

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

Monday, March 16th

Isaiah 11

- 1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
- 2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—
- 3 and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
- 4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
- 5 Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
- 6 The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
- 7 The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
- 8 Infants will play near the hole of the cobra;
young children will put their hands into the viper's nest.
- 9 They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.
- 10 In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him,
and his resting place will be glorious. 11 In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time
to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt,
from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the Mediterranean.
- 12 He will raise a banner for the nations
and gather the exiles of Israel;
he will assemble the scattered people of Judah
from the four quarters of the earth.
- 13 Ephraim's jealousy will vanish,
and Judah's enemies will be destroyed;
Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah,
nor Judah hostile toward Ephraim.

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

14 They will swoop down on the slopes of Philistia to the west;
together they will plunder the people to the east.

They will lay hands on Edom and Moab,
and the Ammonites will be subject to them.

15 The LORD will dry up
the gulf of the Egyptian sea;
with a scorching wind he will sweep his hand
over the Euphrates River.
He will break it up into seven streams
so that anyone can cross over in sandals.

16 There will be a highway for the remnant of his people
that is left from Assyria,
as there was for Israel
when they came up from Egypt.

Points of interest:

- 'from the stump of Jesse'—Jesse was David's father. So, the tree here is the royal house of the kingdom of Judah (the half of Israel that stuck with David's family during the Israelite civil war). God had promised David that David would always have a descendant on the throne, as long as those descendants continued to rely on him. They didn't. So, David's family tree will be chopped down. But even that won't be the end; a new tree will grow out of the stump.
- 'The Spirit of the LORD'—in Genesis 1, we read that the Spirit of the LORD was hovering over the empty world. Now, that same Spirit is hovering over this Branch. It fills him with all of the best qualities of David (might, fear of the LORD) and Solomon (wisdom, understanding). In other words, this Branch is the ideal king.
- 'with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked'—he doesn't even need to wield a weapon, because his words alone are so strong and effective. By the way, 'breath' and 'spirit' are related words in Hebrew; this Branch is taking in God's spirit, and then breathing it out.
- 'the leopard will lie down with the goat'—creatures that are naturally predator and prey will act like members of the same herd. Like with the 'desolations' of the LORD in Psalm 46 (last Monday), the Branch uses his tremendous destructive potential to destroy war. You may remember from yesterday's introduction that Isaiah lived during a conflict-ridden time: there were constant local skirmishes, overlaid by major wars among competing empires. Isaiah foresees a time when, by the work of this future king, there will finally be an end to these conflicts.
- 'on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled'—it sounds like God is calling the whole earth his 'holy mountain' here. The whole earth will become like Jerusalem: a place where people can go to meet God and learn about the benefits of following him. If not that, then God is saying that he will bring about peace for Jerusalem, by bringing about peace for the whole world.
- 'the Root of Jesse'—strangely, this shoot from Jesse is somehow also his root. I think this means that the mysterious, future king is in David's family tree, but his greatness isn't derived from David. Actually, it's the other way around: he's the original model after which David was copied. This odd shoot-and-root image uncannily captures Jesus' situation (Jesus lived about 1000 years after David and 700 years after Isaiah). Jesus, through his stepfather, was in fact a member of David's family. But it's not as if Jesus' greatness came from his family connections; David's family was actually pretty unimportant by Jesus' time. On the contrary, it turns out that Jesus is the greater king of whom David was just a foreshadowing.

