

## 5 God restores through his servant (Isaiah 48–55)

The servant of the LORD had been blind and deaf to their Master. The nation God established as a witness to heaven's authority over the earth had fallen captive to nations that make their own gods.

Nevertheless, a voice in the wilderness proclaims, *“Good news! The Sovereign LORD reigns with a mighty arm!”* (40:9). Faithful to his fallen servant, he says: *“You are my servant; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. ... I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand”* (41:8-9).

God places them in the hands of a Persian king who sends them back to reconstruct a house for the LORD in Jerusalem. God 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.’”* (44:28).

Isaiah 48–55 goes on to explain how God will effectively become a servant to his fallen servant. But first, do you have any pressing questions from previous chapters?

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### 5.1 The Servant and arm of the LORD (Isaiah 48–51)

Cyrus did what God had promised by opening the way for them to return to Jerusalem. So, the LORD calls his people to leave Babylon, to return and resume their role, as the rescued servant of the LORD:

#### Isaiah 48:12, 20 (NIV)

<sup>12</sup> “Listen to me, Jacob, Israel, whom I have called:

I am he; I am the first and I am the last. ...

<sup>20</sup> **Leave Babylon**, flee from the Babylonians!

Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it.

Send it out to the ends of the earth;

say, “The LORD has **redeemed** his **servant** Jacob.”

Led by Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, groups started to trickle back to Jerusalem (Ezra 2, 8, and Nehemiah 2). But most Jews were still living in other countries 500 years later (in Jesus' time).



**The servant of the Lord (Isaiah 49)**

Read this carefully:

**Isaiah 49:3-5 (NIV)**

<sup>3</sup> He said to me, “You are my **servant**,  
**Israel**, in whom I will display my splendour.”

<sup>4</sup> But I said, “I have laboured 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.”

<sup>5</sup> 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 honoured in the eyes of the LORD  
and my God has been my strength.

There are three people in verse 5:

- *The LORD*,
- *me*, and
- *Jacob*, that is *Israel* (the twelve tribes of Jacob).

Who is *me*? There’s an intermediary who speaks for the LORD, to his people. He’s calling the people back to the LORD, to be his servant (verse 3). This spokesman for the LORD feels like he has *laboured in vain*, like he’s spent all his strength *for nothing at all* (verse 4).

Have we heard anything about the frustration of being a spokesperson for the LORD? Do you recall the job description God gave Isaiah? (See Isaiah 6:9-13.)

The prophet trusts that his seemingly pointless commission will produce something worthwhile, for the reward for his ministry is *in the LORD’S hand* (verse 4).

The LORD affirms that the prophet was created for this work even before he was born. So even if he’s devalued and rejected by humans, his role as a **servant** of the LORD is of great value and esteem in God’s eyes (verse 5).

Crucially, *the servant of the LORD* is not just Israel! When Israel was not fulfilling their role as God’s *servant* (verse 3), the LORD could call someone else as his *servant*. This individual servant was not replacing Israel; he was restoring Israel as God’s servant: *to bring Jacob back to him*, that is *to gather Israel to himself* (verse 5).

We’ll have to be more careful now. *The servant of the LORD* is not only God’s nation. It can be an individual servant of the LORD who is bringing his people back to him:

**Isaiah 49:6 (NIV)**

He says:

“It is too small a thing for you [singular] 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.”

That was Isaiah's ministry: calling *the tribes of Jacob* back from exile where they'd been scattered among the nations. So, the gentiles would see the *brilliance* of the LORD *saving* his people (as the Egyptians had done in the exodus). The message of God's saving work would *reach to the ends of the earth*. That's what this text meant in the Persian period.

But *the servant of the LORD* is not just the Isaiah who started this book in the eighth century BC. We haven't heard of him since his conversation with Hezekiah in Chapter 39. A new voice began delivering God's message in Isaiah 40. Many prophetic voices kept delivering God's message across the centuries.

Then John the Baptist is the voice delivering God's message in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the LORD!” (Isaiah 40:3, quoted in Mark 1: 3 etc.). John was the culmination of all the servants who called God's people back to God's saving power (Matthew 11:10-11). But John realized he was merely a pointer to the servant of the LORD who would save his people and restore them as his kingdom (Matthew 3:1-12).

As the servant of the LORD, Jesus entered into the suffering and rejection his people faced from the rulers of this world, saving them since they could not save themselves:

**Isaiah 49:7-9 (NIV)**

<sup>7</sup> 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.”

