

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Isaiah

An adult Bible study of Isaiah · introduction and twenty-nine sessions

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By Larry Herzog Jr. · companion to Isaiah, volume three of The Things Concerning Himself

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INTRODUCTION

Reading Isaiah with Lutheran Eyes

Teaching the Volume · Isaiah

A Note to the Teacher

Thank you for taking up this volume. You are about to lead a class through Isaiah — sixty-six chapters of throne-room visions and courtroom indictments, of nations rising and falling, of a Servant despised and wounded and exalted — and you are right to feel both the weight of it and the joy. This guide is here so that you can carry the weight and keep the joy. It is the companion to the student manuscript, written not for the reader in the chair but for you, the one who will shape the hour: choosing what to protect when time runs short, anticipating the question before it is asked, and keeping a long book pointed, week after week, at the one of whom it speaks.

A word about why this introduction has its own teaching session. The student manuscript opens with an introduction — *Reading Isaiah with Lutheran Eyes* — and it is not front matter to be skimmed. It sets the method for the whole volume, names the four commitments that steer every session, and tells your class where the road is going before they take a single step on it. If the class skips it, they will spend the first month wondering why you keep saying that Isaiah *saw* Christ rather than merely *predicted* him, and why you refuse to read the mountains and highways as a calendar of future events. So this opening session is yours to teach before Session One, or folded into the front of it. Either way, do not let it pass as throat-clearing. It is the lens. Everything after comes into focus through it.

And one honest caution at the threshold. Isaiah is the Old Testament book the church has most loved and most abused. It has been turned into a quarry for prophecy charts and into a museum of ancient Near Eastern religion, and both treatments leave the Lord Jesus standing off to one side of

his own book. You are teaching against that current, and you are teaching with a current far older and stronger: the reading of the apostles, who could not tell the story of the Lord Jesus without Isaiah, and of the church that named this book the Fifth Gospel long before the prophecy charts were drawn. You are not improvising. You are handing on what was handed to you.

The Aim of This Volume in One Sentence

Isaiah does not merely foretell a Savior from a safe distance — he preaches him; teach this volume so that your class stops collecting predictions and starts hearing the gospel proclaimed centuries early, by a prophet who, the apostle John tells us, *saw his glory, and spake of him*.

Before You Open the Volume

A short list of preparations that will pay for themselves across all twenty-nine sessions. Do them once, well, before the class begins, and you will teach the whole book more freely.

- ◆ Read the student manuscript's introduction twice — once for its argument, once for its voice. Underline the four commitments. They are the spine of everything that follows, and your class will need to hear you name them in your own words, not read them off a page.
- ◆ Read Isaiah straight through in one or two sittings, in a single faithful translation, before you teach a word of it. The student book quotes the King James and the English Standard Version; read whichever your class reads. You are not reading to master it. You are reading to feel the shape of the whole — the indictment, the comfort, the Servant, the new creation — so that when you teach a part, you know where it sits in the road.
- ◆ Read John 12:37–41 on your knees. There the beloved disciple says that Isaiah *saw his glory, and spake of him* — of the Lord Jesus. That single apostolic sentence is the warrant for the whole volume. If you are not yet convinced the prophet saw Christ, start here, because the Holy Spirit through John says he did.
- ◆ Review the Formula of Concord, Epitome and Solid Declaration, Article V, on the distinction of law and gospel. No Old Testament book sounds the two notes more sharply than Isaiah — *Woe is me! for I am undone* in chapter six, *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people* in chapter forty — and you will be distinguishing them in nearly every session.
- ◆ Have one good confessional commentary at your elbow for the weeks you want to go deeper: R. Reed Lessing's two volumes in the Concordia Commentary, or the older People's Bible

Isaiah from Northwestern, or the notes of *The Lutheran Study Bible*. You will not need them every week. You will be glad of them the weeks you do.

- ♦ Pray. Not as a pious frame around the real work, but as the real work. The Spirit opens blind eyes through the prophet's own words, and not through our cleverness about them. Pray that he opens yours, and your class's, to see the Servant where Isaiah saw him.

The Four Commitments, Tuned to Isaiah

The student introduction states four commitments that govern the whole series. They are defended at length in Volume One and will not be re-argued here. But Isaiah tests all four and rewards all four more than any book in the Old Testament, so it is worth seeing, before you begin, exactly how each one lands here. Hold these four where you can see them — a whiteboard, a card in your Bible — for the whole volume.

One · Christ is in Isaiah, not merely predicted by it.

This is the commitment your class will find newest, and the one Isaiah supports most directly. Luther had a phrase for the rule that governs all our reading — *was Christum treibet*, what presses Christ upon us and drives him home — and he could call the Old Testament the swaddling clothes and the manger in which the Christ-child lies. Isaiah says as much through the apostle John, who tells us the prophet *saw his glory, and spake of him*. So we will not read Isaiah as a file of distant forecasts to be checked off as they come true. We will read it as a book whose true subject, on page after page, is the Lord Jesus Christ — already glorious, already comforting, already gathering his lambs. The difference is not academic. “Isaiah predicted a Messiah” keeps Christ in the future and the reader at a safe distance; “Isaiah saw Christ's glory” puts the prophet and the reader in the same room with the same Lord.

Two · Law and gospel run through the whole book.

They are not two eras — a stern Old Testament and a kindly New — but the two ways God's word always addresses sinners: the law that exposes and condemns, the gospel that forgives and raises the dead. Isaiah holds the two at full strength and sets them at the poles of the book. In chapter six a man is undone before the thrice-holy God; in chapter forty the same book opens its arms. The two even fall within a single verse: *though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow*. Teaching your class to tell these two words apart — to hear law as law until it does its undoing work, and gospel as gospel until it comforts — is among the most useful things this volume can do for them, and you will be doing it nearly every week.

Three · The narratives are history, and each genre is read as what it is.

Much of Isaiah is poetry and prophecy, and we read it accordingly — a prophet's oracles, with all their soaring imagery, not a flat chronicle — and we read prophecy as a preacher's word to his own day that also reaches forward in time. But where Isaiah gives us plain history — Ahaz on his throne in chapter seven, Hezekiah's faith and folly in chapters thirty-six through thirty-nine — we take it as history, because it happened, and because typology gains no foothold unless the events are real. Real history also means real people, not porcelain saints: Isaiah is *a man of unclean lips*, and the book never pretends otherwise.

Four · Typology, kept on the apostles' leash.

If Christ is genuinely in this book, then its persons and events and institutions point beyond themselves to him — but typology must be governed, or it collapses into the old free-for-all where the text means whatever a clever reader wants. Four guardrails keep it honest: the historical reality of the type is preserved; the connection to Christ must be more than a shared word; the fulfillment always exceeds the figure; and the safest correspondences are the ones the apostles themselves draw. When we read Isaiah's Servant as the Lord Jesus, it is on that last and best warrant — for Philip drew the line first, preaching the Lord Jesus to the Ethiopian *beginning at this scripture*, which was Isaiah fifty-three. Keep your class asking not “what could this stand for?” but “where does Scripture itself draw the line from here to Christ?”

The Question Your Class Will Raise First: One Isaiah, or Three?

Sooner or later — often in the first session — someone will mention a footnote dividing the book into a First, Second, and even Third Isaiah. Be ready, and be calm. The division rests largely on a single fact: Isaiah names Cyrus the Persian by name, as the Lord's anointed shepherd, in chapters forty-four and forty-five — some hundred and fifty years before that king was born. To a reader who has already decided that no one can foretell a name across a century and a half, the only options are a later author or a later editor. The naming of Cyrus is not the conclusion of the argument; it is the hinge, and behind the hinge is an assumption about what God can and cannot do.

We receive Isaiah as one book — *the word of the one prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz* — and behind him the one Spirit who *declares the end from the beginning*, and who is not embarrassed by his own foreknowledge. That is not anti-intellectual stubbornness; it is the plain confession of the Creed

and the explicit claim Isaiah makes about himself, that the contest between the LORD and the idols is decided precisely by who can announce a thing before it happens. So teach the issue briefly, honestly, and then teach the text. Do not let a class spend forty weeks litigating authorship and never meet the Servant. Name the question, give the confessional answer — the book is whole, and we will read it whole — and move on to what the whole book is for.

The Center of Gravity: The Servant of the LORD

Above all, this volume has a center of gravity, and you should teach toward it from the first hour. It is the Servant of the LORD — *ebed YHWH*, the servant of the LORD — who comes most clearly into view in the fifty-third chapter: pierced for our transgressions, bearing the iniquity of us all. There are four songs of this Servant (chapters forty-two, forty-nine, fifty, and fifty-two through fifty-three), and the volume is arranged to bring your class, unhurried, to them and to his cross. From the very beginning, teach the class to read the whole book leaning toward him, watching for the words *my servant*, hearing every comfort and every promise gather toward the one who would be wounded for them.

Read the prophecy, then, with the prophet's double vision — a near horizon in Isaiah's own embattled Judah, with its real kings and coalitions, and a far horizon in Christ and in his church gathered out of every nation — without flattening the one into the other. The restoration texts, the returning exiles, the Zion lifted up and the nations streaming in: we read these as fulfilled in Christ and in his church, the way the apostles read them at the Jerusalem council, and not as a real-estate program for a future political kingdom. Isaiah's mountain is the church; Isaiah's highway is the gospel; Isaiah's feast is the table the Lord still spreads for everyone who has no money and comes anyway.

The Shape of the Road

The sessions follow the book's own movements, and it helps your class to see the map before the journey. The first movement is the Holy One and his indictment — the throne room, the courtroom, the vineyard, and the first great signs of Immanuel and the Child born and the Branch (chapters one through twelve). The second is the Lord of the nations and of history — the oracles against the nations, the little apocalypse, the woes, and Hezekiah's faith and folly (chapters thirteen through thirty-nine). The third is the book of comfort and the Servant — the great forty, the contest with the idols, Cyrus, and the four Servant Songs that climax in chapter fifty-three

(chapters forty through fifty-five). The fourth is the book of glory — the house of prayer for all peoples, the anointed herald, the warrior from Edom, and the new heavens and new earth (chapters fifty-six through sixty-six). The final session gathers the whole and hands your class forward to the Twelve, the last volume in the series.

Launching Session One

A practical note on where to start. Session One does not begin at Isaiah 1:1. It begins at chapter forty — *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people* — because the volume wants your class to arrive at this large and sometimes frightening book already comforted, already pointed at the Servant, already sure of where the road leads. That is a deliberate choice, and a pastoral one. Trust it. Your class meets the holiness that makes comfort necessary soon enough, in Session Two, when they stand with the undone prophet in the throne room. Let them be comforted first.

So when you launch Session One, do not apologize for starting in the middle of the book. Explain it. The student manuscript was sent forward from the end of the Psalms with a thread in its hand — pointed toward a Servant — and chapter forty is where that thread is tied. Hand your class the same thread. Tell them the destination by name on the first day: the Servant of the LORD, and the gospel that is preached through him. A class that knows where it is going will follow you through the hardest oracles without losing heart.

A Final Word

You do not need to be a Hebrew scholar to teach Isaiah well. You need to keep your Bible open, keep the four commitments in view, and keep the Servant in front of your class until they cannot read the book without him. The student manuscript will do the heavy lifting week by week; your calling is to walk the road with the class, protect the gospel when the hour runs short, and trust the word to do what the word does.

And remember whose book this is. The Spirit who inspired Isaiah to see the Servant's glory is the same Spirit who works faith through the prophet's own words on the page. He has been opening blind eyes to this book for twenty-seven centuries, and he does not need your eloquence to do it again on an ordinary Sunday morning. Comfort is commanded here — from the lips of God himself, a command to comfort his people — and you are one of the appointed preachers of it. That is a high calling for a layperson in a fellowship hall, and it is exactly the calling Isaiah

describes: a voice told to cry, *and he said, What shall I cry?* You know what to cry. The comfort has a name.

May the Lord, whose glory the prophet saw and of whom he spoke, bless your teaching, your class, and the long road from chapter forty to the cross and out to the new creation.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION ONE

The Gospel Before the Gospel

Isaiah 40:1–11 · with John 12:41 and Acts 8:26–35

A Note to the Teacher

Welcome to the road. This is the first session of the longest study in the series, and the student book has loaded it deliberately: it is at once the opening of Isaiah and a working demonstration of how the whole volume will read him. Your class will leave this hour either thinking of Isaiah as a quarry of predictions to be mined or as the Fifth Gospel to be believed — and which of those they carry will shape the next twenty-eight weeks. So teach this hour for conviction, not coverage. If they leave persuaded of one sentence — that the prophet *saw his glory, and spake of him* — the session has done its work, even if you never reach every paragraph.

Notice the boldest move first, so you can defend it before anyone objects: the study of Isaiah does not begin at Isaiah 1. It begins at chapter forty, with *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people*. That is a pastoral decision, and a wise one. Your class is about to enter a large and sometimes frightening book, and the manuscript wants them to arrive already comforted, already pointed at the Servant, already sure of the destination. They will meet the holiness that makes comfort necessary soon enough, in Session Two. Let them be comforted first, and do not apologize for the order — explain it.

One word about how this guide works. It is a tool, not a transcript. You know your class — who needs a longer pause, who will bristle at the authorship note, who has waited years to be shown Christ in the Old Testament. Use what serves the hour and set the rest aside. The student book carries the argument; your calling is to keep it pointed and to protect the gospel when the clock runs short.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

Isaiah does not forecast a Savior from a safe distance — he preaches him; teach this hour so the class stops collecting predictions and starts hearing the gospel proclaimed seven centuries early, by a prophet who, John tells us, *saw his glory, and spake of him*.

Before You Walk In

A handful of preparations that will steady the whole hour. Do them once, well, and you will teach this session freely.

- ◆ Read the student session twice — once for its argument, once for its voice. This chapter does double duty, launching the volume and opening chapter forty, so read it until you can name its movements without the page in front of you.
- ◆ Read Isaiah 40 aloud, slowly, in one sitting. Then read John 12:37–41 and Acts 8:26–35 alongside it. Those two New Testament passages are not decoration; they are the warrant for the whole volume, and you will lean on both before the hour is out.
- ◆ Read John 12:41 on your knees. There the beloved disciple says the prophet *saw his glory, and spake of him* — of the Lord Jesus. If you are not yet sure the prophet saw Christ, settle it here, because the Spirit through John says he did.
- ◆ Fix two Hebrew words in mind. *Nacham* — to comfort, to console — stands doubled at the head of chapter forty as a command, not a wish. And *ebed YHWH* — the servant of the LORD — names the figure the whole volume leans toward. You will return to both all year.
- ◆ Review the Formula of Concord, Article V, on the distinction of law and gospel. Chapter six and chapter forty are the two poles of this book — *Woe is me* and *Comfort ye* — and you will be distinguishing the two words nearly every week, starting now.
- ◆ Pray. Not as a frame around the work but as the work. The Spirit opens blind eyes through the prophet's own words, and not through our cleverness about them. Ask him to open yours, and your class's, to the Servant.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions need to be solid in your own mind before you teach. Everything else in the session is illustration of these.

One · The gospel is preached before the gospel.

This is the session's thesis and the volume's. The ancient church called Isaiah the Fifth Gospel, the evangelist among the prophets, because the man writes as though Bethlehem and Calvary had already happened — as though he had stood at the manger and the cross and come back to tell us. That is not pious exaggeration. It is the apostle John's own verdict: quoting Isaiah from both chapter six and chapter fifty-three, John says the prophet *saw his glory, and spake of him*. The difference this makes is not academic. "Isaiah predicted a Messiah" keeps Christ in the future and the reader at arm's length, checking forecasts against a record. "Isaiah saw Christ's glory" puts prophet and reader in the same room with the same Lord. Teach your class to read the book the second way — open, expectant, hungry — the way the church has always read the other four Gospels.

Two · The comfort of chapter forty is amnesty, not advice.

When the sky finally breaks open after thirty-nine chapters of storm, what comes out is not encouragement but pardon. *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God — nacham*, doubled, and in the imperative. God is not coaxing his people to cheer up; he is commissioning comfort to be preached. And mark to whom: not to the deserving, but to a people whose sin has earned the very exile that is coming. The word speaks straight past the judgment to the pardon on its far side — *that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned*. That is the grammar of the gospel exactly. It does not wait for the sinner to mend; it announces the debt paid and the war over. The Hebrew of verse two is even tenderer — to *speak comfortably to Jerusalem* is literally to speak to her heart, the language a man uses to woo and win back the one he loves. Heaven has not waited for Judah to deserve consolation. Heaven has commanded that consolation be preached to the undeserving.

Three · The comfort rests outside us — on a word that will not wither.

The chapter knows how frail our comfort can feel, so it founds it on something steadier than our feelings. *The grass withereth, the flower fadeth* — yes, and we are the grass; our resolve and our moods wither like everything else — *but the word of our God shall stand for ever*. Peter would later lift those very lines and tell the church that this enduring word *is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you*. Then the chapter ends not with a lecture but an embrace: the same Lord who

comes *with strong hand* bends down in the next breath to *gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom*. Power and tenderness in one motion. The Good Shepherd who will one day say *I am the good shepherd* is already here, already gathering. Your class does not begin Isaiah as students assembling data about a Messiah who is coming. They begin as tired sheep, comforted by a Shepherd who is here.

Suggested Time Plan

The plan assumes a one-hour session. Adjust freely; the Pacing Tip tells you what to protect if time runs short.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome; introductions if the class is new
0:05–0:12	The thread from the Psalms; why we begin at chapter forty
0:12–0:22	The Fifth Gospel — John 12:41, and the posture it asks of us
0:22–0:30	The Servant named in advance; reading a prophet with double vision
0:30–0:50	Isaiah 40:1–11 — amnesty, the highway, the word that stands, the Shepherd
0:50–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions chosen in advance
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 6 and Session Two

Pacing Tip

First sessions run long — introductions stretch and the authorship note can swallow the hour. Decide in advance what cannot be cut: the exposition of Isaiah 40:1–11, and John 12:41. If you protect those, the session succeeds even if the method discussion compresses. Do not let the class spend the whole morning litigating “one Isaiah or three” and never meet the Shepherd.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

The notes follow the movements of the student chapter. They are background that lets you teach freely, not a script to read aloud.

Where the Psalms Left Us

Open by reminding the class that they did not arrive at Isaiah by accident. The last volume ended by handing them forward — pointed past the Psalter to a particular song, the song of a Servant

despised and rejected, wounded for our transgressions, sent on to Isaiah 53. So we come to this book already following a thread put into our hand on purpose, and the thread has a destination with a name: the Servant of the LORD, and the gospel preached through him. Name the destination out loud on day one. A class that knows where it is going will follow you through the hardest oracles without losing heart.

The Fifth Gospel

This is the heart of the opening. Jerome and the ancient church called Isaiah a gospel rather than a prophecy, because the prophet does not foretell a Savior at arm's length — he preaches him. Walk the class quickly through the back-of-the-Bible feel of the book: a child born and a Son given whose name is *the mighty God*; a virgin's Son named Immanuel; a shoot from a dead stump with the Spirit resting on him; a voice crying in the wilderness; a Servant wounded for our transgressions; a herald anointed to preach good tidings; a feast spread for every empty-handed beggar. If you did not know better, you would think you were reading the New Testament. Then land the point about posture: a sealed file of predictions is read to be verified and filed; a gospel is read to be believed. We keep the predictions gladly — they are the Lord's own credential against the idols — but we will not shrink the Fifth Gospel to a scorecard of forecasts.

A Useful Bridge for Class

Anyone who has sat through Handel's *Messiah* at Christmas has already heard Isaiah sung — *Comfort ye, For unto us a child is born, Surely he hath borne our griefs, All we like sheep have gone astray*. Handel's librettist reached for Isaiah because Isaiah already sings the gospel. The prophet got there first. Use this with a class that feels intimidated: they know more of this book than they realize.

One Book, One Spirit

Handle the authorship question briefly and calmly — the Introduction session gives you the full treatment, so here you only need to defuse the footnote. Someone will mention a “Second” or “Third Isaiah.” The division rests largely on one fact: Isaiah names Cyrus the Persian, by name, roughly a hundred and fifty years before the man was born. To a reader who has already decided no one can foretell a name across a century and a half, the only options are a later author or editor. So the naming of Cyrus is not the conclusion of the argument; it is the hinge, and behind the hinge is an assumption about what God can do. And that assumption is exactly what Isaiah stakes everything on — the contest with the idols turns on who can *declare the end from the*

beginning. Give the confessional answer plainly: the book is one because the Spirit who spake by the prophets is one, and he is not embarrassed by his own foreknowledge. Then move on. Do not let forty weeks be spent on a footnote.

The Servant, and Reading a Prophet

Two quick orientations before the exposition. First, name the Servant in advance and teach the class to watch for the words *my servant*. The word has a range — sometimes the servant is the nation Israel, called to be the Lord's witness and failing at it, *blind* and *deaf* — but in four great songs the word narrows from the many to One, a Servant who is not blind or faithless and who does for Israel what Israel could never do for itself. Who is he? We are not left to guess: Philip, *beginning at this scripture*, preached the Lord Jesus to the Ethiopian from Isaiah 53. That is apostolic warrant, not our ingenuity. Second, teach them to read a prophet as a preacher with double vision — a near horizon in Isaiah's own Judah and a far horizon in Christ and his church — without flattening one into the other. That double vision keeps the class out of two ditches: the critic's, which allows only the near horizon, and the chart-maker's, which fixes only on a far, literal, real-estate horizon with the Lord oddly absent from his own prophecy.

Comfort Ye, Comfort Ye (Isaiah 40:1–11)

Now the passage itself, and the rest of the hour belongs here. Move through it in four beats. The amnesty (vv. 1–2): comfort commanded, *nacham* doubled, spoken to the heart of a people under judgment — not advice but pardon announced. The highway (vv. 3–5): *the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness*, which all four Gospels put in the mouth of the forerunner, clearing the road not for a program but for a Person — *the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together*. The word that stands (vv. 6–8): *the grass withereth* — we are the grass — *but the word of our God shall stand for ever*, the line Peter applies to the preached gospel. And the Shepherd (vv. 9–11): strong hand and gathered lambs in a single motion. Close the exposition where the chapter closes — with the sheep carried, not the student informed.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you are likely to hear, with workable responses. You will not get all of them, and you may get others; the goal is that none catches you flat.

“Why start at chapter forty instead of chapter one?”

Answer with the pastoral logic, not an apology. The manuscript begins where the book's comfort begins, so the class enters this large book already consoled and already pointed at the Servant. They were sent here from the end of the Psalms with a thread in hand — toward a Suffering Servant — and chapter forty is where that thread is tied. They will meet the holiness that makes comfort necessary in Session Two, standing with the undone prophet in the throne room. The order is deliberate: comfort first, so that when the law does its undoing work next week, the class already knows where the healing is.

“Isn't 'Isaiah saw Christ' just reading the New Testament back into the Old?”

A fair and important question. The texts certainly meant something to Isaiah's first hearers — he preached real words to a real Judah in real crises, and this series honors that at every step. But John will not let us stop there. He does not say a meaning has now been added; he says the prophet *saw his glory* — it was already there. So we are not reading Christ into Isaiah. We are reading him out of it, with an apostle as our teacher, and the guardrails on typology exist precisely so this never becomes a license for ingenuity.

“My study Bible says a 'Second Isaiah' wrote chapters forty through sixty-six. Is that just wrong?”

You have been handed an assumption dressed as a discovery, not a secret the church missed. The dividing line falls where it does because of the Cyrus prophecy, and the real premise underneath is that God does not foretell across a century and a half. We begin somewhere else — with the Lord who stakes his very godhood on declaring the end from the beginning, and with the apostle John, who quotes both halves of the book and names Isaiah the author of both without a flicker of doubt. Set the two assumptions side by side and ask which God you are dealing with: the silent one of the critic, who can only describe a future once it has safely arrived, or the living one of the prophet, who names Cyrus before the man's own mother does.

“Isn't 'comfort' a strange way to open a book that is mostly judgment?”

It is exactly the right way, once you see what comfort means here. This is not the storm relenting; it is amnesty declared in the middle of it. The comfort is spoken to a people whose sin has earned the coming exile, and it speaks past the judgment to the pardon on its far side. That is how the gospel always sounds — it finds us with empty hands and fills them. So the placement teaches the doctrine: comfort is not what God says to people who have gotten their house in order. It is what he commands be preached to the undeserving.

“If ‘servant’ sometimes means the nation Israel, how do we know chapter fifty-three is about the Lord Jesus?”

Because an apostle told us, and not because we decided. The word does have a range — Israel is called the Lord’s servant and fails the calling, going *blind* and *deaf*. But the failing servant-nation is not the last word; in the four songs the word narrows to One who does for Israel what Israel could not, and who is even *sent to* Israel. Philip settled the identity for us: reading the fourth song, the Ethiopian asked *of whom speaketh the prophet this?* and Philip answered by preaching the Lord Jesus from that very scripture. Peter lays the same song over the Lord’s passion; Matthew sees in him the Servant who *bare our sicknesses*. The identification is apostolic, which is what keeps it from being allegory.

Leading the Discussion

The student chapter closes with five questions. Two or three, chosen for your class, is right for one hour. Notes on how each behaves in a room.

Question 1 — “Isaiah saw his glory” versus “Isaiah predicted a Messiah”

The natural opener and the session’s thesis in question form. It invites the class to feel the difference between checking forecasts and meeting a Lord. If discussion is slow, answer it first yourself, briefly: the prophet and I are in the same room with the same Christ — he saw the glory; I read of it; neither of us is merely waiting.

Question 2 — The assumption driving the authorship division

The diagnostic question for whether the method landed. Steer the class to name the real premise — that God cannot foretell — and then to see how Isaiah’s own contest with the idols answers it: the Lord’s credential is precisely that he announces a thing before it happens. Keep this brief and confident; do not relitigate the whole critical debate in the room.

Question 3 — Why an apostle, and not our ingenuity, settles the Servant

The guardrail question, and worth protecting. Press the class on why it matters that Philip drew the line first. The answer is that apostolic warrant is what keeps us clear of the old abuse of allegory, where the text means whatever a clever reader can wring from it. The rule for the whole volume hides here: not “what could this stand for?” but “where does Scripture itself draw the line to Christ?”

Question 4 — Naming law and gospel rightly

The most useful exercise of the hour. Have the class name *Woe is me* as law and *Comfort ye* as gospel, then push the harder half: why does the comfort only land as good news once the woe has done its full work? Because comfort offered to a person who is not yet undone is heard as mere advice; comfort spoken to the undone is heard as rescue. This is the rhythm of the whole book.

Question 5 — A comfort founded outside ourselves

The best closer, and a quietly Lutheran one. Let the class contrast a comfort that rises and falls with how strongly they happen to feel and a comfort founded on a word that does not wither. Anchor it in the text and in Peter's use of it. You might have them write down where they have been tempted to ground their assurance in their own feelings — then set *the word of our God shall stand for ever* beside it.

For Further Study

If you want to prepare more deeply — or a student asks for recommendations — the following will serve.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (Luther's Works, vols. 16–17). Luther's comments on chapter forty are warm gospel preaching; read his treatment of *Comfort ye* before you teach it.
- ♦ The Formula of Concord, Article V (Epitome and Solid Declaration), on law and gospel. Short, clear, and load-bearing for this volume. Chapter six and chapter forty are its two poles.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55* (Concordia Commentary, CPH). A thorough confessional treatment that reads the comfort and the Servant the way this series does. The introduction alone will steady you for the second half of the book.
- ♦ *Isaiah* in the People's Bible series (Northwestern). Accessible, pastoral, and reliably Lutheran — a good week-by-week companion for the teacher who wants one volume at the elbow.
- ♦ *The Lutheran Study Bible* (CPH). The notes on Isaiah 40 and the book introduction handle the authorship question confessionally and briefly, which is exactly the tone you want in class.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ The Isaianic libretto of Handel's *Messiah*, Part One, read slowly as Scripture rather than heard as music. Nearly every line is Isaiah, and reading the texts in order is its own preview of the volume.

A Final Word

You are about to lead a class through sixty-six chapters — throne rooms and courtrooms, nations rising and falling, a Servant wounded and exalted — and you are beginning it with a command to comfort. That is the right beginning. The book itself sets the itinerary, and the first word out of the storm is pardon.

Do not be anxious that you are not a Hebrew scholar. What your class needs is not expertise but the Scriptures opened toward Christ. The student book will do the heavy lifting; your calling is to walk the road with them, keep the Servant in view, and trust the word to do what the word does. The comfort of chapter forty is *commanded* — from the lips of God himself — and you are one of the appointed preachers of it.

And remember whose book this is. The Spirit who inspired Isaiah to see the Servant's glory is the same Spirit who works faith through the prophet's own words on an ordinary Sunday morning. He has been opening blind eyes to this book for twenty-seven centuries. He does not need your eloquence to do it again. A voice is told to cry, *and he said, What shall I cry?* You know what to cry. The comfort has a name. May the Lord, whose glory the prophet saw, bless your teaching and your class as you set out on the long road from chapter forty to the cross.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWO

Holy, Holy, Holy

Isaiah 6 · with John 12:37–41

A Note to the Teacher

Last week the class was comforted. This week they are undone — and that order is the whole pedagogy of the book. Session One opened at chapter forty so the class would arrive consoled; Session Two takes them back to the year King Uzziah died, into the throne room, where the holiest man in Judah collapses under the holiness of God before a coal is ever lifted from the altar. Do not soften this. The comfort of chapter forty gets its full weight only here, where a man is destroyed by what he sees and then, astonishingly, cleansed. This is the law and the gospel of the whole book pressed into one vision, and you have an hour to let both notes ring.

There is a second thread you must not drop, because it is the reason the manuscript pairs this chapter with John 12. The beloved disciple, writing of the unbelief that met the Lord Jesus, reaches back to this very vision and says the prophet *saw his glory, and spake of him*. So the One high and lifted up on the throne in Isaiah 6 is the One who would be lifted up on a cross. Hold those two “liftings” together — the throne and the cross — and the session has a spine.

Use this guide as a tool, not a script. The throne-room scene preaches itself if you stay out of its way; your task is to keep the law from curdling into mere self-improvement and the gospel from arriving before the law has done its undoing work.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

In the throne room the law unmakes the prophet — *Woe is me! for I am undone* — and the gospel restores him by a coal carried from the altar, the place of sacrifice; teach this hour so the class

sees that the cleansing comes from outside the man, and that only the cleansed are sent.

Before You Walk In

Preparations that will let you teach the vision freely.

