

4 God restores his fallen servant (Isaiah 40–47)

“The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD” (Isaiah 39:5).

That was the tragic conclusion of Isaiah's ministry in the eighth century BC. The LORD established Israel to represent him to the nations. But instead of showing how wonderful it was to be under God's reign, they split into two kingdoms, and both parts fell. When Jerusalem fell to Babylon, there was no kingdom of God left.

Nearly 50 years later, Persia captured Babylon. King Cyrus allowed the captives to return. They rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, but no son of David was installed as king since they belonged to the Persian Empire. Would the kingdom of God be restored?

Isaiah's oracles took on fresh significance. He'd said the stump of David's family tree would bear a shoot, and this Spirit-anointed king would gather his people from the nations (11:1-11). He'd said a God-given son would receive the government, to reign on David's throne and over his kingdom (9:6-7).

Isaiah said the LORD of hosts would judge the nations (Isaiah 13–24).

Isaiah said the LORD would redeem his people (Isaiah 25–35).

Isaiah's final song declared the LORD would restore the devastated land, making a way for his holy people (those devoted to the LORD) to return and serve him gladly:

Isaiah 35 (NIV)

¹ The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, ² it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendour of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the **glory of the LORD**,
the **splendour of our God**.

³ Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
⁴ say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come, he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution he will come **to save you**.”

⁵ Then will the eyes of the **blind** be opened
and the ears of the **deaf** unstopped.

⁶ Then will the **lame** leap like a deer,
and the **mute** tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert. ...



Regrowth after devastating fire

- ⁸ And a **highway** will be there;
it will be called **the Way of Holiness**;
it will be for those who walk on that Way. ...
- ⁹ But only **the redeemed** will walk there,
¹⁰ and those the LORD has rescued **will return**.
They will **enter Zion** with singing;
everlasting joy will **crown** their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

What a significant message for the exiles in Babylon! Isaiah's prophetic work continues as a new voice speaks after the exile.

4.1 Good news for the captives (Isaiah 40–42)

To uproot their lives after 50 years and make the 1400-kilometre journey back to Jerusalem, they needed assurance that the hope of becoming a kingdom of God again was real. If they returned to the LORD, would the LORD would return to reign over them?

The good news of God's kingship (Isaiah 40)

Isaiah 40:1-10 (NIV)

- ¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.
- ³ A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness **prepare the way for the LORD**;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
- ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.
- ⁵ And the **glory of the LORD** will be revealed,
and all people will see it together." ...
- ⁹ You who bring **good news** to Zion, go up on a high mountain.
You who bring **good news** to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
- ¹⁰ See, the **Sovereign LORD comes with power**,
and he rules with a mighty arm.



The promise that the LORD would reign over his crushed people was the *good news* the returning exiles needed to hear. This is the origin of the word *gospel*.

When the Hebrew text was translated into Greek, the Septuagint used the word *euangelizō*. The New Testament then picked up Isaiah's word and used it 63 times for proclaiming the gospel, along with the noun *euangelion* a further 73 times.

The content of the gospel is, "The LORD reigns." It's the good news that the oppression caused by sin and death is over, that God's anointed (the Christ) has come and restored heaven's reign (the kingdom of heaven) to the earth.

Mark opened his "Gospel" by explaining that the word has its roots in Isaiah 40:

Mark 1:1-1, 14-15 (NIV)

¹ The beginning of the **good news** [*euangelion*] about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,

² as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

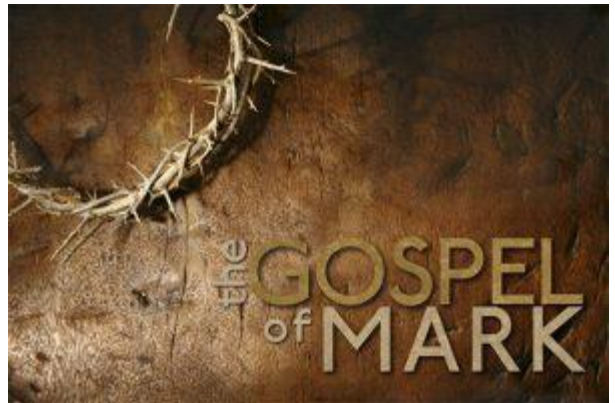
"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way"—

³ "a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord, make
straight paths for him.' " [Isaiah 40:3-4]

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness ...

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee,
proclaiming the **good news** [*euangelion*] of God.

¹⁵ "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has
come near. Repent and believe the **good news** [*euangelion*]!"



The gospel Jesus proclaimed was *the good news of the kingdom* (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16). The arrival of the Messiah, the anointed son of David, is *the good news* [*euangelion*] *God proclaimed ahead of time through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, regarding his Son who was appointed as 'Son of God in power' by his resurrection from the dead, i.e. the good news that Messiah Jesus is our Lord* (Romans 1:1-4).