<sup>8</sup> This is what the LORD says:

“In the time of my favour I will answer you,  
and in the day of salvation I will help you;  
I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people,  
to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances,

<sup>9</sup> to say to the captives, ‘Come out,’  
and to those in darkness, ‘Be free!’”

What do you think? How does this sit with you?

The commission that God gave to Isaiah, Israel, and Jesus continues in us today. That's how the early church understood Isaiah. As Paul and Barnabas began to spread the message, they applied Isaiah's commission to themselves:

**Acts 13:47 (NIV, quoting Isaiah 49:6)**

“For this is what the Lord has commanded us: *‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’*”

**2 Corinthians 6:1-2 (NIV, quoting Isaiah 49:8)**

<sup>1</sup> As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace **in vain**.

<sup>2</sup> For he says, *“In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of **salvation** I helped you.”*

I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of **salvation**.

*In vain* (verse 1) is also a reference to Isaiah 49 (verse 4). It's the frustration every servant of the LORD experiences, a phrase Paul often refers to (1 Corinthians 15:58; Galatians 2:2; Philippians 2:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:1; 3:5).

*Salvation* is also Isaiah's word (49:6, 8). Just as God had promised to save his people from the rule of Babylon, Persia, and so on, he also promised to save the nations from these rulers who serve sin and death, so the whole earth can serve the king of heaven. *Salvation* is a world set right, not merely an individual experience.

The Old Testament background gives New Testament words a whole new dimension. It's like a 2-D picture transforming into a 3-D life we live in Christ.

***The arm of the LORD (Isaiah 51)***

What is the arm of the LORD?

**Isaiah 51:4-5 (NIV)**

<sup>4</sup> “Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation:

Instruction will go out from me;

my justice will become a light to the nations.

<sup>5</sup> My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way,

and my **arm** will bring justice to the nations.

The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my **arm**.

The parallel expression makes it clear that the *arm* is a symbol for strength (44:12; 50:2; 51:9). But how God uses his strength is so different from how the rulers of the world use theirs. God's power is not revealed by smashing nations into submission.

The arm of the LORD is revealed in doing right (*my righteousness*), in



rescuing his oppressed people (*my salvation*), in extending *justice to the nations*. So, even the most remote communities in the oceans *look to me and wait in hope for my arm* (verse 5).

How and when would God roll up his sleeves and use his own strength to rescue his people and set everything right for everyone? Isaiah has more to say about *the arm of the LORD* (52:10; 53:1; 59:1, 16; 62:8; 64:5, 12). He asks us to trust God's strength as more enduring than creation itself:

**Isaiah 51:6 (NIV)**

Lift up your eyes to the heavens,  
look at the earth beneath;  
the heavens will vanish like smoke,  
the earth will wear out like a garment  
and its inhabitants die like flies.  
But my **salvation** will last forever,  
my **righteousness** will never fail.

*Salvation* and *righteousness* are keywords in the New Testament. God sets us right (*justifies*) through his Messiah, as we give him our trust (*faith*). That's a response to God doing right by us (*the righteousness of God*) out of his faithfulness (Romans 3:21-26). Romans is wrapped in this vision of the nations coming into obedience through faith[fulness] to him (Romans 1:5; 16:26).<sup>14</sup>

## 5.2 The reigning and suffering servant (Isaiah 52–55)

As the Jews returned from exile, Ezra taught them the Torah, Zerubbabel helped them construct another temple, and Nehemiah rebuilt Jerusalem's walls. The one thing they could not restore was the kingship. They were ruled by foreigners, instead of being a kingdom of God with an anointed son of David to represent heaven's reign on earth.



### ***The reigning servant (Isaiah 52)***

Zion (Jerusalem) has been dormant, but Isaiah sees a day coming when it will wake up, put on its royal robes, and sit enthroned instead of being trampled by the nations:

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<sup>14</sup> We saw this in our previous course: <https://allenbrowne.blog/2025/07/31/formed-in-gods-story-romans-9-16/>