- ◆ Read the student session twice, then read Isaiah 6 aloud, slowly, more than once. The chapter moves fast — throne, woe, coal, commission — and reading it aloud will keep you from rushing the hinge between the woe and the coal.
- ◆ Read John 12:37–41 beside it. There John quotes both this chapter and chapter fifty-three and tells us the glory Isaiah saw was the glory of the Lord Jesus. That single sentence governs how you teach the throne.
- ◆ Hold one Hebrew word in mind: *qadosh* — holy, set apart, wholly other — trebled by the seraphim. Isaiah's favorite name for God across the whole book grows out of this room: *the Holy One of Israel*. Teach the word, and the title will pay off for sixty more chapters.
- ◆ Re-read the Formula of Concord, Article V. No passage shows the two words at full strength more sharply than this one — the law that does not improve a man but unmakes him, and the gospel that cleanses lips the man himself had confessed unclean.
- ◆ Have the order of the Communion liturgy in view. Your class sings *Holy, holy, holy* in the Sanctus on its way to the altar; this chapter is where that song comes from, and you will want to make the connection land.
- ◆ Pray for the fear of God and the comfort of God in the same hour — that your class would be allowed to feel the undoing before they feel the coal, because the coal means nothing to a man who was never undone.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to have solid before you teach.

One · The glory Isaiah saw was the glory of the Lord Jesus.

This is the most important thing to settle, because the whole vision changes depending on whom the prophet saw. John tells us plainly: Isaiah *saw his glory, and spake of him*. So the One *high and lifted up*, whose train fills the temple, before whom the seraphim veil their faces, is the pre-

incarnate Christ. Then set the two liftings side by side. In John's Gospel the Lord is *lifted up* on the cross — the same Greek verb, the same divine necessity. The Holy One whose holiness undoes the prophet in chapter six is the One who would be stripped and nailed up in the prophet's place. That is not a clever overlay; it is John's own reading, and it keeps the chapter from being a generic lesson about reverence. The holiness that condemns and the love that saves meet in one Person.

Two · The law's proper work is to undo, not to improve.

Watch what the holiness of God does to the best man in the kingdom. Isaiah does not feel affirmed in the presence of God; he comes apart. *Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips.* This is the law in its full, killing force — not a tune-up but a verdict. The world's comfort, *you are a good person*, is no comfort at all in that throne room; it is exactly the lie the vision burns away. Teach your class that the law is not God being harsh; it is God telling the truth, and the truth about a sinner before the thrice-holy God is *undone*. Only a man who has heard that verdict has any use for a coal from the altar. Cheap grace is grace offered to people who were never allowed to be undone first.

Three · The cleansing comes from the altar — from outside the man.

Isaiah does not cleanse himself, and he is not told to try. A seraph flies to him with a live coal *taken with the tongs from off the altar* and lays it on the very lips he had just confessed unclean, with the word, *thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged*. Press every part of that. The cleansing is done to him, not by him. It comes from the altar — the place of sacrifice, where blood is shed — so that even here, centuries early, atonement comes by a death and not by the sinner's effort. And it touches the exact point of his confessed uncleanness. This is the gospel in a gesture: the guilt the man could only name, the Lord removes, and removes from outside him, from the altar. Then — and only then — comes the commission.

Suggested Time Plan

The plan assumes one hour. Adjust freely; the Pacing Tip names what to protect.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:12	The year the king died; whose glory Isaiah saw (John 12:41)
0:12–0:22	<i>Holy, holy, holy</i> — the seraphim and the LORD of hosts
0:22–0:34	<i>Woe is me</i> — the law's undoing work (6:5)

0:34–0:44	The coal from the altar; <i>here am I, send me</i> (6:6–8)
0:44–0:50	Hardened hearts and the holy seed (6:9–13)
0:50–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 1 and Session Three

Pacing Tip

The danger this week is rushing the gap between the woe and the coal. If time is short, protect verses 5–8 — the undoing and the cleansing in sequence — and let the opening throne-room description and the closing hardening compress. The class must feel the order: undone first, cleansed second, sent third. Lose that order and the chapter becomes a lecture on reverence instead of the gospel.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

The notes follow the movements of the student chapter — background for teaching, not a transcript.

The Year the King Died

Begin where the chapter begins, with a date that is also a death: *in the year that king Uzziah died*. Earthly thrones empty; the throne the prophet now sees does not. The timing matters pastorally — it is when the visible king is gone that Isaiah is shown the King who never dies. Set the human scene briefly, then let the curtain go up.

Whose Glory Isaiah Saw

Stop here long enough to make John's point land before the vision overwhelms it. The Lord *high and lifted up* is the Lord Jesus in his glory — John says so. This is your warrant for reading the whole vision christologically rather than as a generic theophany. Plant the seed of the two liftings now; you will harvest it at the cross in Sessions Twenty-two and Twenty-three.

Holy, Holy, Holy

The seraphim cry *Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory*, and the posts of the door shake. Note the trebling — Hebrew intensifies by repetition, and holiness is the only attribute Scripture lifts to the third degree. This is where Isaiah's signature title, *the Holy One of Israel*, is forged. And this is the song your class sings in the Sanctus. Make that connection

explicitly: when the church sings these words before the Supper, she is standing in this room, and she is on her way to an altar where the Holy One gives his body and blood to lips like Isaiah's.

A Connection Worth Drawing

The Sanctus in the Communion liturgy is Isaiah 6 put in the congregation's mouth. The seraphim sing it veiling their faces; the church sings it walking toward the rail. The difference is the coal — for the church, the body and blood of the Holy One himself, touching unclean lips and taking iniquity away. Teaching this turns a familiar hymn into the gospel.

Woe Is Me

The hinge of the chapter and the law's masterpiece. Let the class feel the collapse before you analyze it. Isaiah is not a skeptic or a scoundrel; he is the prophet, and the sight of holiness leaves him *undone* — a word of disintegration, of coming apart at the seams. He indicts his own lips first, the instrument of his calling. This is what the law is for: not to make Isaiah a better man but to end the illusion that he was ever a safe man. Resist any move in the room to make this a humility exercise. It is a death sentence, and the gospel that follows is a resurrection.

The Coal from the Altar; Here Am I, Send Me

Now the gospel, in a gesture and a sequence. The seraph does the cleansing; the coal comes from the altar; the very lips confessed unclean are the lips touched. *Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.* Only after that does the prophet hear the question — *Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?* — and answer, *Here am I; send me.* Drive the order home: cleansed first, sent second. Isaiah is not commissioned because he volunteered or qualified; he is commissioned because his sin was purged. This guards against the oldest mistake in the room — thinking we are put to work because God found us useful. We are put to work because we were first forgiven.

Hardened Hearts and the Holy Seed

The commission has a hard edge: Isaiah is sent to a people who will *hear ye indeed, but understand not* — words John applies directly to those who would not believe the Lord Jesus. Handle this honestly; it troubles people. The preaching that hardens is the same preaching that saves; the word does its work, and where it is refused, the refusing is itself a judgment. But the chapter does not end in the dark. After the felling of the tree, a stump remains, and *the holy seed shall be the substance thereof.* Even the hardest commission ends with a living root — a remnant, and beyond it the Branch the class will meet in Session Eight. The gospel hides even here.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“How can John say Isaiah saw ‘his glory’ — the glory of the Lord Jesus — when the Son was not yet born?”

Because the Son is eternal; he did not begin to exist at Bethlehem. The One the prophet saw enthroned is the Word who was *in the beginning with God*, the Lord who appears throughout the Old Testament. John is not stretching the text; he is reading it the way the church confesses the Trinity. The incarnation is when the eternal Son took flesh, not when he began to be. So Isaiah genuinely saw the glory of the One who would later be born of Mary and lifted up on a cross — the same Person, before and after.

“Why would a loving God say ‘make their hearts fat’ — isn’t that God hardening people on purpose?”

Slow down here; it is a real difficulty. The prophetic idiom states the certain outcome as if it were the purpose: Isaiah will preach faithfully, and the result, in those who refuse, will be deeper hardening. The same sunlight that softens wax hardens clay; the fault is in the clay, not the sun. God is not making innocent people unable to believe; he is sending his word to a people who have already turned, and their continued refusal hardens them further. Paul wrestles with exactly this in Romans, and the answer is never that God delights in their ruin — the chapter itself ends with a holy seed preserved. The word that hardens the proud is the word that saves the contrite.

“If Isaiah was a prophet, why did he need cleansing at all?”

That is precisely the point of the chapter. The holiest man available is shown to be a *man of unclean lips* the moment he stands in true holiness. There is no class of person who graduates past the need for the coal. The vision is not telling us Isaiah was unusually bad; it is telling us what every sinner is before the thrice-holy God, and that even the prophet enters his ministry as a pardoned man. If Isaiah needed the altar, so does the teacher, and so does the class.

“Is the ‘altar’ here pointing to the cross, or am I reading too much in?”

You are on safe ground, and here is the guardrail. We do not say the coal *means* the cross by our own ingenuity; we say the cleansing in Isaiah comes from the place of sacrifice — from an altar where atonement is made by death — and the New Testament teaches that all such atonement was finally accomplished at one cross. So the structure is the same: sin removed not by the sinner’s

effort but by a sacrifice applied to him. Keep the claim modest and let the whole book build toward chapter fifty-three, where the altar becomes a Servant.

“What does the ‘holy seed’ stump have to do with us?”

It is the first appearance of a theme the volume will follow to its end: when judgment fells the tree, God preserves a living remnant, and from that stump comes the Branch — the Messiah of Session Eight, and beyond him the church gathered out of every nation. The stump is the gospel’s refusal to let the story end in ash. Point your class forward: the holy seed planted here grows into the shoot of chapter eleven and is harvested at the empty tomb.

Leading the Discussion

The student chapter closes with six questions. Two or three is right for an hour.

Question 1 — The One enthroned is the One lifted up on a cross

The christological opener. Let the class sit with the strangeness and the comfort of it: the holiness that undoes the prophet belongs to the One who would be undone in the prophet’s place. If discussion is slow, answer it yourself — the throne and the cross are the same Lord, and that is the whole gospel in one vision.

Question 2 — What the law actually does, and why “you are a good person” fails

The diagnostic question. Press the class to see that the world’s affirmation is not a smaller comfort than the gospel — it is a different thing entirely, and a lie in the throne room. The law’s work is to undo, so that the coal has someone to cleanse. Expect resistance here; many have been catechized to believe self-esteem is the goal. Receive it kindly and redirect to the text.

Question 3 — Where the cleansing comes from, and where it does not

The gospel question, and the one to protect if you choose only one. Have the class say it plainly: the cleansing comes from the altar, by a seraph’s hand, to the confessed-unclean lips — and it does *not* come from Isaiah trying harder. Then ask why it matters that the coal is from the altar, the place of sacrifice. You are quietly teaching them the doctrine of atonement from a single verse.

Question 4 — Cleansed first, sent second

The vocation question, handled the Lutheran way. The order guards against the error that God commissions us because we are useful. Isaiah is sent because he is forgiven. Let the class feel the

relief in that: their service flows from pardon already given, not toward pardon they must earn. Keep it off the rocks of “find your calling” self-discovery; the calling here is given, not generated.

Question 5 — Isaiah 6 and the Sanctus

The liturgical question, lovely for a class with visitors. Anchor it in the text: the church sings the seraphim’s song on her way to the altar where the Holy One touches her lips. This is not a polemic about worship styles; it is an invitation to see what the congregation is already doing every Communion Sunday.

Question 6 — The gospel hidden in the hardest commission

The closer, and a good one. The commission to a hardening people would be unbearable but for its last line — the stump, the holy seed. Let the class find the gospel themselves: even where the word is refused, God keeps a remnant and grows a Branch. End the hour looking forward, toward the One the stump becomes.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation, or to recommend to a student.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapter six. Luther reads the vision as law and gospel and is unembarrassed to find Christ on the throne.
- ♦ The Formula of Concord, Article V, on law and gospel — read with Isaiah 6 in hand as the textbook case of the two words at full strength.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1–39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on chapter six, with careful attention to the altar, the coal, and the commission.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People’s Bible, Northwestern) on the throne-room vision — a clear, pastoral walk-through for the teacher who wants one accessible volume.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ The Sanctus and its place in the Communion liturgy (Lutheran Service Book or your hymnal’s order of the Supper). Pray the words this week knowing where they come from.

A Final Word

You will teach this hour better if you have first stood where Isaiah stood. Before you prepare a word for the class, let the chapter do to you what it did to him — let the holiness of God undo your illusions about yourself — and then receive the coal. A teacher who has been to the altar this week will not preach the law as a scold or the gospel as a slogan.

Keep the order in front of the class all hour: undone, cleansed, sent. It is the order of the Christian life and the order of every faithful ministry. None of us volunteers our way into God's service; we are carried there on the far side of a pardon we did not earn. The same is true of the teacher in the fellowship hall as of the prophet in the temple.

And remember that the One whose glory filled that temple is the One who fills your classroom with his word. He has been touching unclean lips with cleansing for twenty-seven centuries, and he is not finished. May the Lord, holy, holy, holy, send you out cleansed and unafraid, and may your class hear, behind your ordinary voice, the seraph's word: *thine iniquity is taken away*.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION THREE

The Great Arraignment

Isaiah 1 · with Romans 9:27–29 and 1 John 1:7–9

A Note to the Teacher

Now the book begins where the book begins. Sessions One and Two gave the class comfort and then holiness; this week Isaiah opens his own first chapter, and it is a courtroom. *Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the Lord hath spoken.* The LORD summons heaven and earth as witnesses and arraigns his own people — a covenant lawsuit, the prophet as prosecutor. Your class will feel the temperature drop after chapter forty’s comfort, and that is exactly right: they are learning the law that makes the comfort necessary. Teach the indictment without flinching, because the gospel offer dropped into the middle of this trial — *though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow* — only stuns a class that has first felt the charges.

Two things to watch. First, the diagnosis is total: *no soundness in it from the sole of the foot even unto the head.* This is the doctrine of sin in a single x-ray, and it cuts against everything a “basically good people” culture believes. Second, the most uncomfortable charge is aimed at the religious: God says he is *full* of the very sacrifices he himself commanded, and calls them an abomination, because the hands lifting them are full of blood. That is a warning for faithful churchgoers, and your class is faithful churchgoers.

Use this guide as a tool. The chapter is a trial; let the verdict land before you rush to the pardon, and the pardon will do its proper work.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

God arraigns his own people in a covenant lawsuit — their sin a betrayal of a Father's love, their worship an abomination because their hands are bloody — and then, in the middle of the trial, the Judge himself offers the only verdict that can save: scarlet washed to snow.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the arraignment.

- ◆ Read the student session twice, then read Isaiah 1 aloud as a courtroom scene — noticing who is summoned, what the charge is, and where the offer falls.
- ◆ Read Romans 9:27–29 and 1 John 1:7–9 alongside. Paul applies Isaiah's remnant to the church; John tells us whose blood washes the scarlet. Both are load-bearing this week.
- ◆ Hold the picture of the covenant lawsuit in mind — the prophetic *rîb*, where the LORD brings a legal case against his people before heaven and earth as witnesses. Naming the genre keeps the class from hearing mere scolding.
- ◆ Re-read the connection to Session Two: in chapter six the law undid the holiest man; in chapter one it undoes the whole nation, and exposes their worship. The two belong together.
- ◆ Have verse 18 marked. *Come now, and let us reason together* is the gospel hinge of the chapter, and you will want to read it slowly and rightly — not as a negotiation but as an announcement.
- ◆ Pray that the law would do its real work in the room — not to shame your class but to empty their hands, so the offer of verse 18 finds them ready to receive rather than bargain.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · Sin is first the betrayal of a Father, not only the breaking of a rule.

The chapter opens not with a statute violated but a family broken: *I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me*. The ox knows its owner, the donkey its master's crib — but Israel does not know. Teach the class to feel this. Sin is real lawbreaking, but underneath the broken law is a wounded love; the offense is against a Father who fed and raised them. This makes the law sharper, not softer. A rule broken can be paid off; a father betrayed must be reconciled.

And it sets up the gospel, because the same Father who indicts is the one who offers to wash them white — the lawsuit is brought by love, for the sake of restoration.

Two · The diagnosis is total — and that is what makes the cure good news.

From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it. This is not pessimism; it is honesty, and it is the opposite of “basically good.” The depth of the diagnosis is precisely what makes the cure gospel. A people who are mostly well need only advice; a people sick from head to foot need a physician who raises the dead. So do not let the class soften the picture. The reason verse 18 can promise *as white as snow* is that verses 5 and 6 refused to pretend the wound was minor. Underplay the sickness and you cheapen the cure.

Three · God can reject the worship he himself commanded.

This is the charge that should unsettle the faithful most. The sacrifices, the new moons, the appointed feasts — God ordained every one of them — and he says, *I am full, I cannot away with, they are a trouble unto me.* Why? *Your hands are full of blood.* Religious activity offered by unclean hands is not neutral; it is an abomination. The warning is exact for a church class: attendance, ritual, even correct doctrine, severed from a heart that does justice and from hands cleansed by God, becomes the very thing God hates. This connects straight to chapter six — the holiest man's lips had to be cleansed before he could serve — and it drives the class toward the only remedy the chapter offers, which is not better worship but washed hands they cannot wash themselves.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the Pacing Tip names what to protect.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:14	The court is called; children who rebelled (1:2–4)
0:14–0:24	No soundness in it; sacrifices an abomination (1:5–15)
0:24–0:36	<i>Wash you, make you clean</i> ; scarlet to snow (1:16–18)
0:36–0:44	If ye be willing; Zion redeemed with judgment (1:19–27)
0:44–0:50	The remnant — Romans 9:27–29
0:50–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 2–4 and Session Four

Pacing Tip

Protect verses 16–18 above all. The whole arraignment exists to make that offer audible. If the indictment runs long and you must cut, compress the catalog of charges but never the moment the Judge turns and says *let us reason together*. The class should leave with the scarlet-to-snow verse ringing, not the list of sins.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching freely, following the chapter's movements.

The Court Is Called

Open with the summons: heaven and earth called as witnesses, the LORD bringing a case. This is the form of the covenant lawsuit, and naming it helps the class hear what follows as legal testimony, not a bad mood. The cosmos itself is subpoenaed to hear how the people have treated their God.

Children Who Rebelled; No Soundness in It

The charge is rebellion against a Father, and the wound is total. Linger on the animal comparison — the ox and donkey know their owner; Israel does not — and on the head-to-foot sickness. This is the law's diagnostic work. Keep it from becoming generic; the point is not that people are flawed but that the covenant people have betrayed covenant love and are sick through and through.

I Am Full of Your Sacrifices

The hardest movement, and the one most needed by a church class. God rejects worship he commanded, because the worshipers' hands are bloody. Read verses 11–15 slowly. The remedy God names is not more or better ceremony but *wash you, make you clean* — and then *learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed*. Worship and justice cannot be divorced; the altar does not launder a violent life.

A Warning to Read Gently

This is not a club to beat the devout with; it is a mirror. The danger for a faithful class is not skipping church but trusting church — letting attendance and correctness stand in for a heart cleansed and hands that do justice. Teach the warning the way Isaiah does: as the necessary clearing of the ground before the offer of free pardon in verse 18.

Wash You, Make You Clean; Scarlet to Snow

The gospel breaks into the trial. *Come now, and let us reason together.* This is not God inviting a negotiation — sinners have nothing to bargain with — but God announcing a verdict no court could reach: *though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.* Scarlet is the color of blood-guilt, of the bloody hands just named. And Scripture says blood-red sin is washed white only by blood — not the worshiper's but the Lamb's, as John teaches. So tie verse 18 back to the altar of chapter six and forward to the cross: the same Lord who indicts provides the washing, and the washing is by his own blood.

If Ye Be Willing; Zion Redeemed with Judgment

Two final notes. First, the free pardon does not abolish the warning: *if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured.* The gift is free, but it must be received; what finally condemns is not the unmet demand but the refused gift. Make clear that *willing and obedient* is not a return to earning — it is the empty hand opening to take what is offered, not a wage being worked for. Second, the chapter ends with hope: *Zion shall be redeemed with judgment.* Teach the class to read “Zion” as the New Testament does — the people God makes righteous, the church — not a political-national program. That reading is your guardrail against the dispensational ditch all year.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Why would God command sacrifices and then call them an abomination? Isn't that contradictory?”

Not contradictory — diagnostic. God did command the sacrifices, and they were good; but a sacrifice was never meant to be a bribe that buys permission to keep sinning. When the same hands that bring the offering are full of injustice, the ritual becomes a lie, and God hates a lie told in his name more than no worship at all. The sacrifices were always meant to point to a cleansing of the heart, not to replace it. So God is not rejecting worship; he is rejecting worship weaponized against repentance.

“Isn't ‘let us reason together’ God inviting us to negotiate a settlement?”

It sounds that way in English, but the verse is not a bargaining table. We come to the table with bloody hands and scarlet sin — nothing to trade. What follows *let us reason together* is not an offer to split the difference but a flat announcement: your scarlet *shall be* white as snow. The only

“reasoning” is God reasoning a sinner out of despair and into the verdict he alone can give. Read it as gospel proclamation, not contract law.

“If the pardon is free, why does the next verse threaten that the rebellious will be ‘devoured’?”

Because a free gift can still be refused, and the refusal is what condemns. Verse 18 gives the pardon; verses 19–20 set the two ways before the people — receive it (*willing and obedient*) or reject it (*refuse and rebel*). Note carefully: *willing and obedient* is not a re-introduction of works. It is the posture of the empty hand that opens to receive. What devours a person is not failing to earn enough but spurning the washing held out for free.

“Is this ‘Zion’ the modern state, or the church, or heaven?”

The New Testament teaches us to read Isaiah’s Zion as the people God redeems and makes righteous — fulfilled in Christ and his church, and consummated in the new Jerusalem. So it is not a real-estate or geopolitical program. *Zion shall be redeemed with judgment* means God will save a people by justly dealing with their sin — which he does at the cross — and gather them as his own. Reading Zion this way keeps you out of the dispensational ditch and keeps the Lord Jesus at the center of his own prophecy.

“What is the ‘remnant’ Paul quotes from this chapter?”

Isaiah says that but for the LORD leaving a small remnant, the people would have been as Sodom. Paul takes that up in Romans 9 to teach that God has always saved by grace a people within the people — not the whole nation by birthright, but those the Lord preserves. It is a sober and a hopeful word: judgment is real, but God never lets the line die out. The remnant of chapter one becomes the holy seed of chapter six and the Branch of chapter eleven.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — Sin as a broken family, not only a broken rule

A strong opener that invites confession without embarrassment. Press the class to feel the difference: betrayal of a Father’s love is heavier than a rule infraction, and it explains why the remedy must be reconciliation, not mere correction.

Question 2 — “No soundness in it” versus “basically good”

The diagnostic question. Help the class see that the depth of the wound is what makes the cure good news. A culture that says “basically good” has no use for a Savior; a people sick head to foot have nothing else.

Question 3 — How God can reject the worship he commanded

The convicting question for the devout. Connect it to chapter six — even the prophet’s lips needed cleansing before service. The warning is for the regular attender, gently delivered: ritual cannot launder injustice.

Question 4 — Scarlet to snow, and whose blood

The gospel question, and the one to protect. Walk the class from *let us reason together* to *white as snow* to the blood that does the washing — not theirs, the Lamb’s — tying it to the altar of chapter six. This is the heart of the hour.

Question 5 — Free pardon and the warning against rebellion

The careful question about gift and refusal. Make sure the class hears that *willing and obedient* is the open hand, not the earning wage. What condemns is the spurned gift, not the unmet demand.

Question 6 — Reading “Zion” rightly

The hermeneutical closer, and your guardrail for the volume. Have the class state how the New Testament reads Zion — the church God makes righteous — and why that keeps the Lord Jesus, not a political map, at the center.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapter one — his handling of the rejected sacrifices and the free pardon is bracing law-and-gospel preaching.
- ♦ The Augsburg Confession and Apology, Articles IV and XX, on justification and good works — useful for keeping *willing and obedient* clear of works-righteousness.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1–39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on the opening arraignment and the covenant-lawsuit form.

- ♦ *The Lutheran Study Bible* (CPH) notes on Isaiah 1, especially verse 18 and the remnant.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ 1 John 1:7-9, read slowly this week — the New Testament's own commentary on scarlet washed white, and a fit prayer for the teacher's own unclean hands.

A Final Word

You are teaching a courtroom this week, and the safest place to stand is in the dock. Before you prepare the indictment for your class, let it be read over you — your own worship, your own hands — and then receive verse 18 as your own pardon. A teacher who has been washed this week will read *scarlet to snow* with the right tremble in the voice.

Hold the order steady: the trial, then the offer. The temptation is to soften the charges so the class is not uncomfortable, but a softened law produces a cheapened gospel, and a class that was never undone has no use for snow. Trust the chapter's own architecture. The Judge who brings the case is the one who offers the washing.

And remember that the same Lord who said *let us reason together* in Isaiah's day says it still, every Sunday, over people with bloody hands and scarlet records. He has been turning scarlet to snow for twenty-seven centuries by his own blood, and he will do it again in your classroom. May the Lord, who indicts in love and pardons in blood, make your teaching an instrument of both the wound and the washing.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION FOUR

The Branch and the Mountain

Isaiah 2–4 · with Micah 4:1–3 and Philippians 2:5–11

A Note to the Teacher

This week the class takes three chapters as one movement, and the shape is the point. A mountain opens it — the LORD’s house lifted up, the nations streaming in — and a Branch closes it: *beautiful and glorious*, the only thing left standing when human glory is leveled. Between those two bright bookends runs a long, hard judgment: the day of the LORD that brings down everything lofty, the stripping of the proud, the catalog of stolen finery. Teach the frame and the picture holds together. Without the mountain at the front and the Branch at the back, chapters three and four read like a bleveling for its own sake; with them, the leveling is in the service of a single survivor — the glory of God in Christ — and a washed remnant sheltered under his canopy.

Two reading habits get exercised this week. First, the christological-ecclesial reading of the mountain: the New Testament says *the last days* began with the coming of the Lord Jesus, so Isaiah’s vision of nations streaming to Zion is being fulfilled now, as the gospel goes out and the nations come in — not waiting on a future map. Second, the guardrail against turning Isaiah into a political program: the peace of beaten swords comes *from the mountain*, from the One who *is our peace*, not from human disarmament. Keep both in view and you keep the class out of two ditches at once.

Use this guide as a tool. Three chapters is a lot of ground; the time plan protects the mountain and the Branch and lets the middle compress.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

The mountain of the LORD's house and the Branch of the LORD frame a long judgment that levels every human height — teach this movement so the class sees that the only glory which survives the day of the LORD is the glory of the One who humbled himself and was therefore exalted, and that his washed remnant is sheltered under his own canopy.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching three chapters as one.

- ◆ Read the student session twice, then read Isaiah 2, 3, and 4 together in one sitting, watching the mountain (ch. 2) and the Branch (ch. 4) frame the judgment held between them.
- ◆ Read Micah 4:1–3 — nearly word for word the mountain vision — and Philippians 2:5–11. Micah shows the vision was shared prophetic hope; Philippians gives you the pattern of humiliation-then-exaltation that explains the whole movement.
- ◆ Mark the refrain: *the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day* (2:11, 17). It is the thesis of the judgment section — every height comes down so that one height remains.
- ◆ Have Acts 2:16–17 and Ephesians 2:14 ready. The first dates *the last days* to Pentecost; the second names the Lord Jesus as *our peace*. Both keep the mountain christological.
- ◆ Note the turn at 4:2 — after all the stripping, *the branch of the Lord is beautiful and glorious*. The Hebrew *tsemach*, the Branch, becomes a messianic title the volume will return to in Session Eight.
- ◆ Pray for humility — yours first. A chapter about leveling human pride is best taught by someone who has let it level his own.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · The mountain is the church, and the last days are now.

Isaiah sees the LORD's house established in the top of the mountains, and all nations flowing to it *in the last days*. Teach your class to read this with New Testament eyes. Peter at Pentecost declares that *the last days* have begun; the writer to the Hebrews says God has spoken *in these last days* by

his Son. So this vision is not a blueprint for a future political Jerusalem; it is a portrait of what is happening as the gospel goes out and the nations stream into the church. The mountain is exalted not by bulldozers but by preaching; the nations come not as conquered subjects but as worshipers learning the LORD's ways. Read this way, the vision is comfort for an ordinary congregation: the streaming has started, and your class is part of the river.

Two · The peace comes from the mountain — from the One who is our peace.

The beaten swords and pruned spears are among the most quoted lines in Isaiah, and among the most misread — carved on monuments as a hope for peace through human effort and disarmament. Watch the order of the verses. The nations beat their swords into plowshares *because* they have first come up to the mountain to be taught the LORD's ways and judged by his word. The peace flows downhill from God, not sideways between treaty partners. Paul names the source: *he is our peace*, who has broken down the dividing wall. So the disarmament is real, but it is a fruit of the gospel's work in hearts, not a political program Isaiah is endorsing. Teaching this keeps the class from turning a vision of Christ into a foreign-policy slogan.

Three · Only one glory survives the day of the LORD — the glory of the humbled and exalted One.

The long middle of this movement is a leveling: every lofty tower, every proud height, all the stripped finery of a people who trusted in appearance — *the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day*. Then, at the far end, comes the one thing left standing: *the branch of the Lord*, beautiful and glorious. Set this beside Philippians 2. The day of the LORD brings down all self-made glory, but the glory that survives is the glory of the One who *humbled himself* to the death of the cross and was therefore *highly exalted*. That is the only height the leveling cannot reach, because it was reached by going low. Teach the class that the way up, in this book and in the gospel, runs downward first.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the Pacing Tip names what to protect.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:16	The mountain of the LORD's house; the last days now (2:1–5)
0:16–0:26	Cease ye from man; the day of the LORD levels the proud (2:6–22)

0:26–0:36	The stay and the staff; the daughters of Zion stripped (ch. 3)
0:36–0:46	The Branch of the LORD; a shelter and a refuge (4:2–6)
0:46–0:50	Philippians 2 — the glory that survives
0:50–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 5 and Session Five

Pacing Tip

The middle chapters are a catalog — do not try to teach every item of stripped finery. Protect the two bright ends: the mountain (2:1–5) and the Branch (4:2–6). If the judgment section runs long, summarize it with the refrain — *the Lord alone shall be exalted* — and move to the Branch, where the gospel waits. The class should leave seeing the frame, not lost in the inventory.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the movement's shape.