But Jesus was not the king the Jews expected. Five centuries is a long time to wait for Isaiah's *good news* to become their experience. They thought it was amazing when Jesus unrolled an Isaiah scroll in the synagogue at Nazareth and read Isaiah's message about *proclaiming good news to poor*. It sounded so full of promise until he said, "*Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*" (Luke 4:21). If Jesus was the fulfilment of what Isaiah said, they'd throw him off a cliff.

A crucified Messiah looked nothing like the great King David, the legendary warrior who freed his people from their enemies. How could Jesus be the fulfilment of what Isaiah had promised? Let's keep that question in mind as we read Isaiah 40–66.

The fallen servant (Isaiah 41–42)

“Where is God?” people ask when life falls apart. “Has God rejected us?” his people asked when they went into exile. Like Job, they thought God wasn’t doing right. The book of Esther doesn’t even mention God. Like her people, Esther was unsure if she should still identify as Jewish when she’d been given to the king of Persia.

This is the word of the LORD to his fallen nation in the Persian period:

Isaiah 40:27-31 (NIV)

²⁷ Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God”?

²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

²⁹ He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;

³¹ but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.

They will soar on **wings like eagles**; they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

The LORD reigns as sovereign over the whole earth. They may feel they cannot journey back to God, but he will renew their strength. Like Frodo at the end of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, they’ll rise up on wings like eagles as he brings them home.

The LORD chose Israel to partner with him in his project to rescue the nations. He had not given up on the covenant that bound them together:

Isaiah 41:8-14 (NIV)

⁸ “But you, Israel, **my servant**, Jacob, whom I have chosen,
you descendants of Abraham my friend,

⁹ I took you from the ends of the earth,
from its farthest corners I called you.

I said, ‘You are my **servant**’;

I have chosen you and have not rejected you.

¹⁰ So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you and help you;

I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

¹¹ “All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced;
those who oppose you will be as nothing and perish.

¹² Though you search for your enemies, you will not find them.

Those who wage war against you will be as nothing at all.

¹³ For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand
and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.

¹⁴ Do not be afraid, you worm Jacob, little Israel,
do not fear, for I myself will help you,” declares the LORD,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

Even though Israel was unfaithful to the covenant, the LORD remained faithful to them. The nations that captured them would perish, but the LORD would take the hand of his fallen servant and lift him up. Jacob may feel like a worm in the dirt, but the One devoted to Israel (*the Holy One of Israel*) would restore his people.

41:8 introduces the key phrase that runs right through Isaiah 40–55. God chose Israel as **the servant of the LORD**. Israel was called to serve the LORD, in covenant relationship with him. They represented the sovereign authority of heaven on earth, representing his justice among the nations.

But as the story develops, Israel struggles to fulfil their calling. By Isaiah 53, God steps in as the suffering servant to rescue his fallen servant. The Messiah ends up fulfilling the servant role for his people (e.g. Matthew 12:18-21 quoting 42:1-4).

Isaiah 42:1-7 (NIV)

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 smouldering 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—
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,
who spreads 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.”

This is why God chose Israel: they were a prototype of the world under God's reign. They represented God ruling with justice and gentleness, with understanding for his suffering and vulnerable people (verses 2-4). They represented the creator of heaven and earth to the other nations, a light revealing the way in a dark world.

4.2 Two witnesses to God's authority (Isaiah 42–47)

God's blind and deaf witness (Isaiah 42-44)

But their vocation had not worked out. Living in the dark world, they became blind to the LORD and his calling:

Isaiah 42:14-20 (NIV)

- 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 ...
¹⁸ “Hear, you **deaf**; look, you **blind**, and see!
¹⁹ Who is **blind** but my servant, and **deaf** like the **messenger** I send?
Who is blind like the one in covenant with me,
blind like the **servant** of the LORD?
²⁰ You have seen many things, but you pay no attention;
your ears are open, but you do not listen.”

Blind and deaf! They're deaf like Sodom and Gomorrah (1:10). They close their ears and eyes to the LORD (6:10). They're blind drunk, like someone asleep at the wheel (29:8). They turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to those who plot evil (33:15). How will the nations ever discover their heavenly sovereign if this is the best evidence God can present that they should live under his authority?

Isaiah 43:9-13 (NIV)

- ⁹ All the **nations** gather together and the peoples assemble. ...
Let them bring in their **witnesses** to prove they were right,
so that others may hear and say, “It is true.”
¹⁰ “You are my **witnesses**,” declares the LORD,
“and my **servant** whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.
Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.
¹¹ I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no saviour.
¹² I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—
I, and not some foreign god among you.
You are my **witnesses**,” declares the LORD, “that I am God.
¹³ Yes, and from ancient days I am he.
No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?”