**Isaiah 52:1-6 (NIV)**

- <sup>1</sup> Awake, awake, Zion, clothe yourself with strength!  
Put on your garments of splendour, Jerusalem, the holy city.  
The uncircumcised and defiled will not enter you again.
- <sup>2</sup> Shake off your dust; rise up, sit enthroned, Jerusalem.  
Free yourself from the chains on your neck, Daughter Zion,  
now a captive.
- <sup>3</sup> For this is what the LORD says:  
“You were sold for nothing,  
and without money you will be redeemed.”
- <sup>4</sup> For this is what the Sovereign LORD says:  
“At first my people went down to Egypt to live;  
lately, Assyria has oppressed them.
- <sup>5</sup> “And now what do I have here?” declares the LORD.  
“For my people have been taken away for nothing,  
and those who rule them mock,” declares the LORD.  
“And all day long my name is constantly blasphemed.
- <sup>6</sup> Therefore my people will know my name;  
therefore in that day they will know that it is I who foretold it.  
Yes, it is I.”

God remembers the suffering his people have endured: crushed by Egypt in Moses' time, and then losing most of the land to Assyria. And now what? The last remnant was captured by Babylon. These nations don't know the LORD. Assyria blasphemed the LORD as unable to save his people (36:18-20). Babylon said its gods were superior (debunked in Isaiah 46). The LORD promises to set the record straight by redeeming his people.

**Redemption** means reacquiring something you owned. In New Testament theology, God redeems us in Christ. We sometimes speak of Christ “paying the price” for us. But we present the wrong picture of divine justice if we imagine God wanting Jesus dead in order to save us because “someone had to pay!” Retribution was part of the Sinai covenant, so it does show up in the Prophets. That's all the more reason to be amazed that it's not part of Isaiah's theology of redemption *without payment* (verse 3).

The rulers of this world (Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon) had no legal right to God's people. They took them by force. God owes them nothing. So God redeems them **without payment**, because God cares for them and it's the right thing to do. The world then sees its true sovereign doing exactly what he promised: his righteousness as the expression of his faithfulness.

The point of God redeeming his people is to bring them back under his reign. In the ancient world, a runner would bring news of significant events such as the outcome of



a battle. Isaiah pictures a runner delivering the good news that God's reign had been restored to his people:

**Isaiah 52:7-10 (NIV)**

- <sup>7</sup> How beautiful on the mountains  
are the feet of those who bring **good news**,  
who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings,  
who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "**Your God reigns!**"
- <sup>8</sup> Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy.  
When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes.
- <sup>9</sup> Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem,  
for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.
- <sup>10</sup> The LORD will lay bare his holy **arm** in the sight of all the **nations**,  
and all the **ends of the earth** will see the **salvation** of our God.

As we said back in 40:9, this is the origin of the word *gospel*. Do you remember what the gospel message was back there? What is the content of the gospel message here? Is this the same message as Paul's gospel? (Hint: see Isaiah 52:7 in Romans 10:9-15.)

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Did you notice the **arm** of the LORD again in verse 10? We've seen:

- *The Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty **arm*** (40:10)
- *His **arm** will be against the Babylonians* (48:14)
- *Was my **arm** too short to deliver you? Do I lack the strength to rescue you?* (50:2)
- *My **arm** will bring justice to the nations. The islands ... wait in hope for my **arm*** (51:5)
- *Awake, awake, **arm** of the LORD, clothe yourself in strength!* (51:9)

As the parallel phrases show, *the arm of the LORD* is his strength, his regal authority over the nations, his intervening to save his people who cannot save themselves. When *the arm of the LORD* intervenes to stop the bullies ruling over his people, the whole earth sees the salvation of Israel's God (52:10).

Just in case you thought this meant that God was finally going to give up on trying to work with his servant and do it all by himself, Isaiah keeps emphasizing the servant who acts in partnership with God:

**Isaiah 52:13–53:1 (NIV)**

- <sup>13</sup> See, my **servant** will act wisely;  
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
- <sup>14</sup> Just as there were many who were appalled at him—  
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being  
and his form marred beyond human likeness—

<sup>15</sup> so he will sprinkle many nations,  
and kings will shut their mouths because of him.

For what they were not told, they will see,  
and what they have not heard, they will understand.

**53** <sup>1</sup> Who has believed our message  
and to whom has the **arm** of the LORD been revealed?

So who is this servant of the LORD? We've seen two:

- Initially, *the servant of the LORD* was **Israel**, called to represent God to the nations (41:8-9; 42:1, 19; 43:10; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 48:20).
- Then God's *servant* was a prophetic spokesman, a **messenger** called to *restore the tribes* of Jacob, yet feeling he'd *laboured in vain* because they were unresponsive (49:3-6).