The Mountain of the LORD's House

Open at the high, bright vision: the LORD's house exalted, nations streaming up, the word going forth, and peace flowing down. Teach it as present tense — the last days have begun, the gospel is going out, the nations are coming in. This is your chance to let a small congregation feel its place in a vast river. Note the parallel in Micah; two prophets saw the same mountain, which marks it as settled covenant hope, not a one-off.

Cease Ye from Man

The vision's shadow side: the day of the LORD against everything lofty. Linger on the climactic command — *cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils: for wherein is he to be accounted of?* Use Luther's rule here: whatever the heart clings to and relies on is its god. The chapter pictures people flinging their idols *to the moles and to the bats* when terror comes; the lesson is to name now what we will abandon then. An idol is anything that will not be there when you die.

The Stay and the Staff; the Daughters of Zion

The stripping. God removes every prop the proud lean on — the *stay and the staff*, the whole supply of bread and water, the leaders — and then the long catalog of finery taken from those who trusted appearance. Read it as the law exposing a haughtiness that measures worth by what can be seen

and worn. Note for the class that the charge falls on the men first; this is not about fashion but about the heart that trusts in display rather than in the LORD.

The Branch of the LORD

The turn, and the gospel. After all the leveling, *in that day shall the branch of the Lord be beautiful and glorious*. This is the first major appearance of *the Branch* — a title that will grow into the shoot from Jesse's stump in chapter eleven and, in the prophets generally, into a name for the Messiah. Set it against the stripped human glory: every borrowed beauty has been taken away, and now the only true beauty stands forth, given by God, not achieved. Point the class to Philippians 2 — this is the glory of the One exalted because he was humbled.

A Craft Note on the Frame

Teach chapters 2–4 as a single arc, not three separate lessons. The mountain (up), the leveling (down), the Branch (up again, but a glory that cannot be leveled). If the class grasps the arc, the hard middle becomes meaningful: the proud heights are brought down precisely so the one true height can be seen. Draw it on the board as a valley between two peaks.

A Shelter and a Refuge

The movement ends in tenderness. The remnant left in Zion is called *holy* — but holy only after *the Lord shall have washed away the filth by the spirit of judgment, and by the spirit of burning*. This is a washed holiness, given and not achieved — the same gospel grammar as the coal of chapter six. Then God spreads a canopy: *a tabernacle for a shadow in the daytime... and for a place of refuge*. The cloud and fire of the exodus return as shelter. Point ahead: this sheltering presence is consummated when God *dwells with* his people forever in the new Jerusalem.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Is the ‘mountain’ a literal future Jerusalem that the nations will march to?”

The New Testament reads it as fulfilled now, in the church. Peter says the last days began at Pentecost; the nations are streaming in as the gospel is preached and Gentiles come to worship the God of Israel. So the mountain is the LORD's house exalted by the word, and the streaming is conversion, not geopolitics. Reading it as a literal future march turns a vision of the church's

present life into a calendar of events and leaves the Lord Jesus, who builds and gathers this house, oddly off to the side of his own prophecy.

“The ‘swords into plowshares’ line is everywhere — isn’t Isaiah endorsing world peace through disarmament?”

Watch where the peace comes from. The nations beat their swords down *after* coming to the mountain to be taught and judged by the LORD’s word. The peace flows from God to the nations, not from one nation to another across a negotiating table. Paul names the true source: *he is our peace*. So the vision is real, but it is gospel peace — reconciliation to God spilling over into reconciliation among peoples — not a political program of treaties. Honor the hope; locate it in Christ.

“Why does God strip away the women’s finery in chapter three? It feels harsh and oddly specific.”

The passage is not finally about clothing or about women in particular — the men are charged first, in chapter two. It is about a haughtiness that trusts in appearance, in what can be displayed and admired, instead of in God. The detailed inventory drives the point home: everything the proud lean on for status will be taken. Teach it as the law exposing the universal temptation to measure ourselves by how we look and what we own — and then let the Branch’s God-given beauty show the difference between borrowed glory and the real thing.

“What does ‘the Branch of the LORD’ mean? Is that already the Messiah?”

It is the first bud of a messianic image the book will develop. Here the Branch is *beautiful and glorious*, the survivor of the leveling. In chapter eleven it becomes the shoot from the stump of Jesse on whom the Spirit rests, and across the prophets *the Branch* hardens into a title for the coming King from David’s line. We read it christologically not by guesswork but because the prophetic tradition and the New Testament draw the line to the Lord Jesus, the true and final beauty that the day of the LORD cannot strip away.

“The remnant is called ‘holy’ — did they become holy by surviving the judgment?”

No — they are holy because God *washed away their filth, by the spirit of judgment and of burning*. The holiness is done to them, not earned by enduring. It is the same gospel pattern as the coal on Isaiah’s lips: cleansing from outside, applied to the unclean. Surviving did not sanctify them; the washing did. This guards the class against hearing the remnant as the tough ones who made it, and points them again to a holiness that is gift.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — The mountain fulfilled now

A strong opener about reading prophecy with New Testament eyes. Help the class feel the comfort: the streaming of the nations has begun, and an ordinary congregation is part of it. Steer away from end-times mapping toward present participation.

Question 2 — Where the peace comes from

The guardrail question. Press the class to trace the peace to the mountain, to the One who *is our peace*. This keeps Isaiah from being conscripted into a merely political vision and keeps the gospel as the engine of reconciliation.

Question 3 — The high places we build, and the One whose glory survives

The convicting and consoling question together. Have the class name their own “high places,” then set the humbled-and-exalted Lord beside them. The closer the class gets to naming what they trust, the more the Branch’s glory shines as the only kind that lasts.

Question 4 — “Cease ye from man” and naming our idols

The Luther question. Use his definition — whatever the heart relies on is its god — and the rule that an idol is anything not there when you die. Let the class do the naming; resist supplying the list for them.

Question 5 — Borrowed glory versus the real thing

The appearance question. Connect the stripped finery to our own measuring by looks and possessions, then to the Branch’s God-given beauty. The point is not shame about clothes but the difference between glory we wear and glory we are given.

Question 6 — A washed holiness and a sheltering canopy

The gospel closer. Make sure the class hears that the remnant’s holiness is washed, not achieved, and that the canopy of 4:6 points to God dwelling with his people forever. End the hour under the shelter, not in the stripping.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapters two through four — especially his handling of the day of the LORD and the Branch.
- ♦ Philippians 2:5–11 read with the Formula of Concord, Article VIII, on the two states of Christ — humiliation and exaltation — the pattern behind this whole movement.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1–39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on the mountain vision and the Branch.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern) — a clear walk-through of the three chapters as a single arc.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ Micah 4:1–5 beside Isaiah 2:1–5, read slowly — two prophets given one mountain, and a fit meditation on the church's present hope.

A Final Word

You will teach a leveling this week, and the only safe ground in it is low ground. Let the day of the LORD bring down your own high places before you describe the bringing-down to your class — and then look up at the Branch, beautiful and glorious, the glory you could never manufacture and will never lose.

Keep the frame in front of the class: mountain, valley, Branch. The hard middle is bearable because it is bounded — the nations stream in at the front, and a washed remnant is sheltered at the back. A judgment without those ends is despair; with them, it is the clearing of the ground so that one true glory can be seen.

And remember that the mountain is already rising in your own congregation. Every Sunday the nations stream a little further in, the word goes forth, and the Branch is lifted up in the preaching. You are not waiting on a distant map. You are standing on the mountain now. May the Lord, whose glory alone survives that day, shelter your class under his canopy and make your teaching part of the river that flows up to his house.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION FIVE

The Vineyard and the Woes

Isaiah 5 · with Matthew 21:33–46 and John 15:1–8

A Note to the Teacher

This chapter is a trap, and a merciful one. It opens as a love song — *a song of my beloved touching his vineyard* — and the crowd is invited to enjoy it, even to render a verdict: *judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard*. Then the floor drops out. The vineyard is themselves, and they have just condemned themselves out of their own mouths. This is the same device Nathan used on David: lead a man to pass sentence on a story, then say, *thou art the man*. Teach the hour so the class feels the song turn under them — because being led to judge our own case lands harder, and more savingly, than being accused outright.

After the song come six woes, the law naming the wild grapes one by one — greed that joins house to house, drunkenness, those who *call evil good, and good evil*, the wise in their own eyes. And every wild grape is traced to one root: *they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word*. That is the doctrine of the chapter — despising the word is the soil all the other sins grow in. The chapter ends in literal darkness; your job is to keep the class from thinking the dark is the last word, because two chapters later *the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light*.

Use this guide as a tool. The two New Testament passages are doing heavy work: the Lord Jesus retells this vineyard song as a parable in which the Owner at last sends his Son, and he names himself *the true vine* who bears in us the fruit Isaiah's vineyard could not.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

God's love song over his vineyard curdles into woe when it yields wild grapes — teach this hour so the class, led like David to judge its own case, hears the law name the fruit it cannot produce, and then meets the Owner's Son sent to the vineyard and the true Vine in whom alone we bear fruit.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the song and the woes.

- ♦ Read the student session twice, then read Isaiah 5 aloud — first the love song, feeling how it turns, then counting the six woes and naming what each one charges.
- ♦ Read Matthew 21:33–46 and John 15:1–8 beside it. The first is the Lord Jesus' own retelling of this song; the second is his answer to its failure. You will lean on both.
- ♦ Re-read 2 Samuel 12:1–7 — Nathan and David. The mechanism of Isaiah 5 is the mechanism of that parable, and having it fresh will help you teach the turn.
- ♦ Mark verse 7 and its wordplay. God *looked for judgment (mishpat)*, but behold *oppression (mispach)*; for *righteousness (tsedaqah)*, but behold *a cry (tse'aqah)*. The Hebrew nearly rhymes — the fruit looked almost right and was rotten. Translate it inline for the class.
- ♦ Have Isaiah 9:2 ready — *the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light* — so the chapter's closing darkness does not become the class's closing note.
- ♦ Pray for honest self-judgment, beginning with yourself. The song is meant to be sprung on the singer; let it be sprung on you first.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · The law works best when it leads us to judge our own case.

Isaiah does not begin with an accusation; he begins with a song, and invites the crowd to be the jury. Only after they have agreed that such a vineyard deserves to be torn down does he reveal that the vineyard is the house of Israel — that *ye* are the ones whose verdict has just fallen on your own heads. This is the law in one of its most powerful modes. A direct charge raises a defense; a story we have already judged leaves us no exit, because we have signed the sentence ourselves. It is exactly how Nathan undid David. Teach your class to recognize this mode, and to let it work on

them — the most useful law is often the law we pronounce on a story before we realize it is a mirror.

Two · The fruit God seeks is justice and righteousness — and the imitation is the danger.

When the Owner came looking for grapes, he came looking for *judgment* and *righteousness*, and found *oppression* and a *cry*. Notice the chilling near-match in the Hebrew: the false fruit sounds almost like the true. Connect this straight back to chapter one — God rejected worship offered by bloody hands because the fruit he wants is not ceremony but justice toward the neighbor. The danger in the vineyard is not bare barrenness but counterfeit: grapes that look ripe and are wild, righteousness that sounds right and is oppression. Teach the class that God is not fooled by fruit that nearly rhymes with the real thing, and that the imitation is more dangerous than open emptiness because it deceives the one who bears it.

Three · A wild vine cannot reform itself — but the true Vine bears fruit through us.

Here is the gospel hidden in a chapter of woe. The Owner asks, *what could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?* — every advantage given, and still wild grapes. The vineyard cannot fix itself; a wild vine has no power to produce good grapes by trying harder. That diagnosis is devastating until you hear the Lord Jesus answer it: *I am the true vine... he that abideth in me... bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.* The failure of Isaiah's vineyard is answered not by a better effort but by a new vine. Our fruitfulness is his gift, borne through us as branches in him — which is freeing, not discouraging, because it lifts the impossible burden of producing good grapes from a wild root.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the Pacing Tip names what to protect.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:16	The love song, and the turn — judge between me and my vineyard (5:1–4)
0:16–0:26	He looked for justice; the verdict on the vineyard (5:5–7)
0:26–0:36	The six woes — the law naming the wild grapes (5:8–23)
0:36–0:46	The Son sent to the vineyard; the true Vine (Matt 21; John 15)
0:46–0:50	The hand stretched out still; light beyond the dark (5:25–30; 9:2)
0:50–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions

0:57–1:00

Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 7 and Session Six

Pacing Tip

Do not try to give equal time to all six woes — they are a list, and a sample teaches the pattern. Protect the turn of the song (5:1–7) and the gospel answer (the Son sent, the true Vine). If the woes run long, name them quickly and trace them to their root — despising the word — then move to the Vine. The class should leave grafted, not merely scolded.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the chapter's movements.

A Love Song

Begin tenderly, because the chapter does. A man on a fruitful hill digs and clears and plants the choicest vine, builds a tower, hews a winepress — every labor of love — and waits for grapes. Let the class hear the affection before the disappointment: this is a God who has poured himself into his people. The bitterness of what follows is the bitterness of love betrayed, not of an indifferent landlord. Keep the warmth in your voice here; it makes the turn land.

Judge Between Me and My Vineyard

The trap springs. *And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard.* The crowd is made jury, and they will of course side with the wronged owner — until they learn they are the vineyard. This is the Nathan device. Teach it as a craft of the Spirit: God leads sinners to pronounce on themselves so that the verdict cannot be argued away. Pause and let the class feel the floor drop, the way David must have felt it.

A Craft Note on the Turn

The whole power of the passage is in the timing of the reveal. If you announce up front that the vineyard is Israel, you defuse the bomb. Teach it the way Isaiah and Nathan do — let the class judge the story first, then say *thou art the man*. Consider reading 2 Samuel 12 aloud as a parallel; the class will never read Isaiah 5 flatly again.

He Looked for Justice

The verdict and its reason. The Owner pronounces sentence on the unfruitful vineyard — the hedge removed, the wall broken, no rain — and then verse 7 gives the charge in its haunting wordplay: he looked for *mishpat* (justice) and found *mispach* (bloodshed); for *tsedaqah* (righteousness) and found *tse'aqah* (a cry). The false fruit nearly rhymes with the true. Translate the pun for the class so they hear how close the counterfeit came — and how God was not deceived.

The Six Woes

The law names the wild grapes one by one: those who join *house to house, and field to field* until they dwell alone; those who *rise up early... that they may follow strong drink*; those who *draw iniquity with cords of vanity*; those who *call evil good, and good evil*; those *wise in their own eyes*; those who acquit the guilty for a bribe. Sample two or three and then point to the root in verse 24: *they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word*. Make the fourth woe a teaching moment — renaming evil as good is more dangerous than doing it, because it disables repentance; you cannot turn from a sin you have relabeled a virtue. Use Luther's call to name a thing what it actually is.

The Son Sent; the True Vine; the Hand Stretched Out Still

Now bring in the two New Testament passages. The Lord Jesus retells this very song as a parable in which the Owner, after sending servant after servant, at last sends his Son — and the tenants kill the heir *outside the vineyard*, exactly where the Lord would be crucified, outside the city wall. Then he names himself *the true vine*: where Israel was the vine that failed, he is the Vine that does not, and we bear fruit only as branches abiding in him. Finally, note the refrain that closes the chapter — *his hand is stretched out still* — ambiguous between continued judgment and continued mercy, and the chapter ends in darkness. Do not stop there. Point the class two chapters ahead: *the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light*. The dark is real, but it is not the last word.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Isn't it manipulative for God to trick people into condemning themselves?”

It is not a trick but a mercy, and the difference matters. A direct accusation lets us mount a defense and harden; a story we have already judged strips the defense away, so the truth can

reach a heart that would otherwise deflect it. That is exactly why Nathan used a parable on David — not to humiliate him but to get past his guard so he could repent. God leads us to judge our own case because self-judgment, once it lands, is the doorway to confession. The aim is never our shame; it is our turning.

“The vineyard had every advantage and still failed. Doesn’t that make God’s judgment unfair?”

Turn the question around: the advantages are precisely what make the judgment just. *What could have been done more?* God withheld nothing — the hill, the vine, the tower, the winepress — so the wild grapes cannot be blamed on neglect. The failure is the vineyard’s, not the Owner’s. But notice where the chapter is heading in the larger story: the Owner finally does *one* more thing the parable in Matthew names — he sends his Son. The God who could righteously have walked away instead gave the heir. That is not unfairness; it is grace beyond what justice required.

“Why is calling evil good singled out as a special woe?”

Because renaming evil disables the only cure. A person who does wrong and knows it can still repent; a person who has relabeled the wrong as a virtue has shut the door to repentance, because you cannot turn from what you now call good. This is why Luther insisted on calling a thing what it actually is. The fourth woe is not worse arithmetic of sin; it is sin made incurable by self-deception. Teach the class to fear the renaming more than the deed.

“If I’m a branch in the true Vine, doesn’t the pressure to ‘bear fruit’ just bring back works-righteousness?”

It does the opposite, once you hear who does the bearing. Isaiah’s vineyard proves that a wild vine cannot make itself good by effort. The Lord Jesus answers that not by demanding harder effort but by making us branches in himself: *without me ye can do nothing*. The fruit is his life flowing through us, not our achievement squeezed out of a wild root. So the call to bear fruit is freeing, not crushing — it relocates the source from your striving to his abiding. Your job is to stay attached; the fruit is his.

“The chapter ends in darkness. Is that really how Isaiah leaves it?”

It is how chapter five leaves it — *they shall look unto the land, and behold darkness and sorrow* — but it is not how Isaiah leaves it. The book is built so that this darkness is answered: just a few chapters on, *the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light... unto us a child is born*. The unfruitful

vineyard and the deepening dark are real, and the class should feel them; but they are the setting against which the great light dawns. Teach the dark, then promise the morning.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — The song that turns, and Nathan's parable

A strong opener about the power of self-judgment. Draw the parallel to David explicitly and ask why being led to judge our own case is more powerful than being accused. Let the class supply moments when a story convicted them before they saw it coming.

Question 2 — The fruit God seeks, and the link to bloody worship

The justice question. Connect verse 7 back to chapter one: the fruit is justice and righteousness, not ceremony, and the counterfeit nearly rhymes with the real. Help the class hear how close — and how unfooled God is.

Question 3 — The Owner who sends his Son

The gospel pivot. Move the class from *what could have been done more?* to the Lord Jesus' parable, where the answer is the sending of the Heir — killed *outside* the vineyard, as the Lord was crucified outside the wall. This is the chapter's hidden cross.

Question 4 — The true Vine and the freedom of borne fruit

The question most likely to relieve a tired class. Press the freedom of it: our fruitfulness is his gift through us, not our own production. Watch for the works-righteousness reflex and gently redirect to *abide in me*.

Question 5 — Calling evil good

The fourth-woe question. Let the class wrestle with why renaming evil is more dangerous than doing it, and tie it to naming a thing what it is. Expect lively examples; keep them off partisan rails and on the principle.

Question 6 — Despising the word as the root, and the great light

The closer. Have the class trace every woe back to the despised word, then end on the promise of light in chapter nine. The hour should close looking toward the dawn, not stuck in the dark.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapter five — his reading of the vineyard and the woes, with his characteristic insistence on naming sin plainly.
- ♦ C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* — the theses on the law's convicting work illuminate the Nathan device at work in this chapter.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1–39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on the vineyard song and the wordplay of verse 7.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapter five — a clear pastoral treatment of the song and the six woes.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ John 15:1–8, read slowly this week — the true Vine answering the failed vineyard, and a fit meditation for the teacher on bearing fruit by abiding rather than striving.

A Final Word

Let the song be sprung on you before you spring it on the class. Sit as the jury in the first six verses, render your honest verdict on such a vineyard, and then hear *thou art the man*. A teacher who has been undone by the turn will read the chapter with the right ache — and will not preach the woes as someone safely outside the vineyard.

Keep the gospel in view through all the woe. The chapter cannot fix the vineyard, and neither can the class; that is the point, and it is good news the moment you hear the Lord Jesus say *I am the true vine*. The pressure to produce good grapes from a wild root is lifted the instant we are grafted into him. Teach the failure honestly so the grafting feels like the relief it is.

And do not leave your class in the dark of verse 30. The same prophet who wrote it wrote *unto us a child is born*. The Owner who could have abandoned the vineyard sent his Son into it. May the Lord, the true Vine, bear his own fruit through your teaching and your class, and bring you all out of the darkness of chapter five into the great light that is coming.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION SIX

Immanuel

Isaiah 7 · with Matthew 1:18–23

A Note to the Teacher

A frightened king stands at the end of an aqueduct while two enemy armies march on his city, and the prophet brings him a word that sounds, at first, like nothing a soldier could use: *fear not*. Behind Isaiah trots a boy named *Shear-jashub* — *a remnant shall return* — a sermon on legs. The Lord is not asking Ahaz to assess the odds; he is asking him to believe a promise. That is the hinge of the whole chapter, and you should teach the hour on it: *if ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established*. The Hebrew makes a pun your class should hear — *im lo ta'aminu ki lo te'amenu*, faith and firmness from one root, *aman*. To be steady, you must trust; the man who will not lean is the man who falls.

Ahaz will not lean. Offered a sign as deep as the grave or as high as heaven, he refuses with a Bible verse — *I will not tempt the Lord* — and his piety is a fraud, because he has already decided to buy Assyria. So the Lord gives a sign anyway, over the king's head, to the whole house of David: *a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel*. Teach this as the gospel's logic in miniature — the promise did not wait on the king's faith, and our salvation does not wait on ours. Immanuel comes because God is faithful, not because Ahaz was.

Use this guide as a tool. Matthew 1:18–23 is doing the heavy lifting at the center of the hour: the evangelist takes this verse, settles the disputed word with one Greek noun, and tells us the name was fulfilled when the Lord Jesus was conceived of the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary. *God with us* — hold that name up to the light and you can see both natures of Christ inside it.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

A faithless king is offered a sign and refuses it, and the Lord gives the sign anyway — a virgin's son named *Immanuel*, God with us — so that the class learns the gospel rests on God's faithfulness rather than ours, and meets in that one name the true God who has come to be with us in our flesh.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the sign of Immanuel.

- ◆ Read the student session twice, then read Isaiah 7 aloud with Matthew 1:18–23 immediately after, so the prophecy and its fulfillment sit side by side in your ear.
- ◆ Fix the history in your mind: Rezin of Syria and Pekah son of Remaliah of Ephraim have come up to depose Ahaz and seat a puppet — the son of Tabeal — on David's throne. The threat is not only to a city but to the line through which Immanuel must come. Read 2 Kings 16 for Ahaz's side of the story.
- ◆ Mark the pun in verse 9. *If ye will not believe (ta'aminu), surely ye shall not be established (te'amenu)* — one Hebrew root, *aman*, behind both faith and firmness. Be ready to say it aloud; the wordplay preaches.
- ◆ Have the case on 'almah ready: the word itself, never used in the Old Testament of a married woman; the pre-Christian Greek of the Septuagint, which rendered it *parthenos*, virgin, long before any Christian had a stake in the question; and above all Matthew 1:22–23, which tells us what it meant.
- ◆ Set the two ends of Matthew's Gospel beside each other — *they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us* (1:23), and *lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world* (28:20). The name opens the book and the promise closes it.
- ◆ Pray for the leaning faith Ahaz refused. Teach this only as one who has been driven, in some fear of your own, to lean on the promise rather than the odds.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · Faith and firmness are one thing — you stand only by leaning.

The pun in verse 9 is the doctrine of the chapter. *Aman* gives Hebrew both its word for believing and its word for being steady, sure, established — the same root behind our *amen*. Isaiah is not telling Ahaz to believe *and also* be brave; he is telling him that the only steadiness available to him is the steadiness of a man leaning his whole weight on God's word. Take away the leaning and there is no standing left — *surely ye shall not be established*. Teach the class that faith is not a feeling added on top of security but the very thing that makes a sinner secure, because it rests him on Someone who cannot move. The man who insists on standing by his own strength has already chosen to fall.

Two · A true-sounding word can be a cloak for unbelief.

Ahaz refuses the sign by quoting Scripture: *I will not... tempt the Lord*, an echo of Deuteronomy. The words are correct; the heart is rotten. He is not honoring God by declining the sign — he is hiding behind reverent language because he has already made his deal with Assyria and does not want a sign that might call it off. This is one of the most dangerous moves the old Adam knows: dressing unbelief in the costume of piety so that disobedience looks like devotion. Teach the class to fear it in themselves — the spiritual-sounding reason that lets us avoid simply taking God at his word, the humble-seeming refusal that is really a refusal to trust. A verse misused as a shield against God is worse than no verse at all.

Three · The promise does not depend on the believer — and that is the gospel.

Here is the comfort hidden in a chapter about a faithless king. Ahaz would not ask; the Lord gave the sign anyway. The plural is deliberate — *the Lord himself shall give you* (you all, the whole house of David) *a sign* — stepping past the unbelieving king to the line and the world that needed Immanuel. The coming of the child did not hang on the strength of Ahaz's faith, and your salvation does not hang on the strength of yours. If the promise waited on our believing well enough, it would never come; it comes because God is faithful. Teach the class to rest there: the object of faith is a Christ who was given to people who did not deserve and did not ask for him.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the Pacing Tip names what to protect.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome

0:05–0:15	The trees shaking — the war, the fear, fear not (7:1–9)
0:15–0:24	Faith and firmness — if ye will not believe (7:9)
0:24–0:33	Ask a sign — the pious refusal (7:10–12)
0:33–0:45	The sign given anyway — a virgin shall conceive (7:13–16; Matt 1:18–23)
0:45–0:52	God with us — the name, the two natures, I am with you alway
0:52–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 9 and Session Seven

Pacing Tip

The class will want to spend the whole hour on 'almah and the critics. Do not let them. Settle the word briefly and well — the three points — then move to what the name *means*, because *God with us* is where the gospel is. A class that wins the virgin-birth argument but never tastes *Immanuel* has spent the hour on the doorframe and never gone in. Protect the last segment.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the chapter's movements.

The Trees Shaking in the Wind

Set the scene with the chapter's own image: *his heart was moved, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind*. Two kings, Rezin and Pekah, are marching to throw Ahaz off the throne and end the line of David in Judah, and the whole city sways like a forest in a gale. Into that panic Isaiah is sent, and he brings his little boy *Shear-jashub*, whose name — *a remnant shall return* — is itself a sermon: there will be a people on the far side of this. The word to the shaking king is *take heed, and be quiet; fear not*. The two threatening kings are only *two tails of these smoking firebrands*, burnt-out stumps about to gutter out. Teach the contrast: the world looks like marching armies; the word says smoking stumps.

If Ye Will Not Believe

Now the hinge. The Lord promises that the plot *shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass*, and then lays down the condition of Ahaz's own standing: *if ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established*. Stop here and give the class the Hebrew, because the English cannot carry it: *ta'aminu* and *te'amenu*, believe and be made firm, are the same root. Ahaz wants to be established — secure, steady, safe on his throne — and Isaiah tells him the only road to it runs through trust. There is no

steadiness on offer except the steadiness of faith. Let the class feel how this cuts against every instinct of a cornered man, who wants to *do* something, anything, rather than simply believe a promise he cannot see.

A Craft Note on the Pun

Write both Hebrew words where the class can see them and underline the shared letters. The point is not to show off the language but to let them watch faith and firmness turn out to be one word. Then ask: where in your own life are you trying to be established without leaning? The pun does the diagnostic work for you.

Ask Thee a Sign

God stoops astonishingly low. He invites the faithless king to name any sign at all — *ask it either in the depth, or in the height above* — as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven. This is sheer grace: the Lord offering to prop up a weak faith with whatever evidence it asks. And Ahaz refuses, with a verse: *I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord*. Teach the class to hear the false note. The words quote Deuteronomy; the heart has already signed with Assyria. Ahaz does not want a sign because a sign might commit him to the very trust he has resolved to avoid. His piety is the polished lid on a closed box. Isaiah sees through it at once — *is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will ye weary my God also?*

The Sign Given Anyway

This is the gospel turn of the chapter, and you should teach it as such. Ahaz would not ask; the Lord gives the sign regardless — *therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign* — and the *you* is plural, addressed past the king to the whole house of David. *Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel*. Here is where the critics gather, so handle the word 'almah plainly and move on. Three things settle it. The word itself denotes a young woman of marriageable age and is never used in the Old Testament of a wife. The Septuagint, translated by Jews two centuries before the Lord Jesus was born, rendered it *parthenos* — virgin — with no Christian thumb on the scale. And Matthew, under the Spirit, tells us flatly that this was fulfilled when Mary, a virgin, conceived by the Holy Ghost. The class does not need to win a philology contest; it needs to hear the apostle's verdict and rest in it.

A Craft Note on Near and Far

Save the class from a false choice. The sign had a near edge in Ahaz's day — before a child then being born could tell right from wrong, the two kings would be gone, and they were. But the prophets often speak with a near hill and a far mountain in one line of sight, and Matthew tells us the far mountain is the virgin birth. You need not pit Ahaz's day against Bethlehem; the same word reaches both, and the apostle has told you which one carries the full weight.

A Virgin Shall Conceive

Linger on what the sign is. Every other sign offered — in the depth or the height — would have been a wonder *around* the king; this sign is a child, a birth, God entering the very stream of human life that Ahaz was busy betraying. The line of David, threatened with extinction by Rezin and Pekah, is guaranteed not by Ahaz's diplomacy but by a promise that a son will be born into it whose name is God himself with us. Teach the class that the answer to a threat against the promise is a deepening of the promise: they meant to end David's line, and God answers by announcing the Son who is David's line's whole point. The kings who came to throw down the throne are smoking stumps; the child who will sit on it forever is on his way.

God With Us

Now teach the name itself, slowly, because it is the treasure of the chapter. *Immanuel* is three Hebrew words pressed into one: *immanu*, with us; *El*, God. Not God *for* us only, though he is; not God *above* us merely, though he is that too; but God *with* us — come down into our flesh and our trouble to stand where we stand. Hold the name up and you can see both natures of the one Christ inside it: *El*, true God of true God, and *immanu*, with us, true man among men, Word made flesh to dwell among us. Then carry the class to the far end of Matthew's Gospel, where the evangelist who opened with *God with us* closes with the risen Lord's own voice: *lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world*. The name promised at the start is fulfilled in the person and kept by his presence to the last day. That is the arc to leave ringing in their ears.

The King He Trusted Instead

End the teaching where Ahaz's unbelief ended. Offered Immanuel, he chose Assyria — sent to Tiglath-pileser, *I am thy servant and thy son*, and stripped the silver and gold from the house of the Lord to pay him. And the refuge he grabbed became the rod that beat him: *the Lord shall bring upon thee... the king of Assyria*, a hired razor to shave the land bare. Teach the bitter logic the class knows in its own bones: what we seize for safety in God's place has a way of turning into the very thing that wounds us. The idol we run to for rescue collects its fee. With *God with us* freely offered,

Ahaz bought Assyria — and we, with the same Immanuel offered, still reach past him for our own Assyrias. Name a few gently, and let the chapter ask its question: why?