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

- 'will stand as a banner for the peoples'—a banner was a clear, visible rally point for an army. The army being rallied here seems to be absolutely everyone.
- 'and gather the exiles of Israel'—you may remember from our first week's passages that God promised the land to Abram's descendants, the Israelites. The Israelites were warned that if they did not stick close to God, treat one another well, and welcome foreigners, the Promised Land could also be taken away from them, as it had been taken from the Canaanites before them. In the passage from March 6th, Solomon referred to this possibility when he mentioned there might be a time when God would send his people 'captive to a land far away' (2 Chronicles 6: 36-37). Isaiah is predicting here that foreign captivity will indeed happen, but that it won't be the end of the story. God will re-gather the exiles.
- 'a second time'—I think the first time would be the exodus from Egypt during Moses' time.
- 'from the four quarters of the earth'—verse twelve is basically a poetic repetition of verse eleven. The nations mentioned in verse eleven were rather far away from Israel, in every direction.
- 'He will raise a banner for the nations'—this Root of Jesse goes out to find the scattered exiles of Israel, and ends up collecting all the nations. There are many more 'exiles' out there than anyone ever expected.
- 'Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah'—Ephraim is the other nation that was formed in the Israelite civil war. It's often simply called Israel. The Branch can bring peace between lions and lambs, and even between these squabbling sibling nations.
- 'They will swoop down on the slopes of Philistia to the west'—the scene shifts from the four corners of the earth, to being quite local. Philistia and the other nations in this verse are Israel's closest neighbors. I wonder if the grand vision of every nation being gathered to Jerusalem was a little too much for Isaiah's listeners—or even Isaiah himself—to understand. So, toward the end here, the vision shrinks to a local and more immediate scale. What they really want to know is whether or not they'll defeat the enemies right in front of them as Isaiah is speaking. Strangely, the answer given here is 'yes.' After the universal peace that's described in the rest of the chapter, it's a little confusing to read about these lands being plundered and subjugated. I don't think it's a coincidence that these nations were the Israelites' enemies during David's time. Perhaps Isaiah is saying here that this Root of Jesse will have his enemies just like David did, and that he will defeat them just as completely. Or maybe, while God clearly has bigger plans in mind, he decides to speak to the Israelites in terms they can understand. He's basically saying here, 'Things will someday be as good as they were under David,' though in a way that sounds a bit violent and jingoistic to modern ears.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Try telling God that you would like more of his spirit and presence. I think you'll find that he's quite generous in giving it away. Specifically ask for any counsel, wisdom, might, understanding or knowledge you need today. Then spend a moment waiting to receive this spiritual blessing from God.
- *For your six:* Do any of your six need a 'banner raised' for them? Pray that God would give them encouragement today—that they would feel cheered on in life and sense an extra measure of support in whatever they may be facing today.
- *For America:* I'm starting to think that God's something of a local geography buff. God seems very familiar with all sorts of countries, cities, rivers and seas. I get the impression that if I were to tell him I'm from Bolingbrook, without missing a beat God would say,

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

'What do you think about that new park they're building along the river?' God seems to know and love every corner of civilization. Pick five American cities with which you're familiar, and pray for God's blessing on each of them. Pray that each of them would be a city that prospers, and that God would create highways there—specific ways for the people of those cities to find and connect with him.

Tuesday, March 17th

Isaiah 25

- 1 LORD, you are my God;
I will exalt you and praise your name,
for in perfect faithfulness
you have done wonderful things,
things planned long ago.
- 2 You have made the city a heap of rubble,
the fortified town a ruin,
the foreigners' stronghold a city no more;
it will never be rebuilt.
- 3 Therefore strong peoples will honor you;
cities of ruthless nations will revere you.
- 4 You have been a refuge for the poor,
a refuge for the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the storm
and a shade from the heat.
For the breath of the ruthless
is like a storm driving against a wall
- 5 and like the heat of the desert.
You silence the uproar of foreigners;
as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud,
so the song of the ruthless is stilled.
- 6 On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
- 7 On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
- 8 he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace
from all the earth.
The LORD has spoken.
- 9 In that day they will say,
"Surely this is our God;

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

Points of interest:

- 'You have made the city a heap of rubble'—this isn't what I expected when Isaiah mentioned the 'wonderful things' God had done. I wonder what exactly this city was like that its total destruction was such good news. It could be that Isaiah is talking about Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, or about Babylon. Assyria and Babylon were the two places responsible for bringing the Israelites into foreign captivity (the Assyrians conquered Ephraim, and the Babylonians later conquered Judah). So, perhaps the destruction of this city allows for the return of the exiles we saw in our last passage. This verse also reminds me of the Tower of Babel, the overthrow of which allowed God's plans for humanity to move forward.
- 'cities of ruthless nations will revere you'—apparently, the destruction of the strong city has positive results even for the strong city itself. God gets the attention and respect of the strong by showing his strength.
- 'a shade from the heat'—the rich and powerful are like a relentless desert sun, beating down on the poor.
- 'On this mountain'—this mountain would be Zion, where the temple is located. Throughout our study, we've noticed a dynamic tension between God's worldwide goals and his local plans: God wants to bless all the nations, but he starts by blessing just one person, Abram; God is too big for the entire world to contain, but God's presence rests in a unique way on one building in Jerusalem; God designates the Israelites a special nation, but for the sake of the rest of the nations. Over time, the Israelites put a greater and greater emphasis on the 'special' part, and tended to forget the 'for the sake of the rest' part. Isaiah seems to be restoring the balance here. He affirms that the temple is indeed the center of the action, but what happens there is for everybody, not just the people of Israel.
- 'a feast of rich food for all peoples'—in the verse above, God silences the 'uproar of foreigners.' It turns out that he's settling them down so that he can throw them a great big party.
- 'he will swallow up death forever'—the rich and the poor have their differences, but they also have a common enemy: death. In the end, this is the enemy God is most interested in defeating.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Isaiah starts this chapter by declaring, 'LORD, you are my God'. Try starting your day by putting yourself in God's hands. Write it down or say it aloud. Tell him that you want to rely on Him—his goodness, faithfulness and love—today. How does it feel to put your trust in God's ability to perform 'wonderful things'? Keep tabs on this throughout the day. Thank God whenever it seems like he has come through for you; and try letting him know when your trust in him is waning, and why.
- *For your six:* God knows how to appreciate a good party. Consider how you could follow God's example of preparing 'a feast of rich foods' for your six. Maybe it isn't actually a meal specifically (although it might be...who doesn't like a well prepared home-cooked dinner?) but any way of showing your six that they are known and celebrated. Ask God if there is a way he would like to use you to lavishly love one or all of your six.
- *For America:* Pray today for the hungry. Compared to other nations, America as a whole has an ABUNDANCE of food. However, there are still some fairly large discrepancies in who experiences that abundance. Pray for the physically hungry in America (ProjectBread reports

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

that in Massachusetts alone there are ½ a million people struggling to put food on the table) that God would watch after them. Pray that every family in our nation would get a healthy share of its abundance.

Wednesday, March 18th

Isaiah 42

- 1 "Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.
- 2 He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
- 3 A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
- 4 he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope."
- 5 This is what God the LORD says—
he who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:
- 6 "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,
- 7 to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.
- 8 "I am the LORD; that is my name!
I will not yield my glory to another
or my praise to idols.
- 9 See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you."
- 10 Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise from the ends of the earth,
you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it,
you islands, and all who live in them.

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

11 Let the wilderness and its towns raise their voices;
let the settlements where Kedar lives rejoice.

Let the people of Sela sing for joy;
let them shout from the mountaintops.

12 Let them give glory to the LORD
and proclaim his praise in the islands.

13 The LORD will march out like a champion,
like a warrior he will stir up his zeal;
with a shout he will raise the battle cry
and will triumph over his enemies.

14 "For a long time I have kept silent,
I have been quiet and held myself back.
But now, like a woman in childbirth,
I cry out, I gasp and pant.

15 I will lay waste the mountains and hills
and dry up all their vegetation;
I will turn rivers into islands
and dry up the pools.

16 I will lead the blind by ways they have not known,
along unfamiliar paths I will guide them;
I will turn the darkness into light before them
and make the rough places smooth.
These are the things I will do;
I will not forsake them.