So who is the servant in 52:13? Israel, or is it the messenger God sent to them?

Two clues:

- In verse 12, God was addressing Israel as *you*. Now in verse 13 he's talking to Israel about *him*, the servant God will raise up for them.
- In 53:1, the people don't believe the message of the LORD and his servant. So the servant must be the messenger, not the people.

If that's right, the *disfigured* servant of verse 14 is not the nation of Israel that's been damaged beyond recognition. It's the servant, mistreated by God's recalcitrant people.

It also makes sense of verses 14-15 where the nations and their kings recognize the LORD'S servant, while his own people do not believe he is the arm of the LORD (53:1).

That's how Paul understood Isaiah 52:

- He quotes 52:5 to describe how the disbelief of his people dishonours God's name among the nations (Romans 2:24).
- He quotes 52:7 to support proclaiming the gospel message of the Messiah to everyone, and 53:1 regarding God's nation not believing the message about him (Romans 10:15-16).
- He quotes 52:15 as the basis for his mission to proclaim the Messiah among the nations that have not yet heard of him (Romans 15:21).

John's Gospel also understood Isaiah 53:1 as God's people refusing to believe his messenger, disregarding all the power of God working through him (John 12:37-38).

What do you think?

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**The suffering servant (Isaiah 53)**

Did you notice *the arm of the LORD* making a reappearance in 53:1? This is God's strength rescuing his people, doing for them what they could not do for themselves. And the LORD is doing that through someone—someone who entered into the suffering of his people and did not receive the esteem he deserved:

**Isaiah 53:1-3 (NIV)**

- <sup>1</sup> Who has believed our message  
and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?  
<sup>2</sup> He grew up before him like a tender shoot,  
and like a root out of dry ground.  
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
<sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by mankind,  
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.  
Like one from whom people hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

Who is this figure who suffers with and for his people? Verse 2 calls him *a new growth* (*yô·nēq*). That word usually means an infant (as in 11:8) but the parallel expression in verse 2 compares him to a new growth from *a root in dry ground*. We heard something like that back in 11:1:

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.*

Isaiah 11 was about the Messiah, the anointed king who would restore God's reign over his people and bring peace to the earth. Could the figure in Isaiah 53 be the promised king, representing his people and suffering for them?

A suffering Messiah is not how Israel thought of their king. They pictured a strong warrior defeating their enemies as David had done. But in reality, the king always suffered for his people. Most of David's Psalms are laments (43 out of 74), describing his sufferings for his people. The first psalm of David starts like this:

**Psalms 3:1-2 (NIV)**

- <sup>1</sup> LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!  
<sup>2</sup> Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him."

With his life under threat, David felt distress rather than esteem:

**Psalms 86:1-2 (NIV)**

- <sup>1</sup> Hear me, LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.  
<sup>2</sup> Guard my life, for I am faithful to you;  
save your servant who trusts in you.

So, even in the Old Testament context, a king suffering for his people makes sense. David could describe himself as *afflicted and in pain* for his people (Psalm 69:29).

When the king suffers because his people have been disobedient to the LORD, they can say this:

**Isaiah 53:4-6 (NIV)**

<sup>4</sup> Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.

<sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.

<sup>6</sup> We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

You may be thinking of Jesus already, but let's look at one more example of an Old Testament king. After each king's reign, 1 & 2 Kings summarizes how the king received what he deserved—blessed for obedience, or cursed for disobedience like the covenant promised. Hezekiah's son Manasseh was so evil that God announced the end of the kingdom (2 Kings 21).

But when **Josiah** died at the hands of Pharaoh Necho, it was totally undeserved (2 Kings 23). He died not for his own iniquity but for the iniquity of his people over many generations. He was the last God-appointed king; the final four were appointed by Egypt and Babylon before Babylon destroyed Jerusalem.

The Book of Kings could make no sense of Josiah's undeserved death. But the people could say what Isaiah says in verse 6: *the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all*.

And that's how the New Testament makes sense of the Messiah's death at the hands of his people (Isaiah 53:1 quoted in John 12:37-38 and Romans 10:16). It's not as if God wanted or needed Jesus to die as a payment (contradicting 52:3); it's that the king died because of the iniquity of his people. He was taking in his own body their sufferings, their afflictions (53:4 quoted in Matthew 8:17, and 53:9 quoted in 1 Peter 2:21-25).