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Wasn’t Ahaz right not to test God? Doesn’t Scripture say not to tempt the Lord?”

It does, and that is exactly what makes his refusal so slippery. The command against tempting God forbids demanding proof in a spirit of defiance, putting God on trial to see whether he will jump. But Ahaz was not being asked to test God — he was being *invited*, by God himself, to receive a gift of assurance. To refuse an offer God presses on you is not reverence; it is unbelief wearing reverence’s coat. The verse is true; Ahaz weaponizes it against the very God who quoted it first. Teach the class that a right Scripture used to dodge God’s clear word is no longer functioning as Scripture.

“The Hebrew ‘almah just means ‘young woman.’ Doesn’t that undercut the virgin birth?”

Three things hold the line, and you can give them in a minute. First, the word: ‘almah refers to a young woman of marriageable age and is never used in the Old Testament of a married woman — virginity is assumed in its very use. Second, the Septuagint: Jewish translators two centuries before Christ chose *parthenos*, the unambiguous Greek word for virgin, with no Christian motive in sight. Third, and decisively, Matthew: the Holy Spirit through the evangelist tells us this verse was fulfilled in the virgin conception of the Lord Jesus. We do not rest the virgin birth on a Hebrew lexicon alone; we rest it on the apostolic word that tells us what the prophet meant.

“If the sign was for Ahaz, how can it be about a birth seven hundred years later?”

Because prophets often see a near hill and a far mountain along one line of sight. There was a near fulfillment — within a few years the two kings Ahaz feared were both destroyed, just as the timing of a young child’s growth foretold. But the sign was given not only to Ahaz but to the whole house of David, and its full freight, Matthew tells us, is the virgin birth of Immanuel. The near event confirmed the word in Ahaz’s lifetime; the far event is the word’s whole point. You do not have to choose between them — the same promise reaches both, and the apostle has named which is the mountain.

“Why does it matter that the name means ‘God *with us*’ and not just ‘God’?”

Because *with* is the whole gospel in a preposition. A God merely above us judges from a distance; a God merely for us might help from afar. But *God with us* means he has come down into our flesh, our weakness, our dying — Immanuel is God in the next bed, God in the same flood. The name also guards the two natures: *El* insists he is true God, *immanu* insists he is truly with us as one of us. Strip either half and you lose Christ. And Matthew shows the name was no figure of speech: the same Lord who is *God with us* at his birth says *I am with you alway* at the end. He is with us still.

“Ahaz had every reason to be afraid. Wasn’t trusting Assyria just being realistic?”

It looked realistic, and it was ruin. That is the trap the chapter exposes. Faith is not the denial of the marching armies; Isaiah grants that the armies are real. Faith is leaning the whole weight on the One whose word outranks the armies — the two kings really were smoking stumps, and they really did fall. Ahaz’s ‘realism’ reached for Assyria, and Assyria became the rod that flayed him. Teach the class that the worldly-wise refuge so often collects a worse price than the danger it was meant to escape. Real realism, in a world ruled by this God, is faith.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — Faith that lets us stand on a promise already true

A strong opener on the pun of verse 9. Draw out the distinction the question presses: faith does not *make* the promise true — it lets us stand on a promise that is already true. Ask why fear crowds faith out so easily, and let the class name the marching armies in their own lives that make leaning feel impossible.

Question 2 — A biblical statement as a cloak for unbelief

The Ahaz-quotes-Scripture question, and a searching one. Let the class sit with how a true verse can become a hiding place from God. Press gently toward the personal edge: where do we use a spiritual-sounding reason to avoid simply doing what God has plainly said? Keep it self-examining, not accusing of others.

Question 3 — The sign given to a king who would not ask

The gospel pivot. The class should hear the comfort that Immanuel did not depend on Ahaz’s faith — and so our salvation does not depend on the strength of ours. Let them say back to you why it is good news that the promise rests on God’s faithfulness rather than our believing.

Question 4 — What settles the virgin birth, and near-and-far

The 'almah question. Walk the three points — the word, the Septuagint, and above all Matthew — and then the near-and-far horizon, so the class can take both Ahaz's day and Bethlehem seriously without pitting them against each other. Aim to settle, not to argue; do not let this swallow the hour.

Question 5 — God with us, and the two natures in one name

The richest question. Why is *with us* more than *for us* or *above us*? Let the class find the two natures inside the name — *El* and *immanu* — and then close the loop with *I am with you always*. This is the question to land if you can land only one.

Question 6 — The Assyria we grab instead of Immanuel

The closer with teeth. Ahaz's refuge became his wound. Ask the class to name — carefully, beginning with themselves — the things we reach for in God's place that turn around and harm us, and why, with Immanuel offered, we still reach. End on the offer, not the rebuke.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapter seven — his robust defense of the virgin birth against the Jewish and rationalist readings of his day, and his delight in the name Immanuel.
- ♦ The Augsburg Confession and its Apology, Article III, on the person of Christ — true God and true man — read as the doctrinal unfolding of the name *God with us*.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1–39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on chapter seven — careful on 'almah, the Septuagint, and Matthew's use of the verse.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapter seven — a clear lay treatment of Ahaz, the sign, and Immanuel.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ Matthew 1:18–25, read slowly this week — the evangelist's own commentary on Isaiah's sign, and a fit meditation for the teacher on the God who came to be with us.

A Final Word

Teach this chapter as a man who has felt the trees shake. Ahaz is not a stranger; he is the part of every one of us that, cornered, reaches for a refuge we can see rather than leaning the whole weight on a promise we cannot. Sit honestly under verse 9 before you teach it — where are you trying to be established without believing? — and the chapter will teach itself through you.

Keep the name at the center. The class can win every argument about the Hebrew and still go home empty if they never hear what the name says: God has come to be with us, in our flesh, true God and true man in one Lord, and he has promised to be with us to the end of the age. Do not spend the hour on the doorframe. Walk the class through the door, into Immanuel.

And leave them with the offer Ahaz refused. The Lord still gives the sign to people who do not deserve and do not ask for him; the promise still rests on his faithfulness and not on the strength of our believing. May the Lord Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, be the refuge your class leans on when their own armies march — and may he keep his ancient promise among you: *I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.*



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION SEVEN

Unto Us a Child Is Born

Isaiah 9:1–7 · with Matthew 4:12–17 and Luke 1:30–33

A Note to the Teacher

After two chapters of gathering dark — the unfruitful vineyard, the faithless king, a land driven to *darkness and sorrow* — the morning breaks all at once: *the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light*. Teach the hour as a sunrise. The class has felt the night of chapters five through eight; do not rob them of the relief of the dawn. And notice where the light rises first — not over the temple and the holy city but over *Galilee of the nations*, the despised, half-Gentile borderland that Assyria had ravaged first. Matthew tells us why: the Lord Jesus opened his ministry there, *that it might be fulfilled*. The Light of the world rose first over the dark and the disregarded. That is not an accident of geography; it is the shape of grace.

At the center stand the words Luther could hardly say without joy: *unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given*. Twice that little *unto us*, and it carries the whole gospel — not merely that a child was born, but that he was born *and given*, and given *to us*. Teach the class the difference between knowing the fact and believing the gift. Then say the names slowly, because each one is a doctrine: *Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace*. A child wears them — a child who is, the same Isaiah will say one chapter later, *the mighty God* himself.

Use this guide as a tool. Luke 1:30–33 is your closing note: Gabriel tells Mary that her son will receive *the throne of his father David, and of his kingdom there shall be no end* — the very throne Isaiah sees here, *of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end*. The angel is quoting the prophet. The child has come.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

Into the deepest dark a great light dawns — a child born *and given to us*, who bears the names of God himself and sits on David's endless throne — so that the class hears not only that Christ was born but that he was born *for them*, the Prince whose first gift is peace with God.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the dawn of the great light.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 8:19–9:7 aloud in one breath, so the class can feel the darkness the light breaks into — the dawn means nothing if there has been no night.
- ◆ Read Matthew 4:12–17 beside it. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali, *Galilee of the Gentiles*, is where the Lord Jesus began to preach — Matthew names Isaiah 9 as the prophecy fulfilled. Have the geography clear: this was the first region Assyria carried away, the despised frontier.
- ◆ Re-read Judges 7 — *the day of Midian*. Gideon's three hundred, cut down on purpose so that Israel could not say *mine own hand hath saved me*. Isaiah invokes that day to tell us how this salvation comes: by what looks like weakness, so no flesh can boast.
- ◆ Mark the double *unto us* in verse 6, and be ready to dwell on it. Born *and given*; given *to us*. This is the heart of the hour.
- ◆ Lay the four names out where you can see them, with one true thing to say about each: *Wonderful Counsellor* — he is himself the wonder; *the mighty God (El Gibbor)* — true God, the same title used of the Lord in 10:21; *the everlasting Father* — Father of eternity, his fatherly care without end; *the Prince of Peace* — peace with God first.
- ◆ Have Romans 5:1 and Luke 1:30–33 ready — the peace the Prince brings, and the endless throne the angel promised. Pray that the light would rise on your own dark before you carry it to the class.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · The light rises first over the dark and the disregarded.

Isaiah could have set the dawn over Jerusalem; he sets it over Galilee of the nations, the bruised borderland Assyria had trampled first, the region good Judeans looked down on as half-pagan. And Matthew tells us the Lord Jesus chose exactly that ground to begin. This is the grammar of grace throughout Scripture: God starts with the last place anyone would look, the dark and the disregarded, the people sitting *in the region and shadow of death*. Teach the class that the light did not wait for worthiness or wait for the respectable; it rose where the night was thickest. That is good news for everyone who has feared they were too far out, too compromised, too unseen for the dawn to find them. The Light came looking for Galilee first.

Two · God saves by what looks like weakness, so no one can boast.

The yoke is broken *as in the day of Midian* — and the whole point of that day was that Gideon's army was whittled down to three hundred men with trumpets and jars, precisely so that the victory could not be claimed by human strength. Isaiah reaches for that memory to prepare us for the manner of this salvation: it comes through a *child*, and it will come at last through a *cross* — weakness on top of weakness, by the world's reckoning. God so orders his rescues that no flesh can glory; the deliverer is a baby, the throne is a manger, the crown is thorns. Teach the class to stop despising the weakness and start trusting it, because the weakness of God is stronger than men, and is designed so that all the boasting falls to him.

Three · The child is true God and true man — born, and given, for us.

Hold the two halves of verse 6 together and you have the gospel whole. *Unto us a child is born* — true man, an infant of our own flesh, born as we are born. *The mighty God — El Gibbor*, true God, the very title Isaiah uses of the Lord himself in the next chapter. The baby in the manger is not merely godlike; he is God. And the verb that joins them is the gospel's own: he is born *and given*, and given *unto us*. Teach the class that the names are not flattery heaped on a remarkable man but the truth about who lies in the manger — and that this true God, true man, was *given*, handed over, for them. The doctrine of the person of Christ and the comfort of the gospel are the same verse.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the Pacing Tip names what to protect.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome

0:05–0:15	The dark, and the dawn over Galilee (8:22–9:2; Matt 4:12–17)
0:15–0:23	Joy in the harvest; the yoke broken as in Midian (9:3–5)
0:23–0:33	Unto us a child is born — the double given (9:6)
0:33–0:48	The four names, one by one (9:6)
0:48–0:53	The throne with no end (9:7; Luke 1:30–33)
0:53–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 11 and Session Eight

Pacing Tip

The four names can eat the clock if you let each become a sermon. Give each one true sentence and one Scripture, and keep moving — the cumulative weight of all four lands better than an exhaustive treatment of two. But do not rush the double *unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given*; that line is the hour's center of gravity, and Luther would have spent the whole class there. Protect it.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the chapter's movements.

A Light in Galilee

Begin in the dark, because Isaiah does. The previous verses left the land *driven to darkness*, peering into gloom with no dawn. Then: *Nevertheless the dimness shall not be such as was in her vexation* — and the light comes to *Zebulun* and *Naphtali*, *Galilee of the nations*. Teach the geography as theology. This northern frontier was the first ground Assyria stripped, a mixed and despised borderland the southern faithful regarded as barely Israel at all. And it is here the great light rises first. Matthew seals it: when the Lord Jesus left Nazareth and came to Capernaum *in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim*, it was *that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet*. The Light of the world began his work in the very place the prophet pointed — over the dark and the disregarded.

Joy in the Harvest

The dawn brings joy, and Isaiah piles up the images: joy *according to the joy in harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil*. Then the reason — the instruments of oppression are shattered: *the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, thou hast broken as in the*

day of Midian. Send the class back to Gideon. On the day of Midian, God deliberately reduced the army to three hundred so that *Israel vaunt not themselves... saying, Mine own hand hath saved me*. The deliverance is real, but it is plainly God's, not Gideon's. Isaiah reaches for that day on purpose: the coming rescue will look like weakness so that the glory can go nowhere but to God. And in verse 5 even the soldier's boots and bloodied cloaks become fuel for the fire — the end of war itself.

Unto Us a Child Is Born

Now the line Luther loved. *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given*. Slow the class down on the doubling. First, *unto us* — twice — the *pro nobis, for you*, the word that turns a fact into a gift. Second, *born* and *given* — he is not only born into our flesh but handed over, given as a present is given, with the cross already in the verb. Teach the difference the question presses: a man may know that Christ was born and remain in the dark; the gospel is that he was born *and given*, and given *to you*. Luther treasured that little *unto us* because it is the hinge between history and salvation. The manger is not merely a wonder to admire; it is a gift addressed, by name, to the sinner who hears.

A Craft Note on “For Us”

Make the class say it personally. The Latin *pro nobis* and *pro me* — for us, for me — is the whole Reformation in two words. Ask each person silently to hear the verse as *unto me a child is born, unto me a son is given*. The doctrine is no different; the comfort is the difference between a creed recited and a gift received.

Wonderful, Counsellor

Take the first name. *Wonderful* renders *pele*, wonder — the same word used when the angel of the Lord, asked his name, answers that it is *secret*, that is, *wonderful*, beyond telling. The child does not merely do wonders; he *is* the Wonder, God's own unspeakable name walking among us. And he is *Counsellor* — not a king who needs advisers but the one whose counsel is wisdom itself, who plans our salvation and needs no one to teach him. Teach the class that here is a King who is at once past understanding and entirely for us: the Wonder who counsels, the mystery who knows exactly what he is doing with you.

The Mighty God

The second name is the one the critics most want to soften, so teach it plainly. *The mighty God* is *El Gibbor* — and Isaiah uses that very title of the Lord himself only one chapter later, when the remnant returns *unto the mighty God*. The same words, of the same God. So the child is not *like* God, not God's special agent, not a man so good we call him divine by courtesy — he is *El Gibbor*, true God of true God. This name guards the manger against every reduction. Teach the class why it matters that the baby is not merely godlike but God: only God can bear the names that follow, only God can sit on the throne with no end, and only God-made-flesh can be *given* for the sin of the world. Take away his deity and every other name collapses.

The Everlasting Father

Handle the third name with care, because it can be misheard. *The everlasting Father* does not mean the Son is the Father — the church confesses one God in three persons and never confounds them. The Hebrew is *Abi-ad*, Father of eternity, and it says two things. It says he belongs to eternity, without beginning of days; the child born in time is older than time. And it says he is fatherly toward his people — not a distant monarch but one who fathers and keeps his own, forever. Teach the comfort in it for everyone who fears being finally alone: this King does not merely rule his people, he fathers them, and his fatherhood has no expiry. The arms that hold you are eternal arms.

The Prince of Peace

The fourth name is *Sar Shalom*, Prince of Peace — and teach the order of his peace, because the order is everything. The peace he brings is, first of all, peace with God: *being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*. That peace must come first, before any peace among people or peace in the world, because the war that matters most is the one our sin made with God, and until that is ended every other peace is a truce on a battlefield. The Prince of Peace does not begin with treaties between nations; he begins by reconciling sinners to God in his own blood. Teach the class to receive that first peace and to expect the rest to flow from it — peace with the neighbor, and at the last a world with war's boots burned for fuel.

The Throne That Has No End

Close where Isaiah closes. *Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom* — a reign that only grows and never stops, secured *with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever*. And then the guarantee: *the zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this*. It does not rest on our cooperation; God's own jealous love will see it done.

Now bring Gabriel's words to Mary: her son will receive *the throne of his father David*, and *of his kingdom there shall be no end*. The angel is reciting Isaiah. The endless throne the prophet saw seven centuries off has a name and a mother and a manger. Let the class hear the prophecy and its fulfillment lock together, and leave them on the throne that has no end.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Why would God start the light in Galilee instead of Jerusalem?”

Because that is how grace moves, and the class should learn to expect it. Galilee of the nations was the despised frontier, the first land Assyria ravaged, looked down on as half-Gentile by the respectable south — and Isaiah sets the dawn there, and the Lord Jesus began his ministry there to fulfill it. God so often starts with the last place anyone would look: the dark, the disregarded, the people sitting in the shadow of death. It is good news for everyone who has feared being too far out for the light to reach. The Light came looking for Galilee first — and for every Galilee since.

“Why does Isaiah call a child the mighty God? Isn't that going too far?”

It is exactly far enough, and Isaiah means it. *The mighty God* is *El Gibbor*, and he uses the same title of the Lord himself only one chapter later. So this is not poetic exaggeration about a remarkable man; it is the plain claim that the child is true God. And it has to be. Only God can bear the other names, sit on the endless throne, and be *given* for the sin of the world. Strip the deity and every other word in the verse falls apart. Teach the class to receive the offense of it: the baby in the manger is not merely godlike. He is God, come in our flesh.

“If the Son is called the everlasting Father, doesn't that confuse the persons of the Trinity?”

It would, if the name meant the Son *is* the Father — but it does not. The Hebrew is Father of eternity, and it tells us two things about the Son. He belongs to eternity, without beginning, older than the time he was born into. And he is fatherly toward his people, one who fathers and keeps them forever, not a remote ruler. The church confesses one God in three persons without ever blending them; this name describes the Son's eternity and his fatherly care, not his identity with the Father. Teach it as comfort: the King who reigns over you also fathers you, and his fatherhood never ends.

“How is the Prince of Peace bringing peace, when the world is still so full of war?”

By bringing first the peace that matters most. His peace begins not between nations but between God and sinners: justified by faith, we have peace with God. Until that war is ended, every earthly peace is only a truce on a battlefield, because the deepest conflict is the one our sin made with our Maker. The Prince of Peace settles that first, in his own blood — and from that reconciled center peace begins to spread, to the neighbor now and to the whole creation at the last, when war's boots are burned for fuel. The world's wars are not evidence that he failed; they are the not-yet of a peace that has already begun where it counts.

“What practical difference does ‘given for us’ make if I already believe Christ was born?”

All the difference, and Luther staked the gospel on it. To know that Christ was born is to hold a fact; to believe that he was born *and given*, and given *for you*, is to receive a gift. The devil himself knows the fact. What saves is the *unto us* — that this child was handed over for *you*, named and addressed, your sin and your death the reason he was given. Teach the class to move the verse from the third person to the first: not only *a child is born* but *unto me a son is given*. The doctrine does not change; the comfort is the difference between a creed recited and a Savior received.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — The light over Galilee of the nations

A strong opener on grace's direction. Let the class say what it means that the Light rose first over the dark and disregarded, and connect it to Matthew's fulfillment. Draw out the personal comfort: no one is too far out for a light that started in Galilee.

Question 2 — The day of Midian and salvation by weakness

The Gideon question. Trace the line from three hundred men to a child to a cross, and ask why God so often saves by what looks like weakness. Land it on the purpose — so that no flesh can boast, and all the glory goes to God.

Question 3 — Born, and given, for you

The heart of the hour. Press the difference between knowing Christ was born and believing he was born *and given for you*. This is the *pro me* question; let the class hear the verse in the first person and say why Luther treasured the little *unto us*.

Question 4 — The mighty God, true God and true man

The deity question. Walk the class to 10:21 — the same title, of the Lord himself — and ask why it matters that the baby is not merely godlike but God. Hold both natures together: a child is born, *El Gibbor* is given.

Question 5 — The everlasting Father, rightly understood

The Trinity-guard question. Clear away the misreading — the Son is not the Father — and let the class find the two true meanings: his eternity and his fatherly care. Land the comfort for those who fear being finally alone.

Question 6 — The Prince of Peace and the endless throne

The closer. Why must peace with God come first? Tie it to Romans 5:1, then lift the class to the throne with no end and the zeal of the Lord that will perform it. End on the guarantee — the kingdom does not depend on us; God's own zeal secures it.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapter nine — his treatment of the names and his famous delight in the *unto us... unto us* of verse 6.
- ♦ Handel, *Messiah*, the chorus *For unto us a child is born* — the names set to music; a fit way to hear verse 6 the way Luther heard it, as joy.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1–39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on chapter nine — careful on the four names, *El Gibbor*, and Matthew's use of the Galilee prophecy.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapter nine — a clear lay walk through the dawn, the child, and the names.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ Luke 1:26–38, read slowly this week — Gabriel announcing the endless throne of Isaiah 9 to Mary, and a fit meditation for the teacher on the prophecy come to flesh.

A Final Word

Let the dawn rise on you before you carry it to the class. Sit in the dark of chapter eight — the gloom, the shadow of death — so that *the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light* is not a line you explain but a relief you have felt. A teacher who has watched the morning break over his own night will not preach this chapter as information. He will preach it as the sunrise it is.

Keep the double *unto us* at the center. The names are glorious, the throne is endless, the light is great — but it is the little *for us, for you* that turns all of it into gospel. Make the class say it in the first person. The child was born and given, and given to *them*; *El Gibbor* came in flesh for *them*; the Prince of Peace made peace with God for *them*. The doctrine is no different in the first person; the comfort is everything.

And leave them on the throne that has no end. The kingdom does not totter on our faithfulness; *the zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this*. Gabriel told Mary so, and the manger proves it. May the Lord Jesus — Wonderful Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace — reign over your class from his endless throne, and give them first of all his first gift: peace with God.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION EIGHT

The Shoot from the Stump

Isaiah 11 · with Romans 15:8–13

A Note to the Teacher

Chapter ten ends with a forest falling. The Lord takes an axe to the proud — *he shall cut down the thickets of the forest with iron, and Lebanon shall fall by a mighty one* — and the towering trees of human pride and dynasty crash to the ground. Then chapter eleven opens on a stump. *And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.* Teach the hour on that contrast: where the world's tall timber is felled, God grows a green shoot from a dead-looking stump. And notice the name on the stump — not David in his glory but *Jesse*, the shepherd's father, the humble root before the kings. God goes back past the palace to the pasture to begin again. This is the same grace we have watched all along — despised Galilee, the manger — the Lord starting where nothing looks possible.

Upon this shoot the Spirit rests — sevenfold, in fullness — and *rests* is the word to weigh: at the Jordan, John saw the Spirit *abide* on the Lord Jesus, come to remain and not merely to visit. The very word *Christ* means *anointed*; here is the anointing. And teach the strange weapon of this King: he conquers *with the rod of his mouth*, ruling by his word rather than by the sword. Luther took deep comfort that the church's King fights with his word, and so should we. Then comes the picture that has lodged in every imagination — the wolf with the lamb, the lion eating straw, the child unharmed at the serpent's hole — the new creation breaking in, *for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord.*

Use this guide as a tool. Romans 15:8–13 is your anchor: Paul gathers a chain of Old Testament promises about the nations and ends on this very chapter — *there shall be a root of Jesse... in him*

shall the Gentiles trust. If your class is mostly Gentile, then your class is the fulfillment of Isaiah 11. The nations have come to the banner.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

From the cut-down stump of David's line God raises a Spirit-anointed King who rules by his word, takes up the cause of the poor, and gathers the nations into a peaceable new creation — so that the class sees in the root of Jesse the Christ to whom they themselves, the Gentiles, have come.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the shoot from the stump.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 10:33–11:10 aloud as one piece, so the class hears the forest fall in chapter ten before the shoot rises in chapter eleven — the stump only matters if they have seen the tree come down.
- ◆ Mark that the shoot comes from *Jesse*, not from David — back past the throne to the humble root. Be ready to say why that matters: God begins again below the palace, at the shepherd's family.
- ◆ Lay out the sevenfold Spirit of verse 2 — the Spirit *of the Lord*, and *of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord*. Have John 1:32–33 ready: the Spirit descending and *abiding* at the Jordan. Rest and remain, not merely visit.
- ◆ Note the weapon in verse 4 — *the rod of his mouth... the breath of his lips*. The King conquers by his word. Have 2 Thessalonians 2:8 in view, where the Lord undoes the wicked *with the breath of his mouth*.
- ◆ Set chapter eleven beside chapter five. There God looked for justice and found oppression; here the Branch *with righteousness shall... judge the poor*. This King is the vineyard's failure answered.
- ◆ Read Romans 15:8–13 and pray over it — Paul's chain of promises ending in the root of Jesse to whom the Gentiles come. If your class is Gentile, teach as one who is himself the answer to this prophecy.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · God grows life from dead-looking stumps.

The whole architecture of these two chapters preaches it: the proud forest is felled, and from a stump — a thing that looks finished, a dynasty cut off — God raises a living shoot. He does it from *Jesse*, going back behind David's royal glory to the shepherd's humble household, as if to say the kingdom will be rebuilt from the bottom, not the top. Teach the class to read their own dead stumps this way. The pattern we have traced — Galilee of the nations, the manger, salvation by what looks like weakness — reaches its emblem here: a green sprig out of a dead stump is exactly how God works. Where the world sees a hopeless ending, the Lord is preparing a beginning. Nothing is too far gone for the God who specializes in stumps.

Two · The Spirit rests and remains on the Christ — and the word is his weapon.

Two truths sit close together in this chapter and belong together in the teaching. First, the Spirit *rests* upon the shoot — not a passing visitation but a permanent abiding, as John witnessed at the Jordan. The title *Christ* simply names this: the Anointed, the one on whom the Spirit settled to stay. Second, this Spirit-anointed King fights with his mouth: *he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked*. His kingdom does not advance by armies or coercion but by the preached word, which the Spirit carries. Teach the class why this is comfort and not weakness: a kingdom built on the word can be entered by the weak, cannot be toppled by force, and spreads exactly where the gospel is spoken. Our King's sword is his word, and that word is doing its conquering wherever it is preached.

Three · The peaceable kingdom is the new creation, already breaking in.

The wolf and the lamb are not a nature documentary about a future calendar, and they are not merely a metaphor for a calm heart. They are the new creation — the whole cursed order healed, predator and prey reconciled, the child safe where death used to wait — *for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea*. Teach the class to hold the now and the not-yet together. The peaceable kingdom has already begun: where the gospel is preached, old enemies are reconciled, the violent are made gentle, Jew and Gentile sit at one table. And it is not yet complete: creation still groans, and we wait for the day when *they shall not hurt nor destroy* anywhere at all. Read the picture as promise and as down payment — a peace inaugurated in Christ and to be consummated when he comes.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the Pacing Tip names what to protect.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:15	The forest felled, the shoot from Jesse's stump (10:33–11:1)
0:15–0:25	The sevenfold Spirit that rests and remains (11:2; John 1:32)
0:25–0:34	The rod of his mouth; justice for the poor (11:3–5)
0:34–0:45	The wolf and the lamb — the new creation (11:6–9)
0:45–0:52	An ensign for the nations; the Gentiles come (11:10; Rom 15:8–13)
0:52–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 12 and Session Nine

Pacing Tip

The wolf-and-lamb segment will draw the most energy, and the class will want to argue the calendar — literal animals, future date. Do not get pulled onto that ground. Settle quickly that this is the new creation, already begun and not yet finished, and spend the saved time on the ensign for the nations, because that is where the class discovers it is *in* the prophecy. Protect the last teaching segment.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the chapter's movements.

A Stump in the Field

Set the scene with the fallen forest of chapter ten, then let the shoot rise. *There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.* The Hebrew gives a tender shoot — a *netzer* — sprouting from a stump that looked dead. Two things to draw out. First, the stump: David's royal line will be cut down to a stump by the coming judgments, and from that apparent end God brings the King. Second, the name: not *David* but *Jesse*, the father, the humble shepherd's household at Bethlehem before there was a palace. God reaches back past the glory to the root and begins again low. Tie it to the road the class has already walked — Galilee, the manger — and let them see the stump as the emblem of the whole way God saves: life out of what looks finished.

The Spirit Shall Rest Upon Him

Now the anointing. *The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him* — and Isaiah unfolds it sevenfold: wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord, all resting on the one Spirit of the Lord. Press the verb *rest*. At the Jordan, John the Baptist bore witness: *I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him*. The Spirit came not to flit but to settle, to remain. This is what the word *Christ* means — *Messiah, Anointed*, the one upon whom the Spirit rests to stay. Teach the class that the King's every act — his wisdom, his might, his judgment — flows from this resting Spirit, and that the same Spirit he received without measure he pours out on his church.

A Craft Note on “Christ”

Many in the class hear *Christ* as a surname. Use this chapter to repair that. *Christ* is a title — the Anointed One — and Isaiah 11 shows the anointing happening: the Spirit resting on the shoot from Jesse. Ask the class to hear *Christ* as *the one the Spirit rests on* every time they say it. It turns a name back into a confession.

The Rod of His Mouth

Watch how this King wins. He does not judge *after the sight of his eyes* or *after the hearing of his ears* — not by appearances or hearsay — but *with righteousness shall he judge the poor*. And his weapon is named: *he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked*. Teach the class that the kingdom advances by the word, not the sword. Paul says the Lord will undo the lawless one *with the breath of his mouth*; the same breath that spoke creation speaks the wicked's end and the sinner's life. Luther found enormous comfort here: the church does not conquer by force, money, or politics but by preaching, and a kingdom built on the word cannot be beaten by the powers that rely on the sword. Our King's weapon is his word — which means it is a weapon the weakest believer already wields when the gospel is spoken.

The Wolf and the Lamb

Here is the picture everyone remembers, so teach it carefully. *The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid... and a little child shall lead them*. The lion eats straw; the nursing child plays over the cobra's den; *they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain*. Steer the class away from two errors. It is not a literal forecast of animal behavior on a dispensational calendar — to read it as zoology is to miss the point. And it is not merely a metaphor for inner calm — to shrink it to a feeling is to lose the cosmic scope. It is the *new*

creation: the whole curse undone, hostility healed, death's ambush disarmed, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. Teach the now and the not-yet. We already see the peaceable kingdom breaking in wherever the gospel reconciles enemies and makes the violent gentle; we still wait for the day it fills the earth. Both are true, and the class should leave holding both.