17 But those who trust in idols,
who say to images, 'You are our gods,'
will be turned back in utter shame.

Points of interest:

- 'my chosen one in whom I delight'—this servant, and the Branch/Root from Monday, remind me of Abram: one person chosen to bring about blessing for all people. It's as if God is pushing the reset button. God started out by calling all of humanity to carry goodness into the world. In the aftermath of the Babel incident, he decided to focus on Abram alone, as a small start to worldwide blessing. He expanded from that one person to a single nation, Israel. The idea was for Israel to serve as a model for other nations, and as a nation of priests to connect those other nations with God. Thus far, Israel has fallen short on both counts. Israel has had a difficult time staying in faithful relationship with God themselves, and—apart from some anomalies like in the time of Solomon—shown very little interest in introducing other nations to God. So, here God is starting over again with one person. The goal remains the same: setting everything right in all the earth.
- 'a smoldering wick he will not snuff out'—this is an interesting contrast with the Branch, who killed his enemies with his breath. Here, the servant (who I think is actually the same person as the Branch) is so gentle that he won't blow out a guttering candle.
- 'till he establishes justice on earth'—again, like in the psalms, one of God's major concerns is to see that all nations are governed well.

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

- 'who gives breath to its people'—this is a poetic way of saying that God is the source of all life, but I think it might also be a reference to the Spirit Isaiah has been talking about. Remember, 'spirit' and 'breath' are related words. Maybe Isaiah is saying here that the Spirit that rests on this servant is intended eventually for all people.
- 'will make you to be a covenant for the people'—this is interesting. You may recall from our Exodus passage that a covenant is a contract or an agreement. Somehow, this person will serve as a contract between God and people.
- 'and a light for the Gentiles'—this is the first time we've run across the word *Gentiles*. It's an Anglicized version of the Latin for 'nations.' In the original Hebrew, this is exactly the same word as is translated 'nations' elsewhere. I'm not sure, but I think the translators chose to render it 'Gentiles' here to mark the fact that increasingly the word took on a technical, theological meaning as 'those outside of the covenant.' Over time, Jewish theologians (Jew meaning 'from Judah') increasingly split the world into two groups: the Jews (those on the inside), and the Gentiles (those on the outside). In this verse, these outsiders are actually being included in the covenant.
- 'I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols'—in Isaiah particularly, God often compares himself to so-called gods that are made by human beings out of wood or metal. God's glory, what distinguishes him from these idols, is that he can hear and respond when people ask him for help.
- 'the former things have taken place'—things have so far happened just as God predicted. Now, he has something new in store.
- 'you islands, and all who live in them'—*the islands* is Isaiah's way of saying, 'the other end of the world.'
- 'the settlements where Kedar lives'—Kedar and Sela were remote settlements in the desert. So, together verses ten and eleven say, 'Praise him, whether you're in the ocean or the desert.'
- 'The LORD will march out like a champion'—earlier, he was careful not to break a bruised reed. Now, he's more like a bull in a china shop.
- 'I will lead the blind'—it turns out that even this more militant manifestation of the servant has a peaceful purpose in mind. He's leading a blind person, and clearing impediments out of that blind person's path.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* God is often in the business of doing 'new things.' Ask God to point your attention toward any new things he is doing in you or in your family.
- *For your six:* Pray that God would be inviting your six into a vibrant connection with him. Pray that any barriers that might get in the way of that connection would be removed. Pray that nothing would keep your six from receiving whatever God might have for them.
- *For America:* Pray that our nation would not be one that trusts in idols. Ask God to forgive us for ways that we rely on things we have created—such as the military, the economy, advancements in technology, and so on—instead of relying on him.

Thursday, March 19th

Isaiah 49: 1-7

1 Listen to me, you islands;
hear this, you distant nations:
Before I was born the LORD called me;
from my birth he has made mention of my name.

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

- 2 He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me into a polished arrow
and concealed me in his quiver.
- 3 He said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."
- 4 But I said, "I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing at all.
Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand,
and my reward is with my God."
- 5 And now the LORD says—
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
and gather Israel to himself,
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD
and my God has been my strength—
- 6 he says:
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."
- 7 This is what the LORD says—
the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—
to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,
to the servant of rulers:
"Kings will see you and stand up,
princes will see and bow down,
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

Points of interest:

- 'hear this, you distant nations'—this message is particularly aimed at people who are very far away from Jerusalem.
- 'He made my mouth like a sharpened sword'—I think this prophecy is working on two different levels simultaneously. On one level, the subject is Isaiah himself, whose prophecies are like a sharpened sword. On the other level, we have yet another picture of this mysterious future, ideal king (the Branch, the Root, the servant).
- 'concealed me in his quiver'—to me, it seems that this part of the prophecy is especially applicable to Isaiah. His words are like sharp arrows, but instead of being shot, they're just kept in the quiver. As far as he can see, his words are being wasted. It must have been hard indeed to be Isaiah. He's prophesying about the Jewish return from exile—and things that happen long after that, even—more than a hundred years before they even go into exile. No one in Jerusalem believes a word he says; they just can't believe that God would ever let the

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

temple be taken by a foreign nation (think of Psalm 46 from last week). What's the point of continuing to speak?

- 'You are my servant, Israel'—whether God is speaking to Isaiah, the future king, or both, I think what God is saying is that they fulfill God's long-standing intentions for Israel. They're what Israel is supposed to be.
- 'It is too small a thing'—it's not that Isaiah's words are being wasted. Rather, they're being saved for a more worthy purpose, when the time is right.
- 'that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth'—the big miracle Isaiah is hoping for is the rescue of the Israelites from Babylon. God has much bigger things in mind: he is going to rescue the whole world, and he's going to use Isaiah's words and the work of this future king to do it.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Do you believe God has good plans for you? Or do you more often feel a little overlooked or out of place? Ask God that he would speak to you about the special things he has in mind just for you. You might want to prepare yourself for the possibility that they are MUCH bigger than you would expect or could comprehend.
- *For your six:* Thank God for the unique way he has made each of your six. Consider that God has stamped his image in some way on each of them. Pray that the unique ways that each of your six reflects God would be used. You might also consider pointing out to them a unique quality that you see in them and why you think it's a good thing.
- *For America:* Pray today for all the people in America who are trying in some way to follow Jesus. Pray that God would use them to actually be a light—that they would in fact be helpful and relevant to those around them. Pray that they wouldn't think too small about what God might have for them.

Friday, March 20th

Isaiah 56:1-8

1 This is what the LORD says:

"Maintain justice
and do what is right,
for my salvation is close at hand
and my righteousness will soon be revealed.

2 Blessed are those who do this—
who hold it fast,
those who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it,
and keep their hands from doing any evil."

3 Let no foreigners who have bound themselves to the LORD say,
"The LORD will surely exclude me from his people."
And let no eunuch complain,
"I am only a dry tree."

4 For this is what the LORD says:
"To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose what pleases me
and hold fast to my covenant—

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

5 to them I will give within my temple and its walls
a memorial and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that will endure forever.

6 And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD
to minister to him,
to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant—

7 these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations."

8 The Sovereign LORD declares—
he who gathers the exiles of Israel:
"I will gather still others to them
besides those already gathered."

Points of interest:

- 'for my salvation is close at hand'—I think the idea here is that God's rescue could come at any time; so people should make sure that they are ready to take advantage when the opportunity arises.
- 'those who keep the Sabbath'—observing the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments. It's a day of complete rest from work, as a sign of dependence on God's goodness rather than our effort. God often used their level of attention to the Sabbath as a way of measuring how serious the Israelites were about keeping their covenant.
- 'The LORD will surely exclude me'—in this case, these foreigners are tempted to count themselves out, rather than being excluded by anyone else.
- 'let no eunuch complain'—the word *eunuch* here could be referring simply to civil servants in the Assyrian and Babylonian courts or to castrated males; there was such a high coincidence between the two that the same Hebrew word is used for both. Castrated males were commonly used as civil servants in ancient near eastern governments, because it was thought that their lack of family made them harder working and more loyal—they looked to the king's interests instead of their family's interests. Isaiah tells us that even these family-less men will have a lasting heritage in the new reality God is bringing about.
- 'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths'—the eunuchs, not technically members of the covenant, are acting according to its terms; therefore, they will reap its rewards. Anyone can be a part of the covenant (or presumably opt out of it), simply based on whether they keep it or not; they don't have to have been original signers of it to get its benefits.
- 'within my temple and its walls'—under normal conditions, these eunuchs wouldn't even be allowed in much of the temple, or even allowed in at all (castration was considered a 'blemish' that was prohibited on sacred ground, Deuteronomy 23:1). The temple was a series of smaller, ever more restrictive courtyards:

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

- on the very outside was the *court of nations*, the only place where foreigners were allowed;
- one step further in was the *court of women*, where Israelite women were allowed;
- then, there was the *court of Israel*, for Israelite men;
- next was the Holy Place, where only priests could go;
- and finally, there was the Most Holy Place, where only high priests could go.

