chosen ones” – to the glory of heavenly mount Zion because of Jesus’ work. Never forget the gospel that Isaiah preached!

Then the Sabbath rest in verse 22-23. This is the new, eternal creation. This is the New Heavens and the New Earth. This is a grand, audacious, majestic picture of heaven. Isaiah 65.17 talks about this too; the old will be forgotten. Revelation 21.1 talks about the old order passing away. 1 Peter 3:13, like Isaiah 66, was written to exiled pilgrims who were waiting for new heavens/earth. While we wait, God gives us imaginative portrayals of heaven to comfort us in this time of “distress and persecution.” God through Isaiah painted this picture to comfort exiles waiting to go home. We too are exiles and pilgrims are waiting. We’re waiting to go home, waiting for homecoming day.

Q/A 52 talks about the “joy and glory of heaven.” This is what Isaiah is portraying, the church eternally triumphant. The church eternally joyful and in glory. The Israelites who faced crisis after crisis breathed a sigh of relief, and we can too! Isaiah points us toward the future, the “joy and glory of heaven” to give us comfort. This earth/heavens will pass away! This age of darkness is coming to an end! This “sad world” is not eternal, nor are your troubles! The Assyrians and the great Harlot Babylon will go down in flames, as we’ll see. This sad world is coming to an end. In all your “distress and persecution,” turn your “eyes to the heavens and confidently” wait!

Isaiah gives God’s people a promise of heaven to surprise us, to comfort us, to wake us up, to give us resolve, and to cheer us. We can rejoice with gospel-comfort even though exilic tears fall down our faces and our exilic hearts are broken in two. Jesus is coming again. Jesus is coming again to take you by the hand into the glory of our heavenly home, as the catechism says

These kind of apocalyptic texts roll the clouds back as a scroll to turn our eyes to heaven. These graphic prophetic visions look beyond this present evil age, and be reminded who is on the throne and who is in control. And this isn't just a lesson on eschatology (end times), it is a painting that invites us to look at it, make us forget that we are exiles for a moment; it invites us to step into the painting and imagine the future bliss that awaits us!

This apocalyptic (prophetic visionary) literature separates the universe into two parts: heaven and hell. We've heard what awaits God's people. Isaiah also tells us what awaits the wicked. Its not good news, not fun, it hurts our ears, but it's in the Bible and we must hear it.

Bad News for the wicked (15-17, 24)

Verse 15 continues with an image: Yahweh coming in fire. It is payback time against those who mock Yahweh and practice idolatry! Genesis 3.15 will come true – the ultimate day of crushing defeat of the serpent will happen! The Lord is coming in an inferno of divine wrath on the last day. Isaiah 30 portrays God as burning with anger; his tongue is like a consuming fire. It is terrible imagery, isn't it? He is no "tame God!" Without a mediator, God is a consuming fire!

Still Isaiah gives us more imagery: Yahweh slays with a sword. The sword is stained with the blood of his enemies, as verse 16 portrays. Yahweh's fiery judgment-sword will leave a great number slain, cut-off, killed, and piled up. Yahweh-Christ comes on a white horse to slay wicked just like in Revelation 19. It is terrible imagery, isn't it? He is no "buddy!" How many times have you heard someone say God is nicer than he is mean? Isaiah reminds us of God's hatred for sin and wickedness in most graphic and shocking pictures. The catechism agrees: Jesus is coming as judge to condemn his enemies, to send them to their home in hell.

Yahweh also punishes lawlessness (verse 17). Here is a picture of Israelites doing detestable things contrary to God's law. Remember 1 Peter 3 and the flood/Noah parallel? God's patience will

run out! Repent sinner, for the day of reckoning comes! Now God shows patience, but then there will inferno of hatred for unrepentant sinners.

Notice that judgment includes Israel along with other nations. This would shock the Israelites – and us – hopefully back to their senses. Israel is included – judgment begins with the house of God! Today, the church is a mixed assembly too, isn't it? This terrifying picture of punishment for the wicked should be a wake up shout in our ears. Wake up, sinner! A place in the pew isn't a promise of paradise. Only resting and receiving Jesus Christ is an escape from God's wrath, not just sitting in the pews of a Christian church.

And then comes the end of the wicked (verse 24). Here is a metaphor: worm and fire, a grotesque illustration to shock us. It means eternal suffering in body and soul, as Christ explained in Mark 9:48. This picture is confusing almost, like when you look at an abstract painting. You know generally what it is, but specifically, only the painter knows. So too with hellish eternity: we know it generally, but that's it – it is beyond our comprehension how terrible it is.

Again, this is one of those places where the catechism gets its doctrine of eternal punishment Q/A 52 says “All his enemies and mine he will condemn to everlasting punishment.” Ursinus and Olevian didn't blush at the thought of eternal punishment for the unrepentant. Note that there is no peace, no comfort, no flourishing, no rest, and so on for these sinners. They face the hellish opposite of what Christians face.

And now for a historical picture of this curse. Dearly beloved, Christ was punished like this! He didn't know comfort, peace, prosperity while on earth! I know that usually we preach bad news first then good news, but I want you to see also that good news can come from judgment and cursing, that amidst curse, there can be blessing, amidst sorrow, there can be joy.

Jesus will come with a sword to judge, but remember he laid down that sword and gave up his life for you. He laid down his sword and was struck by the judgment sword, as Q/A 52 notes, in our

place.” He “stood trial in your place,” and “so removed the whole curse from you!” Christ is the curse bearer who removed this “whole curse” from you and me. He “stood trial” and was punished for the sins of his people. He took your “whole curse” on himself and off of you. These terrors in Isaiah 66 are silenced by Christ, silenced for those who rest in and receive Christ.

Isaiah 53 must happen before Jesus takes up the sword of judgment. He must be a Man of Sorrows, smitten and beaten, stricken by God, crushed for our iniquities, slashed by stripes before he can be the glorious judge. In a word, there must be a cross before the crown! Suffering comes before glory. Q/A 52 also notes Jesus suffering – his trial – and his glory, his condemning the wicked and blessing his people. The catechism also notes our trials and our future glory.

Conclusion

Isaiah 66:12-24 brings us out of ourselves, out of our dark world, and into the future. It did these things for God’s people in Isaiah’s time, Paul’s time, Luther’s, and ours. It reminds us of the ultimate: that God is on his throne, that Jesus is stronger than death. It reminds us that what we go through here on earth has an end, and is relatively insignificant in the bigger picture of things.

These images are a call to stand in awe and to worship the omnipotent Christ. They wake us up! Quit sinning! Trust in Christ! Let these pictures of heaven increase your resolve even though you face crisis and tribulation and tears and death as exilic Israel did so many years ago

Yahweh has rolled the clouds back today, as it were, to remind his church of his salvation, power, glory, and might. Is the thought of Christ’s return scary? Do so many books about Jesus’ return make you afraid and confused? Well don’t be! Christ isn’t coming to punish or condemn you, dear Christian! Kids, adults – church – you need not fear Christ’s return as judge because “he has stood trial in your place and so removed the whole curse from you.” He’s coming again to “take you and his chosen ones from all nations into the joy and glory” of heaven. Christ’s return is comforting. His return means homecoming, your coming home.