A Craft Note on Now and Not-Yet

Give the class a concrete “already” so the picture is not all future. Jew and Gentile at one table, an old enemy forgiven, a hard man made tender by the word — these are the wolf lying down with the lamb in advance. Then name an honest “not-yet” — creation still groans, the grave still takes. Holding both keeps the class from either escapism or despair.

An Ensign for the Nations

End where Paul ends. *In that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek.* The shoot from the stump becomes a banner lifted up, and the nations come to it. Then carry the class to Romans 15, where Paul strings together promise after promise that the Gentiles would praise God, and closes the chain with this very verse: *there shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust.* Now make it personal. If your class is mostly Gentile — and it almost certainly is — then they are reading the fulfillment of Isaiah 11 in their own pews. The banner was raised; the nations sought it; here they sit. Tie it back to the mountain of chapter two, with the peoples streaming in. The root of Jesse gathered them, and is gathering still.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Why does Isaiah say the shoot comes from Jesse instead of David?”

Because the point is the stump. By the time the Branch sprouts, David's royal line will have been cut down to a stump — the glory gone, the palace fallen — and Isaiah names the *root*, Jesse, to take us back below the throne to the humble shepherd's household where the line began. God starts the kingdom over from the bottom, not the top. It is the same grace the class has been tracing: Galilee, the manger, salvation by what looks like weakness. The Branch from Jesse's stump tells

them that God's favorite material is a dead-looking stump — which is hope for every situation that looks finished.

“What is the ‘sevenfold Spirit,’ and why does it matter that the Spirit rests?”

The sevenfold Spirit is Isaiah's way of saying *fullness* — the one Spirit of the Lord named in the completeness of his gifts: wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. What matters most is the verb: the Spirit *rests* on the shoot, and John saw it *abide* on the Lord Jesus at the Jordan — come to remain, not merely to visit. That is exactly what the title *Christ* means: the Anointed, the one the Spirit settled on to stay. And from this resting Spirit flows everything the King does, and the same Spirit he pours out on his church. The anointing that rested on the Head is shared with the body.

“How does a King who fights with ‘the rod of his mouth’ actually win anything?”

By the only weapon that can change a heart — his word. This King does not advance by armies, wealth, or political force; he smites *with the rod of his mouth* and slays the wicked *with the breath of his lips*. Paul says the Lord will undo the lawless one with the breath of his mouth. Teach the class why this is strength, not weakness: a kingdom built on the preached word can be entered by the weakest, cannot be conquered by the sword, and spreads precisely where the gospel is spoken. Luther rejoiced in it — the church's King fights with his word, so the church fights the same way. Every time the gospel is spoken, the King's weapon is drawn.

“Are the wolf and the lamb a literal prediction about animals someday?”

It is better read as the new creation than as a zoology forecast on a future calendar — and better than shrinking it to a picture of inner peace. Isaiah is describing the whole cursed order healed: hostility reconciled, death's ambush disarmed, the child safe where the serpent waited, *for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord*. The right frame is already-and-not-yet. The peaceable kingdom has begun wherever the gospel reconciles enemies and gentles the violent — you can see it now; and it is not yet complete, for creation still groans. Teach both, and the class will neither escape into the future nor despair in the present.

“The nations come to the ‘root of Jesse.’ Does that include us?”

It is precisely us. The shoot from the stump becomes a banner, and *to it shall the Gentiles seek* — and Paul closes his chain of Gentile promises in Romans 15 with this very verse: *in him shall the Gentiles trust*. If your class is mostly Gentile, then the people in the room are the fulfillment of Isaiah 11, reading the prophecy from inside it. The banner was raised, the nations sought it, and

here they sit. Connect it to the mountain of chapter two, with the peoples streaming in. The root of Jesse has been gathering the nations for two and a half millennia, and your class is the proof.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — The green shoot from dead wood

A strong opener. Let the class say what the stump-and-shoot image teaches about how God works, and connect it to the lowly origins already seen — Galilee, the manger. Land it personally: where is each one tempted to think a situation is past hope, and what does the stump say to that?

Question 2 — The Spirit that rests and remains

The anointing question. Draw out why *rest* and *abide* matter — the Spirit came to stay — and let the class connect it to the meaning of *Christ*. A good moment to repair the common notion that *Christ* is a surname rather than a confession.

Question 3 — The rod of his mouth

The word-not-sword question. Ask how ruling by the word shapes the way the kingdom actually advances, and why it was such comfort to Luther — and should be to us — that our King's weapon is his word. Let the class feel the strength hidden in what looks like weakness.

Question 4 — Justice for the poor and the meek

The vineyard-answered question. Set chapter eleven beside chapter five: God looked for justice and found oppression; here the Branch judges the poor with righteousness. Ask whose cause this King especially takes up, and what that tells the class about him.

Question 5 — The wolf and the lamb as new creation

The picture everyone knows. Steer between the two errors — literal animal forecast and mere inner peace — toward the new creation, already and not-yet. Ask where the class already sees the peaceable kingdom breaking in, and where they still wait. Keep both alive.

Question 6 — The ensign for the nations, and us

The closer, and the most personal. Let the class discover that they are the fulfillment of the root of Jesse to which the Gentiles come, with Paul's Romans 15 in hand. Tie it back to the mountain of chapter two. End with the nations streaming in — and the class among them.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapter eleven — his reading of the Branch, the resting Spirit, and especially the King who rules by the word.
- ♦ The Nicene Creed, on the Holy Spirit who *spoke by the prophets* — read alongside the sevenfold Spirit resting on the Christ, who pours that same Spirit on his church.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1–39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on chapter eleven — careful on the *netzer*, the sevenfold Spirit, and the new-creation reading of the peaceable kingdom.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapter eleven — a clear lay treatment of the shoot, the Spirit, and the ensign for the nations.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ Romans 15:8–13, read slowly this week — Paul's chain of Gentile promises ending in the root of Jesse, and a fit meditation for the teacher on the nations gathered to Christ.

A Final Word

Teach this chapter as a man who has needed a stump to sprout. We all carry dead wood — a failure that looks final, a hope that was felled — and the gospel of the Branch is that God's chosen material is exactly the stump everyone has written off. Let the shoot rise in your own field before you point the class to it, and you will preach chapter eleven not as a nice image but as the way your God actually works.

Keep the King's weapon in view. In an age that trusts force and money and noise, it is easy to grow ashamed of a kingdom that advances only by a word. Do not. The rod of his mouth has outlasted every empire that mocked it, and it is the one weapon the weakest soul in your class can wield: speak the gospel, and the King is at war. Teach them to trust the word the way he does.

And leave the class standing under the banner. The root of Jesse was lifted up, the Gentiles sought him, and here they sit — the prophecy fulfilled in their own pews, the peaceable kingdom already breaking in among them and not yet filling the earth. May the Lord Jesus, the shoot from Jesse's

stump on whom the Spirit rests, rule your class by his word, take up their cause as his poor and meek, and gather them at last into the new creation where they shall not hurt nor destroy in all his holy mountain.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION NINE

The Song of Salvation

Isaiah 12 · with Exodus 15:1–2 and John 7:37–39

A Note to the Teacher

Six verses, and they sing. After eleven chapters of woe and warning, of vineyard and stump and the gathering of the nations, the first great movement of Isaiah closes the only way it can — in a song. *And in that day thou shalt say, O Lord, I will praise thee.* Teach this hour as the doxology it is. The redeemed have come through the storm; now they stand on the far shore and sing, and the song they sing is the old Song of the Sea made new. Moses sang *the Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation* on the morning Egypt drowned; Isaiah puts the very words in the mouth of the ransomed of the second exodus. The God who once split a sea will gather his people again, and they will sing the same song over a greater rescue.

Do not hurry past the small words, because the gospel hides in them. *Though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away* — not ignored, not pretended away, but *turned*, and the class should ask where it went. *God is my salvation* — not salvation in the abstract but *my*, the little word Luther staked everything on. *I will trust, and not be afraid* — the very sentence Ahaz could not say four chapters back. And then the song that began in one heart spills outward: *declare his doings among the people*. A faith that has truly sung *God is my salvation* cannot keep its seat.

Use this guide as a tool. John 7:37–39 is your center: at the Feast of Tabernacles, as the people recited verse 3 and the priest poured out the water, the Lord Jesus stood and cried, *If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink*. He is the well. And note how the chapter answers chapter six: there Isaiah cried *woe is me* before the Holy One; here the redeemed *cry out and shout* because

the Holy One... is in the midst of thee. What turned terror into joy is the whole story between — the coal, the child, Immanuel.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

The first movement of Isaiah closes in a song — the redeemed of the new exodus singing *God is my salvation*, drawing with joy from the wells that are Christ himself — so that the class learns to say the little word *my*, to trust where Ahaz feared, and to rejoice that the Holy One who once terrified Isaiah now dwells in their midst as comfort.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the song of salvation.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 12 aloud — it is only six verses — and count how many times *salvation* rings out. The chapter is meant to be sung, not studied at arm's length; read it as a song.
- ◆ Read Exodus 15:1–2 beside it. Isaiah 12:2 is nearly a quotation of the Song of the Sea — *the Lord... is become my salvation*. The new exodus gets its own Song of the Sea; have the parallel ready.
- ◆ Mark the turned-away anger of verse 1. Be ready to say where the anger went — not overlooked but borne, looking ahead to the Servant of chapter fifty-three. The gospel needs the anger to be real before it can be sweet that it is gone.
- ◆ Underline the *my* in verse 2 — *God is my salvation* — and be ready to dwell on it as Luther did. The whole difference between knowing about Christ and trusting him lives in that pronoun.
- ◆ Read John 7:37–39 and learn the setting: the Feast of Tabernacles water ceremony, where this very verse was recited. The Lord Jesus stands in the middle of it and calls the thirsty to himself. He is the well of salvation.
- ◆ Set chapter twelve beside chapter six. *Woe is me* before the Holy One; *cry out and shout* because the Holy One is in the midst. Pray that you would teach this hour from a heart that has made the same journey, from dread to song.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · The anger was real, and it was turned away — not ignored.

The song opens with a confession the modern ear wants to soften: *thou wast angry with me*. Do not soften it, because the gospel loses its sweetness the moment the anger becomes pretend. God was truly angry at sin — his is not the irritation of a slighted neighbor but the just wrath of a holy God against what destroys his creation and his people. And the wonder of the song is not that the anger was overlooked but that it was *turned away*. Teach the class to ask the question the verse begs: turned away to *where*? An anger that simply evaporates leaves sin unanswered and God unjust. But this anger was *borne* — the chapter is pointing down the book toward the Servant on whom the chastisement of our peace would fall. Teach the class that the comfort of *thine anger is turned away* rests entirely on the cross, where the anger landed on Another. Cheap forgiveness sings a thin song; this song is full because the wrath was real and was truly satisfied.

Two · Faith dares to say “my.”

Twice the song says it: *God is my salvation, he... is become my salvation*. Luther pressed the little pronoun until it bled gospel, because the whole of saving faith turns on it. The devils believe true things about Christ in general; what they cannot say is *my*. To recite that God is a Savior is to hold a doctrine; to say *God is my salvation* is to receive a gift, to put your own name in the sentence and your own weight on the promise. Teach the class that this is not arrogance but faith — indeed it is the only humility, because it stops trusting the self and rests wholly on Christ *for me*. The aim of the whole hour is to move the class from the third person to the first: not *a salvation* but *my salvation*, not *God saves* but *God is my salvation*.

Three · The Holy One in the midst is now our song, not our terror.

Hold chapter twelve up against chapter six and let the class feel the reversal. In the throne room, the nearness of the Holy One undid Isaiah — *woe is me... for mine eyes have seen the King*. Here the same nearness is the reason for joy — *cry out and shout... for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee*. Same Holy One, same nearness, opposite cry. What changed is everything the book has shown between: the coal from the altar, the child born to us, Immanuel, God with us. For the unatoned sinner, God in the midst is a consuming fire; for the redeemed, God in the midst is the whole of heaven. Teach the class that the gospel does not make God less holy or less near — it makes his holiness and nearness our comfort, because the wrath is turned away and the Holy One who dwells among us is *for us*. The name Immanuel has become a song.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the chapter is short, so the connections carry the weight.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:14	A song at the end of the storm; the new Song of the Sea (12:1; Exod 15)
0:14–0:24	Thine anger is turned away — and where it went (12:1)
0:24–0:34	God is my salvation — the little word my (12:2)
0:34–0:44	The wells of salvation; the Feast and the Lord's cry (12:3; John 7:37–39)
0:44–0:52	Cry out and shout — the Holy One in the midst (12:4–6; cf. 6:5)
0:52–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 13–23 and Session Ten

Pacing Tip

A six-verse chapter tempts you to either rush it or pad it. Do neither. The chapter is short because it is a song, and its riches are in its echoes — Exodus 15 behind it, John 7 within it, chapter six across from it. Spend the hour on those connections rather than squeezing the verses for more words than they hold. Let the class leave humming, not analyzing.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the chapter's movements.

A Song at the End of the Storm

Frame the chapter by its place. Chapters one through twelve are the first great movement of Isaiah, and they end here, in a song — the way a symphony resolves. After the vineyard's woe, the faithless king, the great light, the shoot from the stump, and the gathering of the nations, the redeemed stand on the far side and sing: *O Lord, I will praise thee*. And the song is not new — it is the old Song of the Sea, sung again. When Egypt drowned, Moses and Israel sang *the Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation*; Isaiah 12:2 takes those very words and gives them to the ransomed of the second exodus, the gathering of chapter eleven. Teach the class to hear the rhyme across the centuries: the God who saved at the Red Sea will save again, and his people will

sing the same song over the greater rescue. The form of salvation does not change — God does it, and his people sing.

Thine Anger Is Turned Away

Slow down on verse 1, because the gospel is in its grammar. *Though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me.* Three movements: the anger was real, the anger is turned away, and the result is comfort. Do not let the class soften the first — God was truly angry at sin, and a gospel that begins by denying the wrath ends by offering a cure for a disease no one had. Then press the second: the anger is *turned away*, not merely dropped. Ask where it went. The honest answer carries the class down the book to chapter fifty-three, where *the chastisement of our peace was upon him*. The wrath did not evaporate; it was borne. And so the comfort of verse 1 is not the comfort of a God who shrugged at sin but of a God whose Son absorbed the anger so that, toward us, only comfort is left. That is why the song can be so glad: the wrath was real, and it is truly, justly gone.

God Is My Salvation

Now the heart of the song. *Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation.* Two things to teach. First, the pronoun: *my*. Luther would not let it go, and neither should you — the difference between a creed and a comfort is whether you can say *my salvation* and mean yourself. Move the class from the general to the personal; have them hear it as *God is my salvation*, each one. Second, the line *I will trust, and not be afraid* — and remind the class who could not say it. Four chapters back, Ahaz, offered any sign in heaven or earth, would not trust and reached for Assyria instead. The redeemed heart says the sentence Ahaz refused. Teach the root difference: fear grasps for a refuge it can see; faith leans on the Savior it cannot. The same God stands before both hearts; one trembles and grabs, the other trusts and sings.

A Craft Note on “My”

Have the class say verse 2 aloud, slowly, in the first person, replacing nothing — just hearing the *my*. Then ask quietly whether they dared to mean it. The exercise does in a moment what a lecture cannot: it exposes the gap between believing facts about Christ and resting on him for oneself, and it invites the class across that gap.

The Wells of Salvation

Verse 3 gives the image that the New Testament will seize: *with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation*. Teach the setting that makes it sing. At the Feast of Tabernacles, the priest each day drew water from the pool of Siloam and poured it out at the altar while the people recited this very verse. On the last and greatest day of that feast — the water ceremony fresh in every mind — the Lord Jesus stood and cried, *If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink... out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water*. John tells us he spoke of the Spirit. So the wells of salvation are not a place but a person: Christ himself, and the living water of the Spirit he gives. Teach the class where they draw today — the gospel preached, the water of baptism, the cup of the Supper, the word that carries the Spirit — and teach them the manner: *with joy*. The wells are not a grim duty to be performed but a spring to be enjoyed. A church that draws from them as a chore has forgotten they are full of living water.

Cry Out and Shout

The song does not stay private. Watch it turn outward in verses 4 through 6: *declare his doings among the people, make mention that his name is exalted... this is known in all the earth*. The *my salvation* of verse 2 becomes the *declare among the nations* of verse 4 — personal faith growing, as it always does, into the church's praise and proclamation. Teach the class that a heart which has truly sung *God is my salvation* cannot keep its seat; the song wants out, toward the neighbor and the nations. And bring the chapter home on its last line: *cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee*. Hold it against chapter six — *woe is me* before the Holy One — and let the class measure the distance the book has traveled. The Holy One is just as holy and just as near; but now his nearness is the reason to shout for joy, because the wrath is turned away and Immanuel dwells among his people. The throne room's terror has become Zion's song.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Why dwell on God’s anger? Doesn’t that undercut a song of joy?”

It is the opposite — the anger is what makes the joy real. *Though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away*. If God was never truly angry at sin, then the song celebrates a rescue from a danger that did not exist, and the gospel shrinks to sentiment. The joy is full precisely because the wrath was real and is now truly gone. And gone *where*? Not overlooked, but borne — the chapter

points ahead to the Servant on whom the chastisement of our peace would fall. Teach the class that a forgiveness which cost nothing sings a thin song; this song is loud because the anger was real and was answered at the cross.

“Why did Luther make so much of one little word, ‘my’?”

Because saving faith lives in that word. *God is my salvation* — anyone can affirm that God is a Savior; the demons affirm true things about Christ. What they cannot say, and what faith alone says, is *my*. To put your own name in the sentence, to rest your own weight on the promise, is the difference between holding a doctrine and receiving a gift. Luther pressed the pronoun because the whole Reformation is in it: not Christ in general but Christ *for me*. Teach the class that saying *my* is not presumption but the truest humility, because it stops trusting the self and leans entirely on the Savior.

“Where are the ‘wells of salvation’ for us? We don’t go to the pool of Siloam.”

The wells are not a place but a person. At the Feast of Tabernacles, as the people recited this verse and the priest poured the water, the Lord Jesus cried, *If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink* — and John says he meant the Spirit he would give. So Christ himself is the well, and the living water is the Spirit. We draw from him today wherever he has promised to give himself: the gospel preached, the water of baptism, the bread and cup of the Supper, the word that carries the Spirit to the thirsty. And the manner matters — *with joy*. These are not duties to be discharged but a spring to be enjoyed; teach the class to come to them thirsty and glad, not dutiful and dry.

“Why does a private song of faith turn into public proclamation?”

Because it cannot help it. The song begins in one heart — *God is my salvation* — and by verse 4 it is *declare his doings among the people... this is known in all the earth*. That is the native motion of real faith: what has truly gladdened a heart wants out, toward the neighbor and the nations. Teach the class that evangelism, at its root, is not a program bolted onto faith but the overflow of a heart that has tasted salvation and cannot keep its seat. A song that stays locked inside was probably never fully sung. Private faith grows into the church’s praise and the church’s mission as naturally as a spring becomes a stream.

“How can the Holy One ‘in the midst’ be a comfort, when in chapter six it terrified Isaiah?”

Because everything between the two chapters has happened. In the throne room the nearness of the Holy One undid Isaiah — *woe is me* — for an unclean man cannot survive the presence of the holy. But between chapter six and chapter twelve came the coal from the altar, the child born to

us, Immanuel — God with us. The Holy One is no less holy and no less near; what changed is that the wrath is turned away and he now dwells among his people *for* them. To the unatoned sinner, God in the midst is a consuming fire; to the redeemed, God in the midst is heaven itself. Teach the class that the gospel does not push God away to make him bearable — it makes his nearness our song.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — The anger turned away, and where it fell

A strong opener. Let the class say why the gospel loses its sweetness if God's anger is softened into pretend, and press the question of where the anger went — borne, not ignored, looking ahead to chapter fifty-three. Land it on the cross, where the wrath fell on Another.

Question 2 — The little word my

The heart of the hour. Draw out Luther's point: the difference between believing true things about Christ in general and daring to say *he is my salvation*. Consider having the class say verse 2 in the first person and sit with whether they meant it.

Question 3 — Trust where Ahaz feared

The faith-versus-fear question. Set *I will trust, and not be afraid* against Ahaz, who could not say it. Ask the root difference between a heart that fears and a heart that trusts, and why the redeemed can face frightening things singing.

Question 4 — The wells of salvation and the Lord's cry

The John 7 question. Locate the wells in Christ himself and the Spirit, and the means by which we draw today. Press the *with joy*: ask the class whether they come to word and sacrament thirsty and glad or dutiful and dry, and why it matters.

Question 5 — The song that cannot stay quiet

The mission question. Trace the turn from *my salvation* to *declare his doings among the people*, and ask why a heart that has truly sung the first cannot keep the second to itself. Let the class see proclamation as overflow, not obligation.

Question 6 — From Woe is me to Cry out and shout

The closer, and the richest. Hold chapter six beside chapter twelve and ask what changed between the two cries. Land the comfort that the Holy One in the midst is now joy, not terror, and tie it back to Immanuel — God with us, no longer against us.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapter twelve — his treatment of the song, and his characteristic insistence on the little word *my* in verse 2.
- ♦ The Small Catechism, on the meaning of baptism and the Lord's Supper — read as the answer to *where are the wells of salvation for us today*.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1–39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on chapter twelve — careful on the echoes of Exodus 15 and the structure of the song.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapter twelve — a clear lay treatment of the song that closes the first movement.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ John 7:37–39, read slowly this week — the Lord Jesus at the Feast crying the thirsty to himself, the living well of Isaiah's song, and a fit meditation for the teacher who draws daily from him.

A Final Word

Teach this chapter from the far shore. Isaiah 12 is the song of people who have come through the storm — through the wrath, through the fear, through the long night of chapters one to eleven — and are standing now on dry ground, singing. If you have made that crossing yourself, even in part, you will not teach the song as an exercise. You will teach it as your own.

Keep the little word *my* at the center. Everything else in the chapter — the turned-away anger, the wells, the shout in Zion — becomes gospel only when the class can put themselves in the sentence and say *my salvation* and mean it. Do not let them leave with a doctrine they admire. Lead them to the well, and let them drink, and hear them say *my*.

And leave them shouting, not trembling. The Holy One who once made Isaiah cry *woe* now dwells in the midst of his redeemed as their joy, because the anger is turned away and Immanuel has come. May the Lord Jesus, the well of salvation, give your class living water to draw with joy, put his own song in their mouths, and make the nearness of the Holy One the gladdest fact they know.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TEN

Oracles Against the Nations

Isaiah 13–23 · with Isaiah 19:19–25 and Philippians 2:5–11

A Note to the Teacher

Eleven chapters in one hour — do not panic, and do not try to march through them verse by verse. Chapters thirteen through twenty-three are a gallery of *burdens*, oracles against the nations: Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Egypt, Tyre, and even Jerusalem herself. The word *burden* — *massa*, a heavy thing lifted and laid down — opens one after another, and the cumulative message is a single great claim: the Holy One of Israel rules and judges *every* nation, not Judah alone. Teach the hour on that claim and on the handful of peaks where the gospel breaks through the judgment — the fall of the proud king, the two ladders, the astonishing blessing of Egypt and Assyria, and the key of David. Let the burdens be the dark frame; let those four moments be the light.

Two of those peaks are pure gospel and you should aim the class at them. First, the fall of the king of Babylon, who says *I will... be like the most High* and is cast down — set against the Lord Jesus, who *was* God and *humbled himself*, and was therefore exalted. Two ladders, running opposite directions: the grasping that falls, the self-emptying that is lifted up. That is the heart of Luther's theology of the cross — the way up is down. Second, the jaw-dropping promise tucked into the Egypt oracle: *Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands*. The house of bondage and the cruelest empire — gathered in, blessed, named God's own. If your class is Gentile, that promise has their name on it.

Use this guide as a tool. Philippians 2:5–11 is your anchor for the two ladders; Ephesians 2:14–16 stands behind the gathering of the old enemies; and Revelation 3:7 will let the class hear the risen Lord Jesus claim the key of David as his own. The door he opens, no one shuts.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

The burdens declare that the Holy One judges every nation and every proud heart — yet in the middle of judgment the gospel breaks through: the King who grasped at godhead falls while the God who humbled himself is exalted, the old enemies are gathered in and blessed, and the risen Lord Jesus holds the key of David that no one can shut.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the oracles against the nations.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read at least Isaiah 13–14 and 19 closely, and skim 15–18 and 20–23, so you have the sweep — you are teaching a gallery, and you need to have walked its length.
- ◆ Mark how often *burden* opens an oracle, and keep the big claim in front of you: the same Lord who reigns in Zion reigns over Babylon and Egypt and Tyre. Be ready to say why that is both comfort and warning.
- ◆ Lay the two ladders side by side: Isaiah 14:13–15, the five *I wills* of the king of Babylon and his fall; and Philippians 2:6–11, the Lord Jesus who emptied himself and was exalted. Have Genesis 3:5 and Luke 14:11 ready behind them.
- ◆ Do not miss 19:19–25 — the altar to the Lord in Egypt, the highway to Assyria, and *Blessed be Egypt my people*. Read it slowly in advance; it is the most surprising sentence in the section.
- ◆ Note the burden against Jerusalem in chapter 22, and her trust in *walls and water supply* — the pool and the armory — while she did not look to the Maker. Be ready to ask where the church trusts her own defenses today.
- ◆ Have Isaiah 22:22 and Revelation 3:7 together — the key of David laid on Eliakim's shoulder, and the risen Lord Jesus claiming the key as his own. Pray that the class would fear the right pride and rest in the right King.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · God is the Lord of all nations — a comfort and a warning at once.

The burdens are not a foreign-policy briefing; they are a confession that the Holy One of Israel governs the whole earth. To a small and frightened people, surrounded by empires that could swallow them whole, this is enormous comfort: the Babylon that terrifies you is on my docket, says the Lord; the Egypt you are tempted to run to is mine to command. And to every proud nation — and every proud heart — it is a warning: there is no jurisdiction outside his reach. Teach the class to resist the instinct to make God a local deity, a tribal protector concerned only with our own affairs. The God of the Bible is not the chaplain of one nation; he is the Judge of all, and that truth steadies the fearful and humbles the proud in the same breath. The class should leave both comforted that no power is beyond him and sobered that they are not.

Two · Pride — the self lifted into God's place — is the root of every sin.

Listen to the king of Babylon: *I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God... I will be like the most High*. Five times *I will*, and the last is the oldest lie in the world — *ye shall be as gods*, the serpent's promise in the garden. The church has long heard, behind the human tyrant, the deeper fall of the one who first grasped at God's place. Teach the class that this is not merely one sin among many but the root from which every other sin grows: the self enthroned where God belongs. Every particular wrong — the lie, the lust, the grudge — is a branch of this one trunk, the will that says *I will be like the most High*. And it lies deeper than any single bad act; a person can mend his behavior and never touch it. Teach the class to fear the pride beneath the deeds, because that is what the gospel finally has to kill.

Three · The way up is down — the gospel runs opposite to Babylon.

Here is the heart of the hour, and of Luther's theology of the cross. Set the two ladders side by side. The king of Babylon climbed — *I will ascend... I will be like God* — and was thrown down to the pit. The Lord Jesus, who *was* in the form of God and had every right to grasp, did the opposite: he *made himself of no reputation*, took a servant's form, humbled himself to death on a cross — and *therefore God also hath highly exalted him*. The ladders run in opposite directions. Babylon grasped upward and fell; Christ stooped downward and was lifted to the highest name. Teach the class the scandalous logic the world cannot believe: the way up is down, exaltation comes through humiliation, and the cross is the throne. This is not only how Christ was glorified; it is the shape of

the Christian life. The one who exalts himself is abased; the one who humbles himself is exalted. Babylon's ladder is in every human heart — and the gospel offers the other one.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; you are teaching a sweep, so protect the peaks.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:14	The burden of the nations — the Lord of all the earth (13; 15–23 in survey)
0:14–0:24	How art thou fallen — the five I wills (14:12–15)
0:24–0:36	The two ladders — Babylon and Christ (14; Phil 2:5–11)
0:36–0:46	Blessed be Egypt my people — the enemies gathered in (19:19–25; Eph 2)
0:46–0:53	The burden of Jerusalem; the key of David (22; Rev 3:7)
0:53–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 24–27 and Session Eleven

Pacing Tip

You cannot teach eleven chapters; do not try. Establish the big claim quickly — God judges all nations — then spend your real time on the four peaks: the fall, the two ladders, the blessing of Egypt and Assyria, and the key of David. If a class wants to linger on Lucifer and angelology, gently redirect: the text is about a human king, and the gospel point is the two ladders. Protect Philippians 2 and the key of David.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the section's movements.

The Burden of the Nations

Open by establishing the genre and the claim. A *burden* — *massa* — is a weighty oracle, a thing the prophet lifts and lays on a nation: Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Cush, Egypt, Tyre, one after another. Do not try to teach each; teach what the collection says together. The Holy One of Israel is not a tribal god whose writ stops at Judah's border; he rules and judges the whole earth, and every empire that ever frightened his people is under his hand. For a tiny nation pinned

between superpowers, this is the deepest comfort: your God is the God of the ones who threaten you. And for every nation drunk on its own greatness, it is a warning: there is no escaping his court. Teach the class to read the headlines this way — not as proof that God is absent from the chaos of nations but as the arena where the Lord of all is quietly, certainly at work.

How Art Thou Fallen

Come to the great taunt over the king of Babylon: *How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!* The immediate target is a human tyrant, the proud emperor brought to the dust; teach that first so the class does not float off into pure speculation. But hear the depth the church has always heard. The king's boast — *I will ascend... I will be like the most High* — is the serpent's promise from Eden, *ye shall be as gods*, and behind the human pride lies the oldest pride of all. Lay out the five *I wills* and let the class feel the climbing: heaven, the stars, the clouds, the mount of the assembly, the throne of God himself. And then the one word that answers them all: *yet thou shalt be brought down to hell*. Teach the class that this is the trajectory of all self-exaltation — the higher the grasping, the longer the fall. The will to be God is not ambition gone slightly too far; it is the original ruin, and it ends in the pit.