These restrictions were established by God himself for the Tabernacle, the sacred tent that preceded the temple. Now, God is breaking down those barriers.

- 'will be called a house of prayer for all nations'—this is what Solomon prayed in his dedication of the temple. It's an aspiration that, as far as we can tell, hadn't often been met yet. God promises here that it will be, though.
- 'I will gather still others'—no matter how many have been gathered already, God will keep on gathering until his house is absolutely full.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Do you ever feel excluded—maybe not quite on the 'in' with your friends or family? Or maybe you even feel excluded by God himself or the people who represent him? This passage tells us that God is in the business of gathering and including people. Talk to God about any ways you feel a little excluded or 'left out'. Pray that he would help you today to not only feel included yourself but to be inclusive of others.
- *For your six:* In this passage, God promises a legacy even to people for whom it seems impossible. Do any of your six fear that they have no future? Perhaps they don't have any children, but very much wish they did. Or maybe they have children, but are worried about their children's future. Maybe they're more concerned with the impact they would like to make in academia or at their job. Pray that God would give them a lasting impact on the world around them.
- *For America:* Pray for all those in America who feel excluded from places of faith. Pray for those who truly have faith in and a heart for God, but don't feel at home in—or even more feel downright angry at—houses of worship. Pray that God would make a place for them. Pray for our church and other churches across the country, that we would in fact be 'gathering places' and not places of exclusion.

Saturday, March 21st

Isaiah 66:18-24

18 "And I, because of what they have planned and done, am about to come and gather the people of all nations and languages, and they will come and see my glory.

19 "I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations—to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. 20 And they will bring all your people, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD—on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels," says the LORD. "They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the LORD in ceremonially clean vessels. 21 And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites," says the LORD.

22 "As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me," declares the LORD, "so will your name and descendants endure. 23 From one New Moon to another and from

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

one Sabbath to another, all people will come and bow down before me," says the LORD. 24 "And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to the whole human race."

Points of interest:

- 'gather the people of all nations and languages'—once again, God starts out on a mission to find and rescue the Israelite exiles, but ends up vastly expanding his mission. People from every nation are gathered to Jerusalem. We have almost the opposite of the Tower of Babel here. At Babel, the people gathered together to resist God and make a name for themselves, but God scattered them. Here, God gathers all of the people to Jerusalem, where they worship God together.
- 'I will send some of those who survive to the nations'—so far in Isaiah, we've heard a lot about God gathering exiles from every nation to Jerusalem. Here, he's not just gathering, but he's also sending some of those gathered ones back out. They're joining in the gathering mission, going out to places that haven't yet heard the news. As God said at the end of yesterday's passage, 'I will gather still others.'
- 'Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians'—this is yet another list of far-flung countries that God wants to draw into his people.
- 'famous as archers'—God is very attentive to his fame in this passage, and rightly so: he wants everyone to hear of the good life he will give to people in relationship with him. I like the fact that, while advertising his own greatness, God can also recognize the accomplishments of others. He can't help but throw in, 'Have you seen the way those Lydians shoot their bows?'
- 'on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels'—they will use every available mode of transportation.
- 'I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites'—among the Israelites, the priesthood was hereditary. Only the Levites, one of the twelve tribes of Israel, could serve in the temple; and among them, only the family of Aaron could serve as priests. What was restricted to a single tribe within Israel is now being thrown open, not just to any tribe within Israel, but to the people of any nation.
- 'From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another'—that is, from month to month, from week to week. The number of people streaming in is constantly increasing.
- 'they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me'—these are the people who tried to stop the exiles from being gathered. This reminds me of the end of a horror movie, when the survivors keep checking to see that the monster is really dead. The enemy is truly and permanently vanquished here. The new heaven and earth being formed are entirely safe. I have to say, though, that I think it's a bit of a bummer to end on such a down note (this is the last verse of the book of Isaiah). Couldn't Isaiah have just swapped those last two paragraphs?