Isaiah is not saying Jesus died to satisfy divine justice. He's saying it was unjust:

**Isaiah 53:7-9 (NIV)**

<sup>7</sup> He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

<sup>8</sup> By oppression and judgment he was taken away.  
Yet who of his generation protested?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living;  
for the transgression of my people he was punished.

<sup>9</sup> He was assigned a grave with the wicked,  
and with the rich in his death,  
though he had done no violence,  
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Stephen understood verse 8 to mean that Jesus was *deprived of justice* (Acts 8:33). But the problem is the same one Kings had with Josiah's death. Are we to say that God is no longer in control of the world, that it's just running amok? No, says Isaiah:

**Isaiah 53:10-11 (NIV)**

<sup>10</sup> Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,  
and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin,  
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,  
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.  
<sup>11</sup> After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied;  
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,  
and he will bear their iniquities.

The Sinai covenant is the context for *an offering for sin*. God had authorized the community to kill animals and criminals. The high priest had the authority to kill an offender to save the people (e.g. Numbers 25:10-13, compare John 11:49-50). Since God delegated that authority, *a hanged man is cursed by God* (Deuteronomy 21:23 ESV, quoted in Galatians 3:10). Verse 10 is not saying God wanted the Messiah dead; it's saying the buck stops with God.

In the sense that Josiah died for the sin of his people, Jesus did too. The crucifixion of the Messiah looked like God had forsaken the King of the Jews in his hour of distress (Psalm 22:1 in Mark 15:34), but God had a more enduring plan. God did not abandon his anointed to the realm of the dead (Psalm 16:10 in Acts 2:27, 31).

So, after the Jerusalem leaders have used the authority God gave them to condemn the Messiah to death, *he will see his offspring and prolong his days?* (verse 10) He's alive after his death?

Yes! Verse 11 confirms: *After he has suffered, he will see the light of life!*<sup>15</sup> The one who died for his people's iniquities is vindicated (*my righteous servant*). And the Righteous One sets us right with our Sovereign in the heavens!

What a leader for the peoples of the earth!

**Isaiah 53:12 (NIV)**

Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,  
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,  
because he poured out his life unto death,  
and was numbered with the transgressors.

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<sup>15</sup> The Masoretic Text lacks the word "light", but this reading is confirmed by both copies of Isaiah in the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QIsaiah<sup>a-b</sup> and 4QIsaiah<sup>d</sup>) as well as the Septuagint.

For he bore the sin of many,  
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Throughout human history, the rulers of this world have loudly proclaimed their own power, with blood on their hands to back up that claim. King Jesus did not promote himself or force himself on people: he humbled himself and was given authority by heaven. That's what Isaiah said as he introduced this incredible message: "*He will cleanse many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him*" (52:15).

His people have not always followed what Jesus did. He was *numbered with the transgressors* since his followers were carrying swords to kill their enemies when he was arrested (Luke 22:37, 49-51). Truly, he bore *the sin of many*: the *many* who are set right (*justified*) in him (verse 11).

What are your thoughts on Isaiah 53?

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### 5.3 So what?

Isaiah 54 describes the majesty of the community that gathers around the Messiah, the community that's larger than the Old Testament nation and incorporates the nations.

Isaiah 55 invites everyone to come and discover grace in the community of God's faithfulness in his Messiah (with verse 3 quoted in Acts 13 :34). In this way, the fruitfulness God decreed for the earth at creation is fulfilled in Christ. That's what verse 11 means: "*My word that goes out of my mouth will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*"

Andrew Abernethy pulled together what these chapters mean to us:

As Christian communities read Isaiah 52:13–53:12 in the light of its witness to Christ, the suffering servant's death does more than achieve atonement for sin. It creates a community of servants who are willing to suffer and serve like their master (1 Peter 2:20–25). What is more, Paul understood from Isaiah 49:6 his own mission in the light of God's servant being a light and salvation to the Gentiles; if this was Jesus' mission, Paul shares in it too as his servant (Acts 13:47). Thus, though the book of Isaiah does not present the Davidic ruler and the servant as identical figures, we find an unexpected and glorious merging of two unique offices and purposes in one person, Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup>

In preparation for next time, **read Isaiah 60 and 65.**

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew T. Abernethy, *The Book of Isaiah and God's Kingdom: A Thematic—Theological Approach*, (Downers Grove, IL; London: Apollos; InterVarsity Press, 2016), 159–160.