The Two Ladders

Now set the gospel against the taunt, because this is the center of the hour. Babylon said *I will ascend, I will be like God*, and was cast down. The Lord Jesus, Paul says, *being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God* — he did not need to grasp, because it was already his — *but made himself of no reputation... and humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*. And then the hinge: *Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him*. Draw the two ladders on the board if you must. One climbs and falls; the other stoops and is lifted. Teach the class the logic the world calls foolish and Luther called the theology of the cross: the way up is down. Exaltation does not come by seizing it but by the self-emptying that looks, to every worldly eye, like losing. The cross is the lowest rung and the highest throne. And this is not Christ's pattern only — it is the believer's: *whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted*. Babylon's ladder is wired into every human heart; the gospel hands us the other one.

A Craft Note on the Two Ladders

Make the contrast physical. Read Isaiah 14:13–15 with your hand rising, then crashing; read Philippians 2:6–9 with your hand sinking, then lifted. The class will remember the gesture longer

than the exposition. The point lands in the body: the grasping hand falls, the open hand is raised.

Blessed Be Egypt My People

Bring the class to the most astonishing verses in the section, and let them be astonished. In the very middle of an oracle of judgment on Egypt, the Lord promises *an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, a highway out of Egypt to Assyria*, and then the words that should stop the class cold: *Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance*. Egypt — the house of bondage, the old slaver. Assyria — the empire whose cruelty was a byword. And the Lord calls them *my people* and *the work of my hands*, gathered with Israel as one. Teach the class that this is the gospel of the ingathering of the nations, seven centuries early: the day when the old enemies would be reconciled and brought in, the middle wall of partition broken down, the two made one. Paul says exactly this — *Christ is our peace, who hath made both one... to make in himself of twain one new man*. And then make it personal: if your class is Gentile, *they are Egypt and Assyria*, the old outsiders gathered in. The most surprising sentence in the chapter is their own story.

The Burden of Jerusalem and the Key of David

Close with two sobering, then comforting, turns. First, Isaiah aims a burden at Jerusalem herself — *the valley of vision* — the one city that might have thought itself exempt. When the threat came, she trusted her defenses: she counted the houses, repaired the walls, made a reservoir for the water of the old pool — *but ye have not looked unto the maker thereof*. Teach the warning plainly: the people of God are judged by the same word as the nations, and the church is forever tempted to trust her walls and water supply — her buildings, budgets, programs, and reputations — instead of the Lord who built her. Then turn to the gospel that closes the chapter. The faithless steward Shebna is deposed, and Eliakim is given *the key of the house of David... so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open*. Even Eliakim, a *nail in a sure place*, will finally be cut down — the type cannot bear the full weight. But the risen Lord Jesus takes these very words for himself: *he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth*. Teach the class the comfort: the key is in the nail-scarred hand. The door he opens into the Father's house, no power in heaven or earth can shut against you.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Why should we care about ancient oracles against Moab and Tyre?”

Because together they make a claim that matters in every age: the Holy One of Israel judges *all* nations, not Judah alone. Read singly, the oracles are dusty geopolitics; read together, they are the confession that no empire is outside God's court. For a frightened people that is pure comfort — the powers that terrify you are on the Lord's docket. For a proud people it is a warning — there is no jurisdiction beyond his reach. Teach the class to resist shrinking God to a local protector of their own affairs. The God of these burdens governs the whole earth, which steadies the fearful and humbles the mighty at once.

“Is Isaiah 14 really about Satan, or about a human king?”

The text's plain target is a human king — the proud emperor of Babylon brought down to the dust — and you should teach that first, so the class stays grounded in what the chapter actually says. But the church has long heard, behind the human boast, the deeper and older fall, because the king's words — *I will be like the most High* — are the serpent's very promise, *ye shall be as gods*. The verse exposes the root pride that animates both the tyrant and the tempter. Do not let the class float off into pure angel-speculation; the gospel point is not a map of the fall of devils but the two ladders — the grasping that falls and the humbling that is exalted.

“What does ‘the way up is down’ actually mean for me?”

It means the path to true exaltation runs opposite to your instincts. Babylon climbed and fell; the Lord Jesus stooped and was lifted to the highest name. And Scripture makes it the believer's pattern too: he that humbles himself shall be exalted. Practically, it means you stop trying to secure your worth by rising over others — grasping for status, recognition, control — and you receive your standing as a gift in Christ, freeing you to take the lower place, serve, and let go. It is the theology of the cross applied to a life: glory comes through the cross, not around it. The open, empty hand is the one God fills and raises.

“Isn't it shocking that God blesses Egypt and Assyria — the worst enemies?”

It is meant to shock you, and the shock is the gospel. Egypt was the house of bondage; Assyria was the cruelest empire of the age — and the Lord names them *my people* and *the work of my hands*, gathered with Israel as one. This is the ingathering of the nations, foretold: the day the old enemies would be reconciled and brought in, the dividing wall broken down. Paul says Christ is our peace, who made both one. And here is the personal edge — if your class is Gentile, they *are* Egypt and Assyria, the old outsiders now called God's own. The most startling sentence in the section turns out to be the reader's own testimony.

“What is the ‘key of David,’ and why does it comfort me?”

In chapter 22 the key of the house of David — the authority to open and shut the king’s house — is laid on the steward Eliakim: what he opens none shuts, what he shuts none opens. But even Eliakim, called a sure nail, is finally cut down; no human steward can hold that key forever. So the risen Lord Jesus takes the words for himself in Revelation: *he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth*. The comfort is this: the key to the Father’s house is in the hand that was nailed to the cross for you. When you fear the door of God’s house might be shut against you — by your sin, your failure, your unworthiness — remember who holds the key. The door he opens, no one can shut.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — The Lord of all nations

A strong opener. Let the class hold both edges — comfort to the frightened, warning to the proud — and name where we are tempted to treat God as a local deity, concerned only with our own affairs. Keep it from drifting into partisan geopolitics; the point is God’s universal reign.

Question 2 — The five I wills and the root of sin

The pride question. Trace the king’s boast back to the garden — *ye shall be as gods* — and ask why the self lifted into God’s place is the root from which every sin grows. Press the depth: a pride beneath the deeds, untouched by mere behavior reform.

Question 3 — The two ladders and the theology of the cross

The center. Set Babylon’s climb against Christ’s descent, and ask why *the way up is down* is the heart of Luther’s theology of the cross. Draw out the personal pattern — he that humbles himself shall be exalted. This is the question to land if you land only one.

Question 4 — Egypt my people, Assyria the work of my hands

The ingathering question. Let the class feel the shock of the old enemies blessed and brought in, connect it to Ephesians 2 and the broken wall, and then make it personal: most of the class are Egypt and Assyria, the gathered Gentiles. End on their own inclusion.

Question 5 — The burden against Jerusalem

The self-examination question. Ask what it guards against to know the people of God are judged by the same word as the nations, and where the church today trusts her walls and water supply — her institutions and resources — instead of the Lord. Keep it humble and inward, not accusatory.

Question 6 — The key of David in the pierced hand

The closer. Let the class rest in the comfort that the risen Lord Jesus holds the key, so the door he opens no one can shut. Draw out what it means when we fear the door of God's house might be shut against us. End on the open door, not the closed one.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapters thirteen through twenty-three — and his *Heidelberg Disputation* for the theology of the cross that the two ladders illustrate.
- ♦ The Formula of Concord, on the person and humiliation and exaltation of Christ — read alongside Philippians 2 and the two ladders.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1–39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on the oracles against the nations — careful on the burden form, chapter fourteen, and the Egypt promise.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapters thirteen through twenty-three — a clear lay survey that keeps the gospel peaks in view.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ Philippians 2:5–11, read slowly this week — the second ladder, the Lord Jesus who humbled himself and was exalted, and a fit meditation for the teacher on the way up that is down.

A Final Word

Teach this sweep without drowning in it. The temptation is to attempt all eleven chapters and teach none; resist it. Plant the one great claim — God judges every nation — and then climb the four peaks where the gospel breaks through. A class that leaves remembering the two ladders and the key of David has been fed far better than one that was hurried through every burden in order.

Keep the two ladders at the center. The pride that says *I will be like the most High* is not a Babylonian relic; it is the oldest movement of every human heart, including yours and the class's. Teach it honestly, fear it rightly — and then point to the other ladder, where the God who had every right to grasp let go, stooped to a cross, and was lifted to the highest name. The way up is down. Let the class hear that as the door out of their own climbing.

And leave them at the open door. The old enemies are gathered in and blessed; the Gentiles are called God's people; and the key to the Father's house is in a pierced hand. May the Lord Jesus, who humbled himself and was exalted, who holds the key of David, open to your class the door no one can shut, and gather them — Egypt and Assyria and all — into his inheritance.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION ELEVEN

Death Swallowed Up

Isaiah 24–27 · with 1 Corinthians 15:51–57 and Revelation 21:1–4

A Note to the Teacher

The oracles against the nations widen, in these four chapters, into an oracle against the whole earth. This is sometimes called the Isaiah Apocalypse, and you should teach it as a sweep before you linger on its peaks. Chapter twenty-four levels everything — *as with the people, so with the priest* — and traces the ruin to a curse that runs all the way back to Eden, *the earth is defiled... because they have transgressed the laws*. The ground itself is under the old curse, and the final judgment spares no station and no acre. But do not stop in the rubble, because right in the middle of the wreckage Isaiah sets a table. *In this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast*. The judgment is real and total; and on the far side of it, a banquet.

At that feast comes the line that has steadied the church at ten thousand gravesides: *he will swallow up death in victory*. Teach it as the heart of the hour. Death is the great swallower, the thing that consumes every living creature — and Isaiah says the swallower will itself be swallowed. Paul seizes the words for the resurrection: *Death is swallowed up in victory*. The Lord Jesus did not defeat death from a safe distance; he went down *into* it, tasted it for every man, and burst it from the inside. The eater has been eaten. And so Isaiah can promise what no philosophy dares — not the survival of a soul but the raising of the body: *thy dead men shall live... awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust*.

Use this guide as a tool. First Corinthians 15:51–57 is your anchor for the swallowed death and the trumpet; Revelation 21:1–4 shows John picking up Isaiah's very words — *God shall wipe away all*

tears — at the end of the Book. Teach the class to come to the Lord's Supper as the foretaste of that feast on the mountain, and to face the grave as people whose life is *hid with Christ in God*.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

The whole earth comes under the curse and the judgment — and on the far side of it the Lord spreads a feast on his mountain and swallows up death itself, so that the class learns to taste that feast now in the Supper, to rest in perfect peace on the Rock of Ages, and to face the grave certain of the resurrection of the body.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the swallowing of death.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 24–27 first for the movement of it — judgment widening to a feast widening to resurrection — and then linger on chapters 25 and 26, where the great promises sit.
- ◆ Mark the leveling of chapter 24 — *as with the people, so with the priest* — and the curse on the ground in 24:5–6. Have Genesis 3:17 in view: the earth has been under this curse since Eden.
- ◆ Underline the feast in 25:6, *unto all people*, and be ready to connect it to the Lord's Supper as its foretaste. Note who is invited: all peoples, the nations.
- ◆ Set Isaiah 25:8 beside 1 Corinthians 15:54 — *he will swallow up death in victory* and *Death is swallowed up in victory*. Have Hebrews 2:9 and 2:14 ready, where the Lord Jesus destroys death by entering it.
- ◆ Mark 26:3–4 — *perfect peace*, literally *peace, peace*, and the *Rock of Ages*. Be ready to say where the peace comes from: the object, not the circumstances.
- ◆ Have 26:19–21 and Revelation 21:1–4 and Colossians 3:3 ready — the bodily resurrection, the sheltering, and the life hid with Christ. Pray over the gravesides in your own class; this chapter is for them.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · The judgment is total — and it reaches the cursed ground itself.

Chapter twenty-four does something the earlier oracles did not: it widens from particular nations to the whole earth, and it levels every human rank — *as with the people, so with the priest; as with the servant, so with his master*. No station is exempt, no office a hiding place. And Isaiah traces the wreckage past the deeds of nations to a deeper fault: *the earth is defiled under the inhabitants thereof... therefore hath the curse devoured the earth*. That curse is old; it goes back to the ground God cursed for Adam's sake in Eden. Teach the class that the problem Isaiah is naming is not merely bad empires but a creation groaning under a curse since the garden, and that the final judgment is not local housekeeping but the settling of accounts for the whole fallen order. This matters because it forbids us a hiding place in our station, our religion, or our respectability — the judgment reaches the priest as surely as the people, and the very dirt under our feet. Only what God shelters will stand.

Two · The swallower is swallowed — the Lord Jesus destroyed death by entering it.

Here is the gospel center of the four chapters. Death is the great devourer; it swallows kings and beggars alike, and no one escapes its mouth. And Isaiah dares to say the unthinkable: *he will swallow up death in victory*. The eater will be eaten. Teach the class *how* this happened, because the method is the marvel. The Lord Jesus did not abolish death by decree from heaven; he went down into it. Hebrews says he *tasted death for every man*, and that *through death* he destroyed the one who had the power of death. Death opened its mouth to swallow him as it swallows all — and choked, because it had swallowed its Maker, the Lord of life, and could not hold him. He burst the grave from the inside. So the swallower is swallowed up; the mouth that consumes all living is itself consumed in victory. Teach the class that this is why a Christian can stand at a grave and sing: the thing in the box has already been defeated from within.

Three · The hope is the resurrection of the body — not the survival of a soul.

Be precise here, because the world's vague hope and the Christian hope are not the same. Isaiah does not promise that some immortal spark drifts free of the body at death; he promises that *thy dead men shall live*, that the very dust will be raised: *awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust... the earth shall cast out the dead*. The image is dew — the dew that falls in the dark and brings the dead-looking ground to green life by morning. Teach the class why the resurrection of the *body* matters and not merely the soul's survival. God made us body and soul and called it good; sin killed the whole person; and salvation redeems the whole person, raising the body that was buried. A gospel that saves only souls leaves death half-victorious and the grave with the last word over our flesh. The Christian hope is bolder: the same body that dies will rise, glorified, as the Lord Jesus rose

bodily from his own tomb. Teach the class to confess it as the creed does — *the resurrection of the body* — and to face the grave knowing the dust will sing.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; teach the sweep, then linger on the feast and the swallowed death.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:14	The earth reels — judgment leveling all, the old curse (24)
0:14–0:24	A feast on the mountain, unto all people (25:6; the Supper)
0:24–0:36	He will swallow up death — the swallower swallowed (25:7–8; 1 Cor 15)
0:36–0:44	Perfect peace; the Rock of Ages (26:3–4)
0:44–0:52	Thy dead shall live; hide thyself in Christ; the dragon slain (26:19–27:1)
0:52–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 28–29 and Session Twelve

Pacing Tip

The gravity of these chapters is the feast and the swallowed death; protect those two segments above all. If the apocalyptic sweep of chapter 24 starts pulling the class toward end-times timelines and speculation, redirect firmly: the point is not a calendar but a curse answered and a death defeated. A class that leaves having tasted the feast and heard that death is swallowed has heard the chapter's heart.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the section's movements.

The Earth Reels

Begin in the wreckage. *Behold, the Lord maketh the earth empty... and turneth it upside down.* Chapter twenty-four is cosmic in scope and merciless in its leveling — priest and people, master and servant, buyer and seller, all flattened under one judgment. Teach the class that no station shelters anyone here; the religious office is no exemption, the social rank no refuge. And note where Isaiah locates the fault: *the earth is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have*

transgressed the laws... broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore hath the curse devoured the earth. This is the curse of Eden come to full term — the ground God cursed for Adam's sin, now devouring its inhabitants. The earth *reels to and fro like a drunkard*. Do not soften it; the class should feel how total the ruin is, because only then will the feast in the next chapter land as the miracle it is. But end the movement on the one light in chapter 24: *the Lord of hosts shall reign in mount Zion*. The judgment is not the last word; the King is.

A Feast on the Mountain

Now set the table in the middle of the ruin. *And in this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees.* Teach the shock of the location — a banquet on the very mountain, in the very judgment — and the breadth of the guest list: *unto all people*, the nations, not Israel alone. This is the messianic feast, the wedding supper of the Lamb foreseen. And teach the class that they already taste it: the Lord's Supper is the foretaste of this feast on the mountain, the down payment of the banquet of victory. It changes how one comes to the rail — not as to a funeral but as to the appetizer of a wedding. Who is welcome at the table on the mountain? *All people* who will come; the door is as wide as the nations. Let the class hear the invitation, and hear that the bread and cup they receive are a morsel of that coming feast.

A Craft Note on the Supper

Many in the class come to communion with their eyes down, thinking only of their sin. Right — but not only. Teach them that the Supper is also a foretaste of the feast on the mountain where death is swallowed. The same meal that forgives the past previews the future. Have them taste, next time, not only Good Friday but the wedding banquet coming.

He Will Swallow Up Death

Come to the summit. *He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people... He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces.* Teach the image with care, because it is exact. Death is the swallower — the open mouth that takes every living thing, the grave that is never full. And Isaiah says the Lord will *swallow up the swallower*: the eater itself eaten, the devourer devoured. Bring in Paul, who waited centuries to say *then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory*. And teach *how* the Lord Jesus did it — not by avoiding death but by going into it. Hebrews says he tasted death for every man, and *through death* destroyed the one who held death's power. Death swallowed him as it swallows all, and found it had swallowed the Author of life, and could not keep him down. He

broke the grave open from the inside. Teach the class the result: every tear will be wiped from every face, because the hand that wipes them is the hand that conquered the grave from within.

Perfect Peace

After the feast and the swallowed death, Isaiah turns to the inner life of those who trust. *Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee.* Teach the class that *perfect peace* is in the Hebrew a doubling — *shalom, shalom*, peace upon peace, complete and settled peace — and that its source is named precisely: a mind *stayed on thee*. The peace does not come from calm circumstances; it comes from the object the mind is fixed upon. A mind stayed on its own resources rises and falls with them; a mind stayed on the Lord rests on what does not move. And Isaiah names what does not move: *trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength* — literally, the Rock of ages. Teach the class the difference between peace as the absence of trouble, which any quiet afternoon can give and any phone call can take, and peace as a mind anchored to the Rock, which holds in the storm precisely because it is not leaning on the weather. The peace is as steady as the thing it rests on.

Thy Dead Men Shall Live

Now the resurrection, stated as plainly as the Old Testament ever states it. *Thy dead men shall live... awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead.* Teach the boldness of it: not the survival of a soul but the raising of the buried, the dust commanded to wake and sing. The image of dew is the comfort — dew falls silently in the dark and by morning the dead-looking ground is green; so the buried bodies of the saints lie in the dark of the grave until the morning that raises them. Then read the sheltering verses that follow: *Come, my people, enter thou into thy chambers... hide thyself... until the indignation be overpast.* Teach the Passover behind it — Israel sheltered in their houses behind the blood while the destroyer passed over — and the New Testament fulfillment: *your life is hid with Christ in God.* The believer is sheltered through the judgment not behind a door but inside a Person. Teach the class that to be in Christ is to be in the chamber, behind the blood, kept safe while the indignation passes.

The Dragon Slain and the Vineyard Restored

End the sweep where Isaiah ends it. *In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent... and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea.* Teach the class who the dragon is — the ancient serpent of Eden, the old enemy behind every enemy — finally and personally slain by the Lord's own sword. The curse that began with a serpent in a garden ends with that serpent destroyed. And then the vineyard, restored. Send the class back to

chapter five, where the vineyard yielded wild grapes and was given over to thorns; here the song is sung again, but changed: *A vineyard of red wine. I the Lord do keep it; I will water it every moment... Fury is not in me.* The vineyard that failed is now kept, watered, guarded, fruitful — *Israel shall blossom and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit.* Teach the class that the whole book is bending toward this: the serpent slain, the curse undone, the vineyard fruitful, death swallowed, the tears wiped away. John will pick up the very words at the end of the Bible — *no more death, neither sorrow* — and the class should hear Isaiah and Revelation singing the same final note.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Why does the judgment in chapter 24 hit the priest the same as everyone else?”

To take away every hiding place. Chapter 24 levels every rank — priest and people, master and servant — precisely so that no one can think his office, religion, or status will shelter him in the final judgment. And Isaiah traces the ruin deeper than any rank, to the curse on the ground that goes back to Eden: the whole creation lies under the consequence of sin. Teach the class that this forbids a false refuge — the idea that being religious, respectable, or in a holy office exempts anyone. The judgment reaches the priest, the people, and the very dirt. Only what God himself shelters will stand — which is exactly why the feast and the hiding-place in Christ matter so much in the chapters that follow.

“How exactly did the Lord Jesus ‘swallow’ death?”

By going down into it, not around it. Death is the great swallower; it consumes every living thing. The Lord Jesus let it swallow *him* — he tasted death for every man — and *through death*, Hebrews says, destroyed the one who had death's power. Death opened its mouth to take him as it takes all, and discovered it had swallowed the Author of life himself, whom it could not hold. He burst the grave from the inside. So the swallower is swallowed: the mouth that devours all living is itself devoured in victory. That is why Paul could shout *O death, where is thy sting?* The thing that eats us has been eaten, and a Christian can stand at a grave and sing because of it.

“Why insist on the resurrection of the *body*? Isn't it enough that the soul lives on?”

No — and the difference is the whole boldness of the Christian hope. The world's vague hope is that some part of us survives; Isaiah's hope, and the creed's, is that *the earth shall cast out the dead*, that the buried body itself will rise. God made us body and soul and called it good; sin killed the

whole person; salvation redeems the whole person. A gospel that saves only souls leaves the grave with the last word over our flesh and death only half-beaten. But the Lord Jesus rose *bodily* from his tomb, the firstfruits, and we will rise as he did. Teach the class to confess it plainly — the resurrection of the body — and to take the image of dew as comfort: the buried dust will wake and sing in the morning.

“How can anyone have ‘perfect peace’ in a life full of trouble?”

Because the peace does not come from the trouble being gone; it comes from the One the mind is stayed on. *Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee.* Peace as the absence of trouble is fragile — any phone call can shatter it. But peace as a mind anchored to the Rock of ages holds in the storm, because it is not leaning on the weather. Teach the class the practical difference: a mind stayed on its own resources rises and falls with them; a mind stayed on the Lord rests on what cannot move. The believer is not promised a calm sea but a sure anchor, and the anchor gives a peace the sea cannot take — *peace, peace*, as steady as the Rock it holds.

“What does it mean that my life is ‘hid with Christ in God’?”

It means you are sheltered through the judgment inside a Person. Isaiah tells the people to enter their chambers and hide until the indignation passes — an echo of Passover, when Israel sheltered in their houses behind the blood while the destroyer passed over. The New Testament names the chamber: *your life is hid with Christ in God.* You are not asked to survive the judgment on your own strength or merit; you are hidden in Christ, behind his blood, where the wrath cannot reach you because it has already fallen on him. Teach the class the deep security of it — the safest place in the universe on the day of judgment is inside the Lord Jesus, and faith puts you there.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — Judgment that spares no station, and the cursed ground

A strong opener. Let the class say why it matters that the final judgment reaches the priest as surely as the people, and the very ground under the old Eden curse. Press the loss of every false refuge — office, religion, respectability — and let it set up the need for the shelter that follows.

Question 2 — The feast on the mountain and the Supper

The table question. Ask how it changes the way we come to the Lord's Supper to know it is a foretaste of the feast on the mountain, and who is welcome — *all people*. Let the class taste the future in the present meal.

Question 3 — The swallower swallowed

The heart of the hour. Draw out how the Lord Jesus swallowed death by going down into it, and why descent was the only way to destroy it. Let the class sit with the marvel that the eater has been eaten, and connect it to Paul's shout in 1 Corinthians 15.

Question 4 — Perfect peace on the Rock of Ages

The peace question. Press the difference between peace as the absence of trouble and peace as a mind stayed on the Rock. Ask where each person's mind tends to stay — on resources and circumstances, or on the Lord — and what difference the object makes.

Question 5 — The resurrection of the body, and the dew

The hope question. Let the class say why the Christian hope insists on the body and not merely the soul, and how the image of dew comforts in the face of the grave. A good place to let people speak honestly about their own losses, and to hear the dust will sing.

Question 6 — Hidden in Christ through the judgment

The closer. Connect the chamber and the shut door to Passover and to Colossians 3:3 — the life hid with Christ in God. Let the class rest in being sheltered inside a Person, behind the blood, while the indignation passes. End on the safety of being in Christ.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ◆ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapters twenty-four through twenty-seven — his reading of the feast, the swallowed death, and the resurrection promise.
- ◆ The Nicene Creed, *I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come* — read as the church's confession of Isaiah 26:19.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1–39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on the Isaiah Apocalypse — careful on the feast, 25:8, and the resurrection text.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapters twenty-four through twenty-seven — a clear lay treatment of the judgment, the feast, and the swallowing of death.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ 1 Corinthians 15:51–57, read slowly this week — Paul's trumpet and his shout over the swallowed death, and a fit meditation for the teacher facing any grave.

A Final Word

Teach these chapters as one who will need them. There is no class you will lead that is not, somewhere in its pews, grieving — a fresh grave, a coming one, a fear of the dark. Isaiah 24–27 is written for exactly those pews. Sit under the swallowed death yourself, at the graveside in your own memory, before you teach it, and you will not offer the class a doctrine. You will offer them the only thing that holds at a grave: the swallower swallowed, the dust that will sing.

Keep the feast and the resurrection together. The judgment is total — do not soften it — but it is not the destination. On the far side of the leveled earth the Lord spreads a table for all peoples and swallows up death forever. Teach the class to come to the Supper tasting that feast, and to face the grave certain that the same body laid in it will be raised, as the Lord Jesus was raised.

And leave them hidden in Christ. The serpent is slain, the vineyard is kept, the tears are wiped away, and the believer is sheltered through the judgment inside the Lord himself. May the Lord Jesus, who swallowed up death in victory, keep your class in perfect peace on the Rock of ages, hide their lives with himself in God, and raise them at the last to the feast on the mountain where God shall wipe away all tears, and there shall be no more death.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWELVE

The Precious Cornerstone

Isaiah 28–29 · with 1 Peter 2:4–8 and Matthew 7:24–27

A Note to the Teacher

These two chapters are about what people build on when they are afraid. The leaders of Isaiah's day were drunk — on wine, yes, but more dangerously on their own sophistication — and they mocked the prophet's plain word as baby-talk, *precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, and there a little*. Too simple, they sneered, for clever men like us. And underneath the mockery they had built a refuge: *we have made a covenant with death... we have made lies our refuge*. They imagined they had cut a deal with the grave itself, a clever arrangement by which judgment would pass them by. Teach the hour on the question the chapters force: what are you building on? Because Isaiah answers it with one of the great gospel images of the book — *Behold, I lay in Zion... a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation*.

That stone, the apostles tell us plainly, is the Lord Jesus. Peter takes the verse and lays it on him: the living stone, chosen and precious, the chief cornerstone, on whom *he that believeth... shall not be confounded*. Teach the class why Isaiah calls it a *tried* stone — tested, proven, load-bearing — and why the same stone is two opposite things to two kinds of people: a sure foundation to faith, a stone of stumbling to unbelief. The Lord Jesus made the same point with two houses that looked identical until the storm hit — one on rock, one on sand. There is no neutral ground with this stone. You are building on him, or you are tripping over him.

Use this guide as a tool. First Peter 2:4–8 is your anchor for the cornerstone; Matthew 7:24–27 gives you the two houses. And do not miss the two sober warnings these chapters add — that God's judgment is his *strange work*, done only in the service of his mercy, like a wise farmer who

threshes for a harvest; and that the deadliest religion is the kind with the lips near and the heart far, the very sin the Lord Jesus charged against the most devout men of his day.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

Drunken leaders mock God's plain word and hide in a covenant with death — so the Lord lays in Zion a tried and precious cornerstone, the Lord Jesus, who is sure foundation to faith and stone of stumbling to unbelief, that the class would build their whole weight on him and not on the refuges of lies.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the precious cornerstone.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 28 and 29, watching the woe fall on leaders drunk on wine and on their own wisdom, and finding the cornerstone the Lord lays in the middle of it (28:16).
- ◆ Mark the mockery of 28:9–10 — *precept upon precept, line upon line* — and be ready to explain that the leaders are sneering at Isaiah's plain teaching as fit only for toddlers. Have 1 Corinthians 1 in mind: God offends the wise on purpose.
- ◆ Underline the *covenant with death* and *refuge of lies* in 28:15, and the hail that sweeps the false refuge away in 28:17. Be ready to ask what refuges of lies people hide in today — including religious ones.
- ◆ Set Isaiah 28:16 beside 1 Peter 2:4–8 and Matthew 7:24–27. Have the chain clear: the tried cornerstone is the Lord Jesus; he that believes shall not be ashamed; the two houses look alike until the storm.
- ◆ Note 8:14 and 1 Peter 2:8 — the same stone is sanctuary to faith and stumbling-stone to unbelief. Be ready to teach that there is no neutral ground with this stone.
- ◆ Read 28:21–29 on the *strange work* and the wise farmer, and 29:13 on lips near and hearts far. Pray that you would teach as one building on the Rock, not as one merely talking about it.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · Sophistication can be a drunkenness that deafens us to God's plain word.

The leaders mock Isaiah's teaching as too simple — *precept upon precept, line upon line* — baby-talk, milk for the weaned, beneath the dignity of clever men. And that contempt for the plain word is itself a kind of intoxication, as blinding as the wine that has made the priest and prophet stagger. Teach the class that sophistication, success, and even theological knowledge can become a drunkenness that keeps us from hearing what God actually says, because all three can persuade us we are too advanced for the simple gospel — too educated for *trust and obey*, too nuanced for *Christ died for sinners*. God knows this temptation, and so he often speaks in ways that offend the wise: a cross, a manger, a plain word that a child can grasp and a sage can despise. Teach the class to fear their own cleverness more than their ignorance, and to receive the plain word as a little child — because the kingdom belongs to such, and the wise in their own eyes stagger past it.

Two · Every false refuge is a covenant with death — and only the tried stone holds.

The rulers boast of a *covenant with death*, a *refuge of lies* — some scheme, some alliance, some self-deception by which they feel safe from judgment. Teach the class that this is the universal human project: to build a hiding place from God that we can trust instead of trusting him. And the refuges are not always crude. The most dangerous ones are religious — our churchgoing, our good behavior, our doctrinal correctness, leaned on as a shelter from judgment rather than received as fruit of grace. Isaiah says the hail will sweep every such refuge away; the storm of God's judgment finds out what we were really standing on. Against all of it the Lord lays *a tried stone*, *a precious corner stone*, *a sure foundation*, and the promise attached is exact: *he that believeth shall not make haste* — shall not panic, shall not be put to shame. Teach the class that the only refuge that survives the hail is the one God himself laid, and that to trust anything else, however religious, is to sign a covenant with death.