Taking it home:

- *For you:* How do you feel about being 'sent out' to people different from you? Are there specific people or places to which you think God might be sending you? Take a moment to reflect on any inklings you have that God might be sending you—either now or in the future—to different people or places.
- *For your six:* Pray that Jesus would be attractive to your six. Just like today's passage describes people coming from everywhere because they sense that there is something good for them on that 'holy mountain', pray that your six would sense that Jesus has something good for them.

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

- *For America:* We are a country on the move. Think of all the different ways that people move about each day—foot, bike, car, bus, subway, plane, boat. All of the time, we are moving, moving, moving. We get a similar sense of constant movement in this passage: people were making their way to Jerusalem in whatever way they could—on horses, chariots, wagons, and more. Let's pray today for the way our nation moves. First of all, let's simply pray for safety and patience for people as they travel. Let's also pray that God would be speaking to us as we literally move about their days. And finally, let's pray that we would be on the move spiritually just as much as physically, that more people in our nation would be moving steadily toward the good things God has on offer.

Sunday, March 22nd

Zechariah 8:13-23

13 Just as you, Judah and Israel, have been a curse among the nations, so I will save you, and you will be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong."

14 This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Just as I had determined to bring disaster on you and showed no pity when your ancestors angered me," says the LORD Almighty, 15 "so now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah. Do not be afraid. 16 These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; 17 do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this," declares the LORD.

18 The word of the LORD Almighty came to me.

19 This is what the LORD Almighty says: "The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace."

20 This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, 21 and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, 'Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and seek the LORD Almighty. I myself am going.' 22 And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat him."

23 This is what the LORD Almighty says: "In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.' "

Points of interest:

- 'have been a curse among the nations'—Zechariah is prophesying about two hundred years after Isaiah. By Zechariah's time, the foreign captivity of Israel and Judah, and the return of the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem, has indeed happened just as Isaiah had prophesied. But Jerusalem's glorious rise to the center of what's happening in the world has emphatically not happened. In fact, the returned exiles are having a hard time just rebuilding the temple, which had been destroyed during the Babylonian conquest. At this point, the Jews have become famous for their apparent bad luck. That's what God means here by, 'a curse among the nations'; if you really didn't like someone you'd say, 'May what happened to the Jews happen to you!'
- 'now I have determined to do good again to Jerusalem and Judah'—these residents of Jerusalem are about to give up on their big dreams; but God encourages them that things will indeed turn around.

God and the Nations—a daily Bible guide

Week 3

- 'do not plot evil against each other'—it seems that what God is most concerned about is the possibility that, if they give up their hope on God, the people will turn on one another.
- 'fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months'—that's a lot of fasting! Apparently, these fasts are all to grieve events connected to the Babylonian conquest (*IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*). God promises that these times of mourning will be turned into times of celebration.
- 'Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come'—despite all appearances, God will still bring about the massive gathering of all the nations.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Sometimes God's promises can take a strangely long time to come true. Are you having a hard time continuing to believe in a promise you're pretty sure did indeed come from God? Why don't you ask God to give you a new confirmation of that promise, as he did for the Israelites through Zechariah? You might also want to ask God to give you the strength to endure well until the promise is fulfilled.
- *For your six:* This passage presents an attractive model of people seeking God together. Consider asking one of your six if they would like to come along with you in your spiritual journey. You could simply talking about your own faith experiences, read and discuss the book *Not the Religious Type* together, or even walk through this guide together. There are more ideas for how to pursue alongside of your six in *The World Awaits: the 40 Days of Faith Users' Manual*
- *For America:* Pray that our country would be characterized by the qualities God recommends to the people of Jerusalem: truth, good judgment, promise-keeping, and avoidance of doing evil to one another.