Witnesses is a legal term. God is making the case that the earth belongs under his authority. To make the case that the nations should trust him to save them from the

those who currently claim to rule, God summons as his witnesses the people who live under his leadership. As Isaiah said previously, this is meant to be their testimony:

Isaiah 33:17-22 (NIV)

¹⁷ Your eyes will see the king in his beauty ...

²⁰ Your eyes will see Jerusalem, a peaceful abode ...

²² For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver,
the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us.

But what use are blind and deaf witnesses? If you were in a car crash, would you call a blind, deaf witness?

If Israel is *deaf* to the LORD and *blind* to where he is leading them, how are they any different to the nations that follow blind, deaf, mute, mindless idols?

Isaiah 44:8-23 (NIV)

⁸ You are my **witnesses**. Is there any God besides me?
No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.”

⁹ All who make **idols** are nothing,
and the things they treasure are worthless.
Those who would speak up for them are blind;
they are ignorant, to their own shame. ...

¹⁸ They know nothing, they understand nothing;
their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see,
and their minds closed so they cannot understand.

¹⁹ No one stops to think,
no one has the knowledge or understanding to say,
“Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals,
I roasted meat and I ate.

Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left?
Shall I bow down to a block of wood?”

²⁰ Such a person feeds on ashes; a deluded heart misleads him;
he cannot save himself, or say, “Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?”

²¹ “Remember these things, Jacob, for you, Israel, are my **servant**.
I have made you, you are my **servant**; Israel, I will not forget you.

²² I have swept away your offenses like a cloud,
your sins like the morning mist.

Return to me, for I have redeemed you.”

²³ Sing for joy, you heavens, for the LORD has done this;
shout aloud, you earth beneath.

Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees,
for the LORD has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel.

How will God rescue his fallen people? The promise of verse 23 seemed impossible. But just listen to what God says next!

Cyrus as the Lord's anointed (Isaiah 44–45)**Isaiah 44:24-28 (NIV)**

²⁴ This is what the LORD says—
your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:
I am the LORD, the Maker of all things,
who stretches out the heavens,
who spreads out the earth by myself, ...
²⁶ who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,'
of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be rebuilt,'
and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,' ...
²⁸ who says of **Cyrus**, 'He is my shepherd
and will accomplish all that I please;
he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt,"
and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid."'

Who was Cyrus? Why did he send the Jews back to Jerusalem? Why would a pagan king help them build a temple to the LORD to replace the one Babylon had destroyed? Sounds incredible, beyond belief, right?

In 539 BC, the Persian king Cyrus captured Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar had taken his captives to Babylon to keep an eye on them, but Cyrus believed people would be happy to serve him if he let them return to their cities, worship their gods, and live according to their culture. The book of Ezra explains how Cyrus authorized the return to Jerusalem and helped finance the construction of the second temple that stood from 515 BC to AD 70.

We have historical evidence that Cyrus did this for the peoples of all the nations that were captive in Babylon. A clay cylinder inscribed with Cyrus' message for the nations (not just the Jews) is preserved in the British Museum.



The Cyrus Cylinder. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1880-0617-1941 Photo: Allen Browne, 2008.

Astoundingly, God calls Cyrus his *anointed*. That's *Messiah* in Hebrew, *Christ* in Greek. Previously, the LORD'S *anointed* was always a descendant of David. But David's dynasty has fallen, and Cyrus was serving as the LORD'S anointed:

Isaiah 45:1-3 (NIV)

¹ “This is what the LORD says to his **anointed**,
to **Cyrus**, whose right hand I take hold of
to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armour,
to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:
² I will go before you and will level the mountains;
I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron.
³ I will give you hidden treasures, riches stored in secret places,
so that you may know that I am the LORD,
the God of Israel, who summons you by name.

The exiles in Babylon need to know the LORD is still running the world. It was the LORD who *gave them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar* (Ezra 5:12). As Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar, “*The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory*” (Daniel 2:37). It was the LORD who raised up Persia. On the night Babylon fell to Persia, God's finger wrote, “*Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians*” (Daniel 5:28).

Isaiah has been telling us all book long that it is the LORD who rules over the nations (Isaiah 13–24). He said God would bring down the king of Babylon who tried to raise his throne above God's (14:13). God has dethroned Nebuchadnezzar, giving his kingdom to someone who does what God wants. By his actions, King Cyrus says, “*The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah.*” (2 Chronicles 36:23).

Functionally, Cyrus is the LORD'S anointed, the leader who does on earth what heaven wants done, even though he has no idea who the LORD is:

Isaiah 45:4-6 (NIV)

⁴ For the sake of Jacob my **servant**, of Israel my chosen,
I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honour,
though you do not acknowledge me.
⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.
I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me,
⁶ so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting
people may know there is none besides me.
I am the LORD, and there is no other.”