Three · The stone is never neutral — foundation or stumbling-block, never nothing.

Here is the truth the class must not soften. The same stone God lays in Zion is two opposite things to two kinds of hearts. To faith it is *a sure foundation*, the rock on which a life is safely built. To unbelief it is *a stone of stumbling*, and... *a rock of offence* — the very thing people trip over and fall. Peter quotes both, of the same Christ. The Lord Jesus taught it with two houses that looked identical in fair weather and were revealed only by the storm: one founded on rock, one on sand. Teach the class that there is no third option, no way to keep the stone at a polite distance. You are building your whole weight on him, or you are stumbling over him; he is your foundation or your offense. People imagine a neutral middle — admiring the Lord Jesus without resting on him — but the stone does not permit it. To fail to build on him is already to stumble. Press the class to do the

one thing that is not stumbling: put their whole weight on the tried stone, and let the storm prove the house.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the Pacing Tip names what to protect.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:14	Drunk on the wrong wine — mocking the plain word (28:1–13)
0:14–0:23	A covenant with death; the refuge of lies (28:14–18)
0:23–0:37	The precious cornerstone — the Lord Jesus (28:16; 1 Pet 2:4–8; Matt 7)
0:37–0:45	His strange work; the wise farmer (28:21–29)
0:45–0:52	Lips near, hearts far (29:13; Matt 15:8)
0:52–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 30–33 and Session Thirteen

Pacing Tip

The cornerstone is the center of gravity; give it the largest block and do not let the earlier woes crowd it out. If the class wants to puzzle over the baby-talk Hebrew of 28:10, give it a sentence and move on — the point is contempt for the plain word, not a linguistic curiosity. Protect the cornerstone and the two houses, and leave time for the heart-far warning, which lands closest to home.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the chapters' movements.

Drunk on the Wrong Wine

Open with the staggering leaders. *Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim* — and not the laity only, for *the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink*. The men charged with leading the people to God cannot walk a straight line. But the deeper drunkenness is in what they say about Isaiah: *whom shall he teach knowledge?... them that are weaned from the milk*. They mock his plain, repetitive teaching — *precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, and there a little* — as

fit only for toddlers, beneath sophisticated men. Teach the class that contempt for the plain word is its own intoxication. The leaders are too clever for the simple gospel, and their cleverness has made them stagger as surely as the wine. Draw the line to our own day and our own hearts: the temptation to find the plain word — *Christ died for sinners, trust and obey* — too simple for educated people, and to stagger past it into something more impressive and less saving.

A Covenant with Death

Now the refuge they have built. *We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement... we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves.* Teach the chilling confidence of it — the leaders imagine they have cut a deal with the grave itself, some clever arrangement by which the coming judgment will pass them by. It may have been a political alliance, a scheme, a self-deception; the form does not matter. What matters is that they trust a refuge of lies instead of the Lord. Press the class to find the modern versions, and do not let them stay safely crude. The deadliest refuges of lies are respectable: a churchgoing that soothes the conscience without touching the heart, a record of decent behavior leaned on as a shelter from God, a correctness of doctrine trusted in place of Christ himself. And Isaiah names what comes for every such refuge: *the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place.* The storm finds out what we were really standing on. Teach the class to let the hail come now, in honest self-examination, rather than on the last day.

The Precious Cornerstone

Here is the gospel heart of the session, so slow down and build. Against every refuge of lies the Lord lays his own foundation: *Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste.* Teach each word. *Tried* — tested, proven, load-bearing; this stone has been put under weight and did not crack. *Precious* — chosen, costly, of supreme worth. *Corner stone* — the stone that sets the line for the whole building, on which everything else depends. And the promise: *he that believeth shall not make haste, shall not panic, shall not run frantically for another refuge, shall not be put to shame.* Then bring in Peter, who lays the verse squarely on the Lord Jesus: the living stone, *chosen of God, and precious*, the chief cornerstone, on whom *he that believeth... shall not be confounded.* Teach the class why *tried* matters most. This cornerstone was tested in the wilderness, tested in Gethsemane, tested unto death and through it — and he held. He has been under the full weight of sin and judgment and did not break. So the one who builds on him will not be ashamed when the storm comes, because the stone has already passed the test the storm applies.

A Craft Note on “Tried”

Make the testing concrete. You would not hang your weight on a rope no one had ever pulled, or build on a beam no one had loaded. The comfort of a *tried* stone is that the test is already behind it. Tell the class: the cornerstone has been under the heaviest weight there is — the sin of the world, the wrath of God, death itself — and it held. That is why faith *shall not make haste*.

His Strange Work

Teach the sober comfort of verse 21. The Lord rises to do his work — *his strange work... his strange act*. Isaiah calls God's judgment *strange* because it is not what God most delights to do; Luther drew the distinction the church has used ever since, between God's *proper work*, which is mercy, and his *strange work*, which is judgment — strange because it is alien to his heart, taken up only in the service of mercy. God wounds in order to heal, plows in order to plant. Then comes the parable of the wise farmer, and you should not skip it. The farmer does not plow forever — he plows to plant; he does not thresh every grain the same brutal way — the delicate fitches and cummin are beaten gently with a staff, the bread corn ground but *not forever, because he will not ever be threshing it*. *His God doth instruct him to discretion*. Teach the class the comfort hidden here: when you feel you are being threshed, remember the farmer is wise. God's hard providences are measured, never excessive, never an end in themselves — always aimed at a harvest, always proportioned by a wisdom that knows exactly how much pressure each grain can bear. The threshing has a barn at the end of it.

Lips Near, Hearts Far

Close with the warning that lands nearest the devout. *Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me*. Teach the class that this is a sin peculiar to the religious — not the sin of the irreligious who never come near, but the sin of those whose mouths are full of God while their hearts have wandered off. The Lord Jesus aimed this very verse at the most observant men of his day, the Pharisees, whose worship was scrupulous and whose hearts were elsewhere. Press the class with the danger, because they are the people in danger: it is possible to say the creed, sing the hymns, hold every doctrine correctly, and have a heart that is far from God. Right belief is not the same as a near heart, though it ought to lead there. And note the gospel hope Isaiah folds in just after — *in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see* — for the same God who indicts the far heart is the one who opens deaf ears and brings the heart home. Teach the class to pray Isaiah's diagnosis into a petition: Lord, let my heart be as near as my lips.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“How can knowledge or sophistication be bad? Aren’t we supposed to study?”

Study is good; the drunkenness Isaiah names is not knowledge but contempt for the plain word. The leaders mocked Isaiah’s simple teaching as baby-talk, too elementary for clever men — and that contempt blinded them as surely as wine. The danger is not learning but the pride that learning can breed: the sense that we have advanced beyond the simple gospel, that *Christ died for sinners* is fine for beginners but we need something more sophisticated. God guards against this by speaking in ways that offend the wise — a cross, a plain word a child can grasp. Teach the class to study hard and to receive the plain word like a child, fearing their own cleverness more than their ignorance. The wise in their own eyes stagger right past the kingdom.

“What is a ‘refuge of lies’? I don’t think I’ve made a covenant with death.”

A refuge of lies is anything you trust to keep you safe from judgment instead of trusting God — and most of them do not feel sinister. The leaders’ covenant with death was probably a political scheme dressed up as security. Ours are often religious: churchgoing leaned on to quiet the conscience, a record of decent behavior trusted as a shelter, even correct doctrine rested in instead of Christ himself. The test is simple — when you imagine standing before God, what do you reach for? If it is anything but the mercy of the Lord Jesus, that is your refuge of lies. Isaiah says the hail sweeps every such shelter away. Better to let it be swept now, in honest self-examination, and to move onto the one foundation that holds.

“Why does it matter that the cornerstone is ‘tried’?”

Because a foundation is only as trustworthy as its testing. You would not hang your weight on an untested rope or build on a beam no one had ever loaded. Isaiah calls the stone *tried* — tested and proven — and the testing of this stone is the whole life and death of the Lord Jesus: tried in the wilderness, tried in Gethsemane, tried unto death and through it, under the full weight of the world’s sin and God’s judgment. And he held. He did not crack. So when Isaiah promises *he that believeth shall not make haste* — shall not panic or be put to shame — the promise rests on a stone that has already passed the heaviest test there is. The storm that will come on your house has already broken on him, and he stood.

“Why can’t I just admire the Lord Jesus without making him my whole foundation?”

Because the stone does not allow a neutral middle. Isaiah and Peter both say the same stone is two things: a sure foundation to faith, and a stone of stumbling to unbelief. There is no third category — no way to keep him at a respectful distance, admiring without resting. The Lord Jesus taught it with two houses that looked identical in fair weather; only the storm revealed which was on rock and which on sand. To fail to build on him is not to stay safely neutral; it is already to be the house on sand, already to be stumbling over the stone. Teach yourself and the class the one move that is not stumbling: put your whole weight on him, and let the storm prove the house.

“If God’s judgment is his ‘strange work,’ how should I read the hard things in my life?”

As the work of a wise farmer, not a cruel one. Isaiah calls judgment God’s *strange work* because it is alien to his heart; his *proper work* is mercy, and he takes up the strange work only in mercy’s service — wounding to heal, plowing to plant. The parable of the farmer is the comfort: he does not plow forever, and he does not thresh every grain the same brutal way; the tender seeds are beaten gently, the grain is not crushed past use, *his God doth instruct him to discretion*. So when you feel threshed, the comfort is not that the pressure is imaginary but that it is measured — never excessive, never an end in itself, always proportioned by a wisdom that knows exactly what you can bear and aimed at a harvest. The threshing has a barn at the end of it.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — Sophistication as drunkenness

A strong opener. Let the class wrestle with how success, knowledge, or sophistication can deafen us to God’s plain word, and why God so often speaks in ways that offend the wise. Keep it self-examining — our own cleverness, not other people’s.

Question 2 — Refuges of lies

The hiding-place question. Press the class past crude examples to the religious ones — churchgoing, good behavior, correct doctrine leaned on as a shelter from judgment. Ask what it takes for the hail to sweep a false refuge away, and let honest self-examination do the sweeping.

Question 3 — The tried and precious cornerstone

The gospel center. Draw out why it matters that the stone is *tried* — tested and proven under the heaviest weight — and what it means that the believer *shall not make haste*, shall not be put to shame. Land it on resting one's whole weight on the Lord Jesus.

Question 4 — No neutral ground with the stone

The two-houses question. Use Matthew 7 and 1 Peter 2 to show that the same stone is foundation to faith and stumbling-block to unbelief, with no middle option. Press why admiring the Lord Jesus without resting on him is already stumbling.

Question 5 — His strange work and the wise farmer

The providence question. Draw out Luther's distinction — judgment as God's strange work in the service of his proper work of mercy — and let the wise farmer comfort those who feel threshed. The pressure is measured, and there is a harvest at the end.

Question 6 — Lips near, hearts far

The closer, and the most searching. Ask why drawing near with the mouth while the heart is far is a special danger for devout, churchgoing people, and what the difference is between right doctrine and a near heart. End on Isaiah's gospel hope — the God who opens deaf ears brings the far heart home.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapters twenty-eight and twenty-nine — his treatment of the cornerstone and his distinction between God's proper and strange work.
- ♦ The Augsburg Confession, Article IV, on justification — read as the answer to the *refuge of lies*: not our works but Christ alone as the sure foundation.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1-39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on chapters twenty-eight and twenty-nine — careful on the cornerstone and the parable of the farmer.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapters twenty-eight and twenty-nine — a clear lay treatment of the woes, the stone, and the far heart.

Devotional Reading

- ◆ 1 Peter 2:4–8, read slowly this week — the living stone, precious to those who believe, and a fit meditation for the teacher on building one's whole weight on the Lord Jesus.

A Final Word

Teach this hour from the rock, not from the sand. It is possible to teach a chapter about the cornerstone with lips near and heart far — to handle the doctrine of the foundation while standing, in truth, on some refuge of lies of your own. Examine yourself before you examine the class. What do you reach for when you imagine standing before God? Let the hail sweep your own false shelters away, and build your whole weight on the tried stone, and you will teach this chapter as a man on solid ground.

Keep the cornerstone at the center. The woes and the warnings all serve it: the leaders are drunk, the refuges are lies, the storm is coming — *therefore* the Lord lays a sure foundation, tried and precious. Do not let the class leave merely warned. Let them leave built — their feet on the stone that was tested unto death and held.

And leave them with a near heart, not only right answers. The deadliest danger in a room full of devout people is the lips that honor God while the heart wanders. Pray Isaiah's diagnosis into a petition over your class. May the Lord Jesus, the tried and precious cornerstone, be the one foundation they build on; may he open every deaf ear and draw every far heart home; and may none who believe on him ever be put to shame.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION THIRTEEN

Trust Not Egypt

Isaiah 30–33 · with Matthew 11:28–30 and Hebrews 4:1–11

A Note to the Teacher

When Judah was afraid, she ran to Egypt — because Egypt had horses you could count and chariots you could see, and the Holy One of Israel asked her to do the hardest thing a frightened heart can do: trust him and wait. Teach the hour on that contrast, because it is the contrast of every anxious life. *Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses... but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel.* The Egyptians, Isaiah says, are *men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit*. The class will recognize the move at once, because they make it too — reaching, when afraid, for the visible security rather than the invisible God. This is a First Commandment chapter: whatever your heart runs to for refuge in trouble, that is your god.

And in the middle of the rebuke comes one of the tenderest invitations in all of Isaiah, the very one they refused: *In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not.* Teach the class that salvation here is by *rest*, not by *running* — and that this is the heart of the gospel. The Lord Jesus took the verse onto his own lips: *Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* The frantic effort of saving ourselves is exactly what grace ends; and yet the human heart, then and now, *would not* — because resting in grace wounds our pride, admitting we cannot do it ourselves. Press gently on that wound. It is where the gospel gets in.

Use this guide as a tool. Matthew 11:28–30 is your anchor for the rest; Hebrews 4 will deepen it into the rest that still remains for the people of God. And do not miss the two pictures these chapters give of the Lord himself — the God who *waits to be gracious*, like a father watching the

road, and the King who is *as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land*, the very shelter they ran to Egypt to find.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

A frightened people run to Egypt's visible help and refuse the rest God offers — yet the Lord waits to be gracious and gives them a King who is himself the shelter they sought, so the class learns that salvation comes by resting in Christ, not running, and hears his own *come unto me... and I will give you rest*.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the rest God offers.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 30–33, with special care for chapters 30 and 32–33. Watch God's people run to Egypt for the help God alone can give, and find the invitation they refused in 30:15.
- ◆ Mark the *down to Egypt* texts — 30:1–2 and 31:1 — and the reason: horses and chariots are visible and countable. Be ready to ask what the visible “Egypt” are that we run to, and to connect it to the First Commandment.
- ◆ Note the demand for *smooth things* in 30:10, and have 2 Timothy 4:3 ready — *itching ears*. Be ready to help the class distinguish a word that merely soothes from a word that actually saves.
- ◆ Set Isaiah 30:15 beside Matthew 11:28–30 and Hebrews 4:1–11. Have the chain clear: salvation by returning and rest, fulfilled in the Lord Jesus' *come unto me... and I will give you rest*, opened into the rest that remains.
- ◆ Mark 30:18 — the Lord *waits to be gracious*. Be ready to draw the father-watching-the-road picture, and to connect it to his proper and strange work from the last session.
- ◆ Read 32:1–2 — the King as a hiding place, a covert, *the shadow of a great rock in a weary land* — and 33:14–17 — the devouring fire and who may dwell with it. Pray that you would teach as one who has stopped running and found the rest.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · We run to visible “Egypt” because faith in the invisible God is hard.

Judah did not run to Egypt because Egypt was holy; she ran because Egypt was *visible*. Horses can be counted, chariots can be inspected, treaties can be signed — and the Holy One of Israel asks instead for trust in a God you cannot see and a timing you cannot control. Teach the class that this is the perennial temptation, and that it is, at root, a First Commandment matter. Luther taught that a god is whatever your heart runs to for refuge in trouble; the thing you reach for when you are afraid is the thing you actually worship, whatever your creed says. So the diagnostic question is not *what do you confess?* but *what do you run to when the news is bad?* — the savings account, the connection, the plan, the substance, the relationship. None of these is evil in itself; they become Egypt the moment we *stay* on them instead of looking to the Holy One. Teach the class to notice their own flight reflex, because it tells the truth about where their trust really rests — and to turn the running into trusting.

Two · A word that only soothes cannot save; the saving word must wound first.

The people tell the prophets plainly what they want: *speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits*. They prefer to be comforted than to be told the truth — what Paul calls itching ears, heaping up teachers who will say what the heart wants to hear. Teach the class why this is so dangerous, and how to tell the difference between a word that soothes and a word that saves. A merely soothing word skips the wound: it tells you that you are fine as you are, that nothing needs to die, that the diagnosis was overblown. A saving word does the harder, kinder thing — it tells the truth about sin first, so that the gospel has something to heal. The law must wound before the gospel can comfort, exactly as a surgeon must cut before he can mend. A church drunk on smooth words feels affirmed and stays sick; a church that hears the whole counsel of God is wounded and then truly healed. Teach the class to want the true word more than the comfortable one, and to be suspicious of any preaching that never costs them anything.

Three · Salvation is by rest, not running — and rest is what wounds our pride.

Here is the gospel center of the session. *In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength*. Salvation comes not by the frantic effort of saving ourselves but by returning to the Lord and resting in him — and the Lord Jesus made the verse his own: *Come unto me... and I will give you rest*. But notice the four words that follow Isaiah's invitation: *and ye would not*. They refused the rest. Teach the class why the human heart so often refuses grace and insists

on running, because the reason is humbling: resting in grace means admitting we cannot do it ourselves, that the whole work is God's and the glory is his, that there is nothing for our pride to claim. Running feels active, capable, in control; resting feels like surrender, like helplessness, like death to the self that wants to contribute. That is precisely why grace wounds before it heals. Teach the class that the hardest command in the chapter is *rest*, and the deepest pride is the refusal of it — and that the gospel's mercy is to give the rest to people who could never earn it and would never, on their own, accept it.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the Pacing Tip names what to protect.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:14	Down to Egypt — the visible refuge (30:1–2; 31:1–3)
0:14–0:22	Smooth words and itching ears (30:9–11; 2 Tim 4:3)
0:22–0:34	In returning and rest shall ye be saved (30:15; Matt 11:28–30)
0:34–0:43	The God who waits to be gracious (30:18)
0:43–0:52	The shadow of a great rock; who dwells with the fire (32:1–2; 33:14–17)
0:52–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 34–35 and Session Fourteen

Pacing Tip

The center is 30:15 and the rest it offers; build the whole hour toward it and let the Lord Jesus' *come unto me* land there. The Egypt material is the setup, not the destination — do not let the class spend the hour diagnosing modern idolatry and never arrive at the rest. Protect the rest, and the tender pictures of the waiting God and the sheltering Rock that follow.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the chapters' movements.

Down to Egypt

Open with the flight. *Woe to the rebellious children... that walk to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at my mouth.* When the Assyrian threat loomed, Judah's instinct was to buy Egypt's military help — horses, chariots, a great-power alliance — and Isaiah names the spiritual failure underneath the policy: *they look not unto the Holy One of Israel.* Drive home the contrast Isaiah draws in chapter 31: *the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit.* The whole problem is that Egypt was visible and God was not. Teach the class that the flight to Egypt is the most natural movement of a frightened heart, and that it is a First Commandment failure — trusting the seen instead of the Holy One. Ask the class, gently, to name their own Egypts: the thing each runs to first when the diagnosis is bad, the call comes, the account drops. Not to shame them — the things are often good in themselves — but to expose the reflex, because the reflex tells the truth about where the heart's trust really lives.

Smooth Words

Now the deeper rot — not just where they ran, but what they wanted to hear. *This is a rebellious people... which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits.* Teach the class the astonishing honesty of the demand: they would rather be lied to comfortably than told the truth that saves. Paul foresaw the same appetite — itching ears, heaping up teachers who flatter. Then give the class a tool, because they need one: how do you tell a word that merely soothes from a word that actually saves? The test is whether it ever wounds. A soothing word tells you that you are fine, that nothing must die, that the law was an exaggeration; it leaves you affirmed and sick. A saving word tells the truth about sin first, so the gospel has something to heal — the law cuts before the gospel mends, as a surgeon must. Teach the class to be suspicious of preaching that never costs them anything, and to want the true word more than the comfortable one.

In Returning and Rest

Come to the heart of the hour, and slow down. *For thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel; In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.* Teach the class the whole gospel hiding in the contrast: Judah's salvation was not in the frantic activity of running to Egypt but in *returning* to the Lord and *resting* in him. Salvation is by rest, not by running. And then read the four words that break the heart: *and ye would not.* The rest was set before them, free, and they refused it. Now bring the Lord Jesus, who took Isaiah's invitation onto his own lips: *Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* Teach the

class that this is the same offer, now embodied — the rest of grace held out in a Person. The labor and heavy lading of self-salvation is exactly what he ends. And Hebrews opens it wider: there remains a rest for the people of God, entered not by works but by faith, and the warning is that some, like Judah, will *would not* their way out of it. Teach the class to hear the invitation as addressed to them, today, and to do the one thing Judah refused: come, and rest.

A Craft Note on Rest

Have the class feel the offense of *rest*. Ask: which is harder for you — to work frantically for God, or to stop and receive from him? Most will admit the second. That admission is the doorway. The gospel's hardest word to a capable, striving person is *rest*, because it asks them to stop contributing and simply receive. Let the class sit in that difficulty; it is where grace begins to land.

The God Who Waits to Be Gracious

Teach the verse that turns the chapter's posture inside out. After all the running and refusing, you expect wrath; instead: *And therefore will the Lord wait, that he may be gracious unto you... blessed are all they that wait for him.* Make the class hear what God is waiting *for*. Not waiting to punish, drumming his fingers until he can strike — but waiting *to be gracious*, holding back so that mercy can have its moment. The picture is a father watching the road for a son who has not yet turned home, longing to run to him. Connect it to the last session's distinction: mercy is God's proper work, the thing his heart leans toward; judgment is his strange work, taken up reluctantly. Here we see which way his heart leans — he *waits to be gracious*. Teach the class how this reshapes their imagination of God. Many picture him impatient, eager to catch them out; Isaiah pictures him patient, eager to forgive, watching the road. The God they fled is the God waiting to welcome them — and the waiting is not reluctance but longing.

The Shadow of a Great Rock

Bring the two chapters home on two images, one tender and one searching. First, the King: *Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness... And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest... as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.* Teach the class that this King is the very shelter they ran to Egypt to find — a hiding place from the storm, shade in an exhausting heat. Egypt could never be that; the Lord Jesus is. Let the picture be as gentle as it is: a great rock's shadow in a desert is life itself to a weary traveler, and that is what the King is to a weary sinner. Then the searching image, from chapter 33: the sinners in Zion tremble — *who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire?* — and the answer names a righteousness no sinner can

produce: *he that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly*. Teach the class the question this forces: if only the righteous may dwell with the consuming fire, and I am not righteous, how can I ever come? And give them the gospel answer the whole book is building toward — not a righteousness produced but a righteousness *given*, the righteousness of Another credited to the sinner who rests in him. The fire that devours the self-righteous is the believer's home, because he comes clothed in the King who is his shelter. *Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty*.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“What’s wrong with using visible means? Isn’t it foolish to ignore practical help?”

Nothing is wrong with the means; the problem is where the trust *stays*. Isaiah’s charge against Judah is not that she used horses but that she *looked not unto the Holy One of Israel* — she ran to Egypt and rested her confidence there. The savings account, the doctor, the plan, the connection are gifts, and using them wisely is not idolatry. They become Egypt the moment your heart leans its weight on them instead of on God. The test is the flight reflex: when the news is bad, what do you run to first, and what do you trust to make you safe? Teach the class to use every good means with open hands while resting their actual confidence in the Lord — means in the hand, but trust in God alone.

“Isn’t a comforting word a good thing? Why criticize ‘smooth’ preaching?”

True comfort is a very good thing — but smooth words are not the same as comfort; they are flattery that leaves you sick. The people wanted to be told they were fine when they were not, what Paul calls itching ears. The difference is whether the word ever wounds. A merely soothing word skips the diagnosis: nothing must die, the law was overblown, you are acceptable as you are. A truly comforting word tells the truth about sin first, so the gospel has something real to heal — the law cuts before the gospel mends. The deepest comfort in the world is on the far side of an honest wound, not in its place. Teach the class to distrust preaching that never costs them anything and to receive the wounding word as the friend that makes the healing word true.

“Why is it so hard simply to ‘rest’ in grace?”

Because rest wounds our pride, and Judah’s *and ye would not* is the proof. To rest in grace is to admit you cannot save yourself, that the whole work is God’s and the glory is his, that there is nothing left for you to contribute. Running feels active and capable and in control; resting feels

like surrender. The striving self would rather work frantically for God than stop and receive from him, because receiving is a kind of death to the part of us that wants credit. That is exactly why the gospel offends capable people: its hardest word to them is *rest*. Teach the class that the difficulty they feel in resting is not a small thing to be brushed past — it is the old pride being exposed, and the place where grace finally gets in.

“Does God really ‘wait to be gracious,’ or is he waiting to punish?”

Isaiah says plainly which: *the Lord will wait, that he may be gracious unto you*. He is not drumming his fingers until he can strike; he is holding back so that mercy can have its moment, like a father watching the road for a son not yet home. This reshapes the whole picture many people carry of God — impatient, eager to catch them out. The truth runs the other way. Mercy is his proper work, the way his heart leans; judgment is his strange work, taken up reluctantly. The God you fled is the God watching the road to welcome you, and his waiting is not reluctance but longing. Teach the class to stop imagining a God who can't wait to condemn and to meet the God who waits to be gracious.

“If only the righteous can ‘dwell with the devouring fire,’ what hope is there for me?”

All the hope in the gospel — once you see where the righteousness comes from. Chapter 33 asks who may dwell with the consuming fire and answers with a righteousness no sinner can produce: *he that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly*. If that righteousness had to be your own, the question would be despair. But the whole book is building toward a righteousness that is *given*, not produced — the righteousness of Another, the King who is himself your shelter, credited to you by faith. The fire that devours the self-righteous becomes the believer's home, because he comes clothed not in his own record but in Christ. Teach the class that the trembling question of 33:14 has a gospel answer: come in the righteousness of the King, and *thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty*.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — The Egypts we run to

A strong opener. Let the class name the visible securities they run to when afraid, and connect it to the First Commandment — whatever the heart runs to for refuge is its god. Keep it honest and self-examining, not a contest of confessing other people's idols.

Question 2 — Smooth words versus the saving word

The itching-ears question. Draw out why we prefer a comfortable word to a true one, and give the class the test: does the word ever wound? Help them see that the law must cut before the gospel can heal, and that a word which only soothes leaves us sick.

Question 3 — Salvation by rest, not running

The gospel center. Press how salvation by *rest* rather than *running* is the heart of the gospel, and let the Lord Jesus' *come unto me... and I will give you rest* land as the fulfillment of 30:15. This is the question to land if you land only one.

Question 4 — Why we refuse the rest

The pride question. Ask why the heart so often refuses the rest of grace and insists on saving itself, and what it is about resting in grace that wounds our pride. Let the class admit how hard it is to stop contributing and simply receive.

Question 5 — The God who waits to be gracious

The picture question. Let the class feel how *the Lord waits to be gracious* — a father watching the road, not an executioner sharpening a blade — reshapes their imagination of God's posture. Tie it to his proper and strange work.

Question 6 — The sheltering Rock and the devouring fire

The closer. Draw out the tenderness of the King as the shadow of a great rock — the very shelter sought in Egypt — and then resolve the hard question of 33:14–15: a sinner dwells with the fire only in a righteousness given, not produced. End clothed in the King, seeing him in his beauty.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapters thirty through thirty-three — his reading of *returning and rest* as the gospel of grace against works.
- ♦ Luther's Large Catechism, on the First Commandment — *that to which your heart clings... is your god* — read alongside the flight to Egypt.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1–39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on chapters thirty through thirty-three — careful on 30:15 and the King as shelter in chapter thirty-two.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapters thirty through thirty-three — a clear lay treatment of Egypt, the rest, and the waiting God.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ Matthew 11:28–30, read slowly this week — the Lord Jesus' *come unto me... and I will give you rest*, Isaiah 30:15 made flesh, and a fit meditation for the teacher who is tempted to run rather than rest.

A Final Word

Teach this hour as one who has stopped running. There is no point preaching *returning and rest* from a heart still sprinting to its own Egypt; the class will hear the difference. Ask yourself honestly where you run when you are afraid, and let the Lord call you back from it to himself, and you will offer the class not a lecture on idolatry but the rest you have found.

Keep the rest at the center. The Egypt-running and the smooth words and the devouring fire all serve one gospel point: salvation comes by resting in the Lord, not by saving ourselves — and the rest is held out in a Person who says *come unto me*. Do not let the class leave merely diagnosed. Let them leave having heard the invitation Judah refused, and having a chance, this time, to come.

And leave them in the shadow of the Rock, with a God who waits to be gracious. The shelter they sought in Egypt is the King himself, and the fire they feared becomes their home when they come clothed in his righteousness. May the Lord Jesus, the shadow of a great rock in a weary land, give your class his rest, draw their running hearts home, and let their eyes see the King in his beauty.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION FOURTEEN

The Highway of Holiness

Isaiah 34–35 · with Matthew 11:2–6 and John 14:1–6

A Note to the Teacher

These two chapters are a matched pair, and you should teach them together so the class feels the hinge between them. Chapter thirty-four is the day of the Lord as terror — the sword of the Lord coming down on Edom, the land turned to pitch and brimstone, a wasteland left to wild beasts. Chapter thirty-five is the *same* day of the Lord as springtime — the desert blossoming, the blind seeing, the ransomed coming home with everlasting joy. One day, two outcomes, and the only difference is which side of it you stand on. Teach the class to let the darkness of thirty-four make the glory of thirty-five shine the brighter; the blossom means more set against the brimstone, and the highway home is sweeter for the wasteland it runs through.

And the glory of chapter thirty-five is dense with the gospel. The cursed wasteland bursts into bloom — the reversal of Eden's curse, the new creation breaking in, the same hope we met in the peaceable kingdom of chapter eleven. To the weak-handed and fearful-hearted the word is not *try harder* but *your God will come and save you* — strength from his coming, not from within. The eyes of the blind open, the ears of the deaf unstop, the lame leap — the very signs the Lord Jesus pointed to when John the Baptist's faith wavered. And through the blooming desert runs *an highway... the way of holiness*, marked so plainly that *the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein*, on which *the ransomed of the Lord* come home to Zion, and *sorrow and sighing shall flee away*.