How do you think this would have sounded to the exiles in Babylon?

What do you think about God's appointment of Cyrus after David's dynasty died?

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The gospel call (Isaiah 45–47)

The LORD takes hold of Cyrus' hand, so Cyrus lifts up the fallen servant of the LORD. Cyrus reestablishes them as the LORD'S people, so they can serve him. If Cyrus was the Messiah of his day, he's a picture of the Messiah to come.

The day would come when a son of David would visit the towns and villages of his people, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, dealing with their afflictions, gathering the harassed sheep who'd waited so long for a shepherd (Matthew 9:35-36).

The LORD said:

Isaiah 45:13 (NIV)

¹³ "I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness:
I will make all his ways straight.
He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free,
but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty."

That's good news, right? It's what God has done more completely in Christ:

Romans 3:21–22 (NIV)

²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

God-doing-right is revealed in giving his Messiah. In response, we give our loyalty (faith) to Messiah Jesus who sets us right with God. This message is for all who trust his leadership, not only Israel.

That's Isaiah's gospel call too:

Isaiah 45:22–24 (NIV)

²² "Turn to me and be saved,
all you ends of the earth;
for I am God, and there is no other.
²³ By myself I have sworn,
my mouth has uttered in all integrity
a word that will not be revoked:
Before me every knee will bow;
by me every tongue will swear.

²⁴ They will say of me,
'In the LORD alone are deliverance and strength.'"

All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame.

Verse 23 calls everyone to bow the knee to the LORD and declare allegiance to him. We do that by bowing the knee to his anointed, declaring our allegiance to Messiah Jesus who God raised up. That's how Romans 14:11 and Philippians 2:10–11 understand Isaiah 45:23.



THAT AT THE NAME OF
JESUS EVERY KNEE
SHOULD BOW, IN HEAVEN
AND ON EARTH AND
UNDER THE EARTH.
– PHILIPPIANS 2:10

So, this is how it comes together in the end:

- Isaiah 46 pictures the gods of Babylon as bowing to the LORD, the only true ruler over everyone and everything. When their idols bow, the nations bow.
- Isaiah 47 pictures the kingdom of Babylon falling into the dust. She who seduced the nations with her wealth and power is silenced in shame.
- Isaiah 48 calls God's people to leave Babylon and set out for the promise of the new Jerusalem God is raising up.

If those images sound familiar, many of them reappear in the final book of the Bible. The visions of Revelation focus on God's throne, and the Lamb who gave his life for his people. Although the *satan* deceived the nations into worshipping its power, the kingdom of the world is becoming the kingdom of our God. The nations lose their fight against the Lord's authority. Babylon falls. God is calling his people to come out of her, to give their allegiance to the new Jerusalem, as the Lamb restores the Lord's authority to all the peoples of the earth. To describe what the Lord showed him, John uses the language of the Law and the Prophets, particularly Exodus, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Daniel, and Zechariah.¹²

4.3 So what?

God called his people into partnership with himself as *the servant of the LORD*.

How does Isaiah's use of this phrase clarify what God is calling us to be and do in his earthly realm?

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Isaiah introduces the word *gospel* to describe the good news that God reigns, that the LORD'S reign is being restored to the earth in his Anointed. How does this shape the way you think about the gospel?

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¹² For more detail, see <https://allenbrowne.blog/2024/10/02/formed-in-gods-story-book-of-revelation/>

Michael Bird notes that other prophets also proclaim the restoration of the kingdom:

The exilic and post-exilic prophets are permeated with the promise that Yahweh will again manifest his kingly power to deliver Israel from exile and to establish a new kingdom. ...

Yahweh's kingship was never limited to Israel's territory or confined to its temple, but was eternal, universal, cosmological and eschatological.¹³

What do you make of the Persian King Cyrus? In what sense was he *the LORD'S anointed (messiah/christ)*? How does this help us understand the New Testament's claim that Jesus is *God's anointed (messiah/christ)*?

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How do Isaiah's visions affect the way you see John's visions in Revelation? Had you realized that there is such a strong overlap in imagery and message? Does it help you understand the throne of God, the leadership of the Lamb, the demise of Babylon and the nations deceived by Satan into resisting God's authority, and the restoration of a new Jerusalem under the leadership of the Lamb who gave his life to save his people?

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How do you feel about Isaiah 40–47? What else strikes you from these chapters?

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In preparation for next time, **read Isaiah 49 and 52.**

¹³ Michael F. Bird, *Whispers of Revolution: Jesus and the Coming of God as King* (Apollos, 2025), 32-33.