Use this guide as a tool. Matthew 11:2–6 gives you the King validating his credentials by Isaiah's signs; John 14:1–6 lets the class hear the Lord Jesus call himself *the way* and promise the prepared

place at the end of the road. Teach the hour as a journey: out of the wasteland, onto the highway, home to the city where the sighing stops.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

The same day of the Lord that is terror on Edom is springtime for the redeemed — the desert blooms, the blind see, and a plain highway of holiness carries the ransomed home to a Zion where sorrow and sighing flee away — so the class learns that their strength is in God's coming and their road is the Lord Jesus himself.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the highway home.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 34 and 35 together in one sitting, letting the darkness of 34 set off the glory of 35 — the pair is the point.
- ◆ Mark the matched structure: chapter 34, the day of the Lord as terror on Edom; chapter 35, the day of the Lord as springtime for the redeemed. Be ready to say why it matters that one day has two outcomes.
- ◆ Note the blossoming desert in 35:1–2 and connect it back to the peaceable kingdom of chapter 11 — the reversal of the curse, the new creation. Be ready to ask how the God who blooms deserts blooms barren lives.
- ◆ Underline 35:3–4 — *be strong, fear not... your God will come and save you* — and have Hebrews 12:12 in mind, which takes up the weak hands and feeble knees. The strength comes from his coming.
- ◆ Set Isaiah 35:5–6 beside Matthew 11:2–6 — the signs of the King answering John's doubt. Be ready to teach the healings as credentials, not just kindnesses, and as a foretaste of the resurrection.
- ◆ Read 35:8–10 — the highway, the fools who shall not err, the ransomed, the fleeing sorrow — with John 14:1–6. Have Matthew 20:28 ready for the ransom. Pray that you would teach as a traveler on the road, not a tourist describing it.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · The same day of the Lord is terror or springtime, depending where you stand.

Do not let the class read chapters thirty-four and thirty-five as two unrelated moods. They are one day seen from two sides. The day of the Lord that falls as brimstone on Edom rises as springtime on the redeemed; the sword that ends the one is the salvation that begins the other. Teach the class that this is true of the last day for every person who has ever lived — the same coming of the same Lord will be the worst news in the universe or the best, and the difference is not the day but the standing of the one who meets it. This guards two errors at once. It guards against a sentimental gospel that forgets chapter thirty-four — the judgment is real, the brimstone is not a metaphor to be waved off. And it guards against a grim faith that forgets chapter thirty-five — for those in Christ the very same day is a homecoming with everlasting joy. Teach the class to let the darkness of thirty-four make the glory of thirty-five shine, and to make sure, by faith, which side of the day they will be standing on.

Two · The gospel never tells the frightened to manufacture courage — strength comes from God's coming.

Listen to how Isaiah addresses the weak: *Strengthen ye the weak hands... Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not.* And then notice he does not stop there, where a motivational speaker would stop. He gives the *reason*, and the reason is not inside the frightened person at all: *behold, your God will come... he will come and save you.* The strength is in his coming, not in their resolve. Teach the class this crucial pattern, because the world gets it exactly backwards. The world tells the fearful to dig deep, find the courage within, believe in themselves. The gospel never does. It tells the fearful to look *out* — to the God who is coming to save — and lets the courage flow from the rescue, not the self. The church's real courage has never been self-confidence; it is confidence in the One who comes. Teach the class that when they are weak-handed and feeble-kneed, the command *fear not* is not an order to generate a feeling but an invitation to look at who is coming — and that looking, not striving, is where strength is found.

Three · The road home is plain enough for fools — and it is a Person.

Here is the gospel sweetness of the chapter. The highway of holiness is marked so clearly that *the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein.* Teach the class what good news this is: the way home is not a maze for the clever, a path only the educated or the spiritually gifted can find. It is plain enough for the simple, the slow, the unlettered, the child. The only travelers who manage to

lose this road are those too proud to walk a plain road — the wise in their own eyes who want a more sophisticated way, and the unclean who refuse the way of holiness altogether. Everyone humble enough to walk the marked road arrives. And teach the class the deepest thing: the New Testament tells us the highway is not finally a *what* but a *who*. The Lord Jesus says, *I am the way* — the road home is himself. To walk the highway of holiness is to walk in him, and the simplicity of the road is the simplicity of trusting a Person rather than mastering a system. Teach the class that the plainness of the gospel is not a defect to be improved but a mercy to be received — fools shall not err, because the Way came to find them.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the Pacing Tip names what to protect.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:13	Two days, one Lord — terror on Edom (34)
0:13–0:22	The desert shall blossom — the curse reversed (35:1–2)
0:22–0:30	Be strong; your God will come and save you (35:3–4)
0:30–0:40	The eyes of the blind — the King's credentials (35:5–6; Matt 11:2–6)
0:40–0:52	The highway and the ransomed come home (35:8–10; John 14; Matt 20:28)
0:52–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 36–39 and Session Fifteen

Pacing Tip

Give chapter 34 enough weight to make chapter 35 shine — but not more. A sentence or two on the brimstone of Edom sets the contrast; the hour belongs to the highway. Protect the two New Testament moments above all: the King answering John by Isaiah's signs, and the Lord Jesus calling himself the way. A class that leaves on the highway, homeward bound, has heard the chapter right.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the chapters' movements.

Two Days, One Lord

Open in the dark, briefly, so the light will land. Chapter thirty-four is the day of the Lord as terror: *the indignation of the Lord is upon all nations*, the sword of the Lord comes down *upon Idumea* — Edom, the ancient enemy, the line of Esau — and the land becomes burning pitch, a desolation for the screech owl and the raven. Teach the class to take it seriously; the judgment is real, and a gospel that quietly deletes chapter thirty-four cannot make sense of chapter thirty-five. Then make the hinge explicit: chapter thirty-five is the *same* day of the Lord, seen from the other side — not terror but springtime, not brimstone but blossom. One day, one Lord, two outcomes, and the only variable is the standing of the one who meets him. Teach the class that this is exactly the shape of the last day for every soul: the same coming will be the worst or the best news imaginable, and the question the chapters press is which side of the day faith has put us on.

The Desert Shall Blossom

Now let the desert bloom. *The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.* The very wasteland of chapter thirty-four — cursed, scorched, abandoned — bursts into flower in chapter thirty-five. Teach the class to see what this is: the reversal of the curse, the new creation breaking in, the ground that was cursed for Adam's sake at last released and rejoicing. It is the same hope as the peaceable kingdom of chapter eleven, where the wolf lay down with the lamb — creation healed, the curse undone. And draw the personal line the class needs: the God who makes literal deserts blossom is the God who makes barren lives blossom too. The dry, dead, abandoned places in a person — the wasted years, the cursed patches — are exactly the ground this God delights to flower. Teach the class to bring their own wastelands to the chapter, and to hear that *they shall see the glory of the Lord* precisely where they expected only sand.

Your God Will Come and Save You

Teach the chapter's word to the weak with care, because it corrects a deep error. *Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not.* So far it could be any pep talk. But Isaiah grounds the courage where no pep talk can: *behold, your God will come... he will come and save you.* The strength is in his coming, not in the trembling person's resolve. Teach the class the pattern, because the world inverts it. The world tells the fearful to find the courage within, to believe in themselves, to dig deep. The gospel never says this. It turns the fearful heart *outward*, to the God who is coming to save, and lets the courage come from the rescue rather than the self. Hebrews picks up these very weak hands and feeble

knees and tells a struggling church to lift them — not by self-help but by looking to the Lord Jesus. Teach the class that *fear not* is never an order to manufacture a feeling; it is an invitation to look at who is coming, and to let the looking do what striving never could.

The Eyes of the Blind

Come to the signs. *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing.* Teach the class where these words land in the New Testament. When John the Baptist sat in prison and his faith faltered — *art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?* — the Lord Jesus did not send back reassurances; he sent back Isaiah 35: *the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.* The healings were the King's credentials — the unmistakable signs that the day of chapter thirty-five had dawned and the Savior had come. Teach the class that the miracles were never merely acts of kindness, lovely as they were; they were the messianic signature, Isaiah's promised marks of the coming King. And teach the deeper comfort: every healing was a foretaste of the resurrection. The same Lord who opened blind eyes will raise every body that carries its brokenness down to the grave. The signs were a down payment on the day when the lame will leap forever.

A Craft Note on Doubt

John the Baptist doubted — the greatest of the prophets, and he wavered in prison. Let that comfort the class. The Lord Jesus did not rebuke him; he gave him evidence, the signs of Isaiah 35. When a class member confesses doubt, follow the Lord's pattern: not shame, but a pointing back to what Christ has actually done. Doubt is met with the King's credentials, not with a demand to feel more certain.

The Ransomed Come Home

End on the highway, and walk the class all the way home. *An highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness... the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein.* Teach the threefold good news of the road. First, it is *plain* — marked so clearly that even fools cannot lose it; the way home is not a maze for the clever but a road for the simple, and the only ones who miss it are the too-wise and the unwilling. Second, it is *safe* — *no lion shall be there*; the dangers that haunt every other road are barred from this one. Third, and deepest, the New Testament names the road: the Lord Jesus says *I am the way*. The highway of holiness is a Person; to walk it is to walk in him. Then name the travelers: *the ransomed of the Lord*. A ransom is a price paid to free a captive,

and the Lord Jesus named the price as his own life — *the Son of man came... to give his life a ransom for many*. Teach the class how it changes the walk to know the road was bought: every step is on ground purchased by his blood, and the homecoming is guaranteed not by the traveler's strength but by the price already paid. And give them the end of the road: *they shall come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads... and sorrow and sighing shall flee away*. The Lord Jesus said he goes to prepare the place; the highway has a home at the end of it, where the sighing finally stops.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Why spend any time on the brimstone of chapter 34? Isn't the good news in 35?”

Because chapter 35 only shines against chapter 34. The two are one day of the Lord seen from opposite sides — terror on Edom, springtime for the redeemed — and the glory of the homecoming means little if the judgment it spares us from is quietly deleted. Teach the class that the last day will be exactly this: the same coming of the same Lord, the worst news in the universe or the best, depending entirely on which side faith has put us on. A gospel that forgets chapter 34 grows sentimental; a faith that forgets chapter 35 grows grim. Hold both, and the blossom is sweeter for the brimstone, and the highway home is more precious for the wasteland it crosses.

“Isaiah tells the fearful to ‘be strong.’ Isn't that just telling them to try harder?”

It would be, if Isaiah stopped there — but he does not. He grounds the courage outside the frightened person entirely: *be strong, fear not... your God will come and save you*. The strength is in God's coming, not in the trembling heart's resolve. This is the exact opposite of the world's counsel, which tells the fearful to find courage within and believe in themselves. The gospel turns the fearful outward, to the God who is coming to save, and lets the courage flow from the rescue. Teach the class that *fear not* is never an order to manufacture a feeling; it is an invitation to look at who is coming. The church's courage has never been self-confidence — it is confidence in the One who comes.

“Why were the Lord's healings ‘credentials’ and not just compassion?”

They were both, but they were not *merely* compassion. When John the Baptist doubted, the Lord Jesus answered by listing the signs of Isaiah 35 — the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the lame leaping — because those were the promised marks of the coming King, the unmistakable signature that the day of chapter 35 had dawned. The miracles authenticated him; they said, in

deeds, *the One Isaiah promised is here*. Teach the class also the deeper layer: each healing was a foretaste of the resurrection, a preview of the day when every body that carries its brokenness to the grave will be raised whole. So the healings were kindness, and credentials, and prophecy fulfilled, and resurrection promised — all at once. They were the King proving himself by the very signs Isaiah had written down.

“Why is it good news that the road is plain enough for ‘fools’?”

Because it means the way home is not reserved for the clever. *The wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein* — the highway of holiness is marked so plainly that the simple, the slow, the unlettered, and the child all arrive. The gospel is not a maze for the spiritually sophisticated; it is a plain road for anyone humble enough to walk it. The only travelers who lose it are those too proud to walk a plain way — the wise in their own eyes who want something more impressive — and the unclean who refuse the way of holiness. Teach the class that the plainness of the gospel is a mercy, not a defect: the Lord Jesus is the way, and trusting a Person is simple enough for fools and humbling enough for the wise.

“What practical difference does it make that the road was ‘ransomed’?”

It changes every step from striving to receiving. The travelers are *the ransomed of the Lord* — captives bought back at a price, and the Lord Jesus named the price as his own life, given a ransom for many. To know the road was paid for is to walk it without the crushing anxiety of earning the destination: the homecoming is guaranteed not by your strength but by his purchase. You are not buying your way to Zion step by costly step; you are walking home on ground already bought with blood. Teach the class that this is the difference between a pilgrimage of fear and a pilgrimage of joy — and that at the end of the ransomed road, *sorrow and sighing shall flee away*, because the One who paid for the journey prepared the home.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — One day, two outcomes

A strong opener. Let the class say why it matters that the same day of the Lord is terror or springtime depending on where one stands, and how the darkness of chapter 34 makes chapter 35 shine. Press gently toward the personal: which side of the day will we meet?

Question 2 — The desert that blossoms

The new-creation question. Connect the blooming wasteland to the peaceable kingdom of chapter 11 — the curse reversed. Then make it personal: the God who blooms deserts blooms barren lives. Invite the class to name the dry places they thought were beyond flowering.

Question 3 — Strength from God's coming

The courage question. Draw out why the gospel never tells the frightened to manufacture courage from within, and where the church's real courage comes from — the God who comes to save. A good place to let the weak-handed in the room hear *fear not* rightly.

Question 4 — The King's credentials

The signs question. Use Matthew 11 to show the healings as the King's credentials, not mere kindnesses, and as a foretaste of the resurrection. Let those who carry the body's brokenness hear the promise that the lame will leap forever.

Question 5 — A road plain enough for fools

The simplicity question. Press why it is good news that the road home is plain enough for the simple, not only the wise, and who the only travelers are who manage to lose it. Land it on the Lord Jesus as the way — a Person to trust, not a system to master.

Question 6 — The ransomed come home

The closer. Let the class feel how knowing the road was ransomed — bought with the Lord's own life — changes the walk from striving to receiving. End at the destination, where *sorrow and sighing shall flee away*, and the prepared place waits.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapters thirty-four and thirty-five — his reading of the highway and the joy of the ransomed.
- ♦ The Nicene Creed, *he shall come again with glory to judge the quick and the dead* — read as the one day of the Lord that is terror and springtime at once.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1–39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on chapters thirty-four and thirty-five — careful on the matched pair and the highway of holiness.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapters thirty-four and thirty-five — a clear lay treatment of the two days and the road home.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ John 14:1–6, read slowly this week — the Lord Jesus as *the way* and the prepared place at the end of it, the highway of holiness made personal, and a fit meditation for the teacher walking the road home.

A Final Word

Teach this hour as a traveler, not a tourist. It is one thing to describe the highway of holiness from the outside and another to be walking it, weak-handed and feeble-kneed, leaning on the God who is coming to save. Get yourself onto the road before you point the class to it, and you will teach chapter thirty-five not as scenery but as the way home you are actually taking.

Keep the contrast and the comfort together. The brimstone of chapter thirty-four is real — do not soften it — but it is the dark backdrop that makes the blossom, the opened eyes, and the homeward road blaze with glory. Teach the class to take the judgment seriously and the joy more seriously still, and to make sure by faith which side of the day they will meet.

And leave them on the highway, homeward bound. The desert is blooming, the King has come with his credentials, the road is plain enough for fools and bought with blood, and the home at its end is a place where sorrow and sighing flee away. May the Lord Jesus, who is himself the way, strengthen your class's weak hands by his coming, walk them along the ransomed road, and bring them at last to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION FIFTEEN

Hezekiah: Faith and Folly

Isaiah 36–39 · with Romans 8:31–37 and 1 Peter 5:6–11

A Note to the Teacher

These four chapters read like a story, and you should teach them as one. They are also the hinge of the whole book — the place where Isaiah turns from Assyria, the threat of the first half, toward Babylon, the exile that the second half will comfort. And at the center of the story is a man who shows us, in the space of four chapters, both what faith looks like and what folly looks like — the same man, Hezekiah, magnificent in chapter thirty-seven and foolish in chapter thirty-nine. Teach the hour as a study in both, because the class is made of exactly such people: capable of real faith on Monday and real folly on Tuesday, and badly in need of a gospel that holds for both.

The faith comes first, and it is worth dwelling on. When the Assyrian spokesman stands at the wall and delivers a speech designed to destroy trust — plausible, partly true, mocking the unseen God, urging surrender — Hezekiah does the wisest thing a besieged believer can do: he takes the threatening letter up to the temple and *spreads it before the Lord*. He does not answer it himself; he lays it open before God. And his prayer begins not with the crisis but with *who God is* — the only God, the Maker of heaven and earth — and asks for rescue *for the sake of God's glory*. Then God answers in a sentence that is pure gospel: *I will defend this city to save it, for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake*. Not for the city's strength, not for its righteousness — for God's own name, and for David's sake, which is finally for the sake of David's greater Son.

Use this guide as a tool. First Peter 5:6–11 gives you the roaring lion whose voice the Rabshakeh echoes, and the casting of care that Hezekiah models; Romans 8:31–37 gives you the gospel ground of it all — *if God be for us, who can be against us?* And do not flinch from chapter thirty-nine,

because the folly of the praying saint is one of the most honest and comforting things in Scripture: the believer is *simul justus et peccator*, at once righteous and sinner, and the God who comforts even the disaster our folly causes opens the very next chapter with *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people*.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

The praying Hezekiah spreads his threat before the Lord and is saved — not for his worth but *for God's own sake and for David's sake* — and the same man's later folly shows the believer is at once righteous and sinner, so the class learns to cast every threat on God and to rest in a salvation grounded in God's name and promise, not their own steadiness.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching faith and folly.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 36–39 straight through as the single story it is — the siege, the prayer, the rescue, the sickness, and the folly with the Babylonian envoys.
- ◆ Study the Rabshakeh's speech in chapter 36, and note how much of it is *partly true* — Egypt really was a bruised reed. Have 1 Peter 5:8 ready: the adversary as a roaring lion whose threats mix truth with poison.
- ◆ Mark 37:14 — Hezekiah *spread it before the Lord*. Be ready to teach this as the practical picture of casting care (1 Peter 5:7; Philippians 4:6), and to ask what letters we answer on our own.
- ◆ Note that the prayer of 37:16–20 begins with *who God is* and asks rescue *for God's glory*. Be ready to show how a threat shrinks once it is set beside the majesty of God.
- ◆ Underline 37:35 — *for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake*. This is the gospel logic of the session; have Romans 8:31–37 in view, and be ready to point *for David's sake* ahead to Christ.
- ◆ Read chapter 39 honestly — the same Hezekiah, now foolish — and have *simul justus et peccator* ready. Note that 39 sows the exile and 40 opens *Comfort ye*. Pray that you would teach as one who needs this gospel for both his faith and his folly.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · Faith's first move is to spread the threat before the Lord.

When the deadly letter came, Hezekiah did not draft a clever reply, convene his advisers, or lie awake rehearsing the threat; he carried it up to the house of the Lord and *spread it before the Lord*. Teach the class that this single gesture is one of the most practical pictures of faith in the whole Bible. Faith does not mean having an answer to every threat; it means knowing where to take the threat. The believer's instinct, trained by the gospel, is to bring the menacing letter — the diagnosis, the bill, the accusation, the fear — and lay it open before God rather than trying to manage it alone. Peter calls this casting all your care upon him; Paul calls it making your requests known with thanksgiving. Teach the class that the alternative — answering our own letters, carrying our own threats — is not strength but exhausting unbelief, and that the way of peace is the temple floor, the letter spread open, the matter handed up. The class should leave knowing the first move of faith is not to solve but to spread before the Lord.

Two · We are saved for God's sake, not because we are worth saving.

When God answers, he names the ground of the rescue with startling clarity: *I will defend this city to save it, for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake*. Not for the city's walls, not for its army, not for its righteousness — for God's own name, and for the promise he made to David. Teach the class that this is the deep logic of the whole gospel, and one of its greatest comforts. We are not saved because we are worth saving; we are saved because God has staked his own name and promise on it. That sounds at first like it leaves us out — and it is precisely what lets us sleep at night. If my salvation rested on my worth, it would rise and fall with my worth, and I have watched my worth rise and fall. But it rests on God's name, which does not change, and on a promise made to David and kept in David's greater Son. Teach the class that *for David's sake* points straight to Christ: every mercy God shows the line of David is finally for the sake of the One who would come from it. We are saved, at the last, *for the sake of the Lord Jesus* — and that ground will hold when every other ground gives way.

Three · The believer is at once righteous and sinner — and Scripture tells the truth about it.

Do not rush past chapter thirty-nine, and do not excuse it. The same Hezekiah who prayed so magnificently under the Assyrian threat falls, a chapter later, into vain and self-centered folly before the Babylonian envoys — parading his treasures, and then, told that his folly has doomed his sons to exile, comforting himself that at least there will be peace *in my days*. The man of

chapter thirty-seven and the man of chapter thirty-nine are the same man. Teach the class the doctrine that makes sense of this, the one Luther pressed: the believer is *simul justus et peccator*, at once righteous and sinner — fully righteous in Christ, and still, in himself, a sinner who can pray like a saint on Monday and stumble like a fool on Tuesday. And teach the mercy that Scripture *tells the truth* about its saints. The Bible does not airbrush Hezekiah into a spotless hero; it shows his faith and his folly side by side, because a gospel for spotless heroes would be no gospel for us. Teach the class that the honesty of Scripture about its saints is itself good news: if God's grace held Hezekiah — faith, folly, and all — it can hold them.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the chapters are a story, so keep the narrative moving.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:15	The voice at the wall — the Rabshakeh's assault on trust (36)
0:15–0:25	He spread it before the Lord (37:14; 1 Pet 5:6–7)
0:25–0:37	The prayer, and for mine own sake (37:16–20, 35; Rom 8:31–37)
0:37–0:48	Faith and folly — the same man (38–39; <i>simul justus et peccator</i>)
0:48–0:52	The hinge to Babylon, and Comfort ye (39:8–40:1)
0:52–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 40 and Session Sixteen

Pacing Tip

The two anchors are *spread it before the Lord* and *for mine own sake*; build the hour toward them. Chapter 38's sickness and sundial are wonderful but can swallow the clock — give them a brief mention and keep moving to the folly of 39, which sets up the whole second half of the book and the *simul* doctrine. Protect the prayer and the gospel ground of the rescue.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the story's movements.

The Voice at the Wall

Open at the wall with the enemy's voice. Sennacherib's army has swept through Judah, and his spokesman, the Rabshakeh, stands within earshot of the defenders and delivers a speech aimed at one target: their trust. *What confidence is this wherein thou trustest?* He mocks their reliance on Egypt — *a bruised reed* — and on the Lord, and on Hezekiah; he offers a comfortable surrender; he even claims the Lord sent him; and he lists the gods of other nations who could not save them. Teach the class to notice how *plausible* the speech is, and how much of it is *partly true* — Egypt really was an unreliable reed. That is what makes the voice so dangerous. Connect it to the adversary Peter describes as a roaring lion, whose threats are never pure fiction but truth twisted toward despair, exactly as the serpent in Eden began with a real question before the lie. Teach the class that the enemy's voice at the wall of our own hearts works the same way — plausible, partly accurate, designed to dissolve trust and urge surrender — and that the answer is not to argue the lion down on his own terms but to take the threat somewhere else.

He Spread It Before the LORD

Teach the gesture that is the heart of the session. Sennacherib sends a letter, a written threat designed to break Hezekiah's nerve. And here is what the king does: *Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it: and Hezekiah went up unto the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord.* Linger on the picture — the king kneeling, the threatening letter unfolded on the temple floor, laid open before God. He does not answer it himself. He does not compose a reply or rally his own resources first; he brings the thing to God and spreads it out. Teach the class that this is faith made visible, the most practical posture in the Bible. Peter says it plainly: *casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you*; Paul says be careful for nothing, but in everything by prayer let your requests be made known. Then make it concrete: what letters do we insist on answering ourselves? The medical result we obsess over alone, the accusation we rehearse in the dark, the fear we manage privately because handing it to God feels passive. Teach the class to do what Hezekiah did — take the letter to the temple and spread it before the Lord — and to discover that the floor before God is the only place a threat stops growing.

A Craft Note on the Letter

Make this tangible. Invite the class to picture the literal letter that is frightening them this week — and to imagine physically setting it down, open, before God. Some teachers have the class name (silently) the “letter” they have been answering alone. The image of spreading it out does more than an exhortation to “pray about it” ever could; it gives faith a gesture.

For Mine Own Sake

Now teach the prayer and the answer together. Hezekiah's prayer is a model, and you should walk the class through its order. It does not begin with the Assyrians; it begins with *who God is: O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth: thou hast made heaven and earth*. Only after fixing his eyes on the Maker of heaven and earth does he name the threat — and the threat has shrunk, because it is now set beside the majesty of God. Then he asks for rescue not for comfort's sake but *that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou art the Lord, even thou only* — for God's glory. Teach the class this order: start with God, not the threat, and the threat finds its true size. Then comes the answer, and the line that is pure gospel: *I will defend this city to save it, for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake*. God saves not for the city's worth but for his own name and his promise to David. And that very night the angel of the Lord settles the matter — the great army that mocked the unseen God is undone without Judah lifting a sword. Teach the class the comfort: the salvation rests on God's name and David's sake, which is to say, on Christ — and so it does not depend on us.

Faith and Folly

End with the honesty of chapters thirty-eight and thirty-nine. In chapter thirty-eight Hezekiah falls mortally ill, prays, and is granted fifteen more years with the sign of the sundial — mention it, but do not let it consume the hour. The weight is in chapter thirty-nine. Envoys come from Babylon, flattering the king with attention, and Hezekiah — the same man who spread the letter before the Lord — proudly parades all his treasures and armaments before them, holding nothing back. Isaiah confronts him: all of it will one day be carried to Babylon, and his own sons will serve as eunuchs in a Babylonian palace. And Hezekiah's reply is a small, sad thing: *Good is the word of the Lord... For there shall be peace and truth in my days* — relief that the disaster will fall after he is gone. Teach the class the doctrine that explains this without excusing it: the believer is *simul justus et peccator*, at once righteous and sinner. The praying saint of chapter thirty-seven and the foolish king of chapter thirty-nine are one man, and so is every believer. And teach the mercy of Scripture's honesty: the Bible does not pretend Hezekiah was flawless, because a Bible full of spotless heroes would have nothing to say to us. Then, the gospel turn — Hezekiah's folly sows the seeds of the Babylonian exile, and what does the very next chapter say? *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people*. Teach the class that the God who comforts even the disaster our folly causes is the God we most need to know.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Why does it matter that the Rabshakeh’s speech was partly true?”

Because the most dangerous voices are never pure lies. The Rabshakeh was right that Egypt was a bruised reed; that grain of truth is what made the rest of his poison go down. Peter calls the adversary a roaring lion, and the serpent in Eden began not with a flat lie but with a real question. Teach the class that the enemy’s voice at the wall of the heart always mixes accurate observations — yes, you really did fail; yes, that threat is real — with the lie it is smuggling in: therefore surrender, therefore despair, therefore God cannot help you. Recognizing the partial truth keeps us from two errors: pretending the hard facts are false, and swallowing the despair the facts are dressed to deliver. The answer is not to win the argument on the lion’s terms but to take the threat, true parts and all, and spread it before the Lord.

“What does it actually mean to ‘spread it before the Lord?’”

It means to bring the threat to God instead of carrying it alone. Hezekiah took the literal letter to the temple and laid it open before God — not first drafting a reply, not first rallying his own resources, but handing the thing up. Practically, it means that when the frightening letter comes — the diagnosis, the bill, the accusation, the fear — your first move is not to manage it privately but to lay it open in prayer, casting the care on the One who cares for you. Teach the class that this is not passivity; it is the most active thing faith does, because it puts the matter where it can actually be answered. The exhausting alternative is to answer our own letters in the dark. The peace is on the temple floor, the letter spread out, the matter handed to God.

“Isn’t it cold that God saves ‘for his own sake’ rather than because he loves the city?”

It is the opposite of cold — it is the only thing that lets you rest. If God saved the city because it was worth saving, the salvation would be only as secure as the city’s worth, and worth rises and falls. By grounding the rescue in *his own sake* and *David’s sake*, God anchors it to something that does not change: his own unchanging name and his promise. Teach the class that this is the deep comfort of grace. Your salvation does not hang on your steadiness, your usefulness, or your worth on a given day; it hangs on God’s name and his promise, kept in David’s greater Son. And love is not absent — it is precisely God’s love that binds his own name to your rescue so that nothing in you can finally unbind it. We are saved for his sake, which means we are saved securely.

“How can the same man pray like that and then act like such a fool?”

The same way every believer can — because we are *simul justus et peccator*, at once righteous and sinner. Hezekiah was genuinely a man of faith and genuinely a sinner, fully righteous in God's sight and still, in himself, capable of vanity and folly. The praying saint of chapter 37 and the foolish king of chapter 39 are one man, and so is each of us, prone to trust God magnificently in one hour and to stumble in the next. Teach the class not to be scandalized by this — in Hezekiah or in themselves — but to be driven by it back to grace. And teach them the mercy that Scripture tells the truth: it does not give us a spotless Hezekiah, because a spotless hero would have no gospel for sinners. The honesty is the comfort — if grace held Hezekiah, faith and folly and all, it holds us.

“If Hezekiah's folly caused the exile, why does the next chapter start with comfort?”

Because that is the kind of God he is — and it is the best news in the chapter. Hezekiah's pride sows the seeds of Babylon, and the very next words in the book are *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people*. God pours out comfort over a disaster that human sin has caused. Teach the class what this means for them: when they have sown their own trouble by their own folly — and they have, and they will — the God of Isaiah does not stand back and let the consequences have the last word. He speaks comfort into the very mess our sin has made. This is not God excusing the folly; the exile still comes. It is God refusing to let the folly define the end of the story. The hope for people who have made their own bed is that the God who comforts Israel's self-inflicted exile is the God they are dealing with.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — The voice at the wall

A strong opener. Draw out how the Rabshakeh's speech — plausible, partly true, mocking, urging surrender — resembles the roaring lion of 1 Peter 5:8, and why the partial truth makes it so dangerous. Help the class recognize the same voice at the wall of their own hearts.

Question 2 — Spreading the letter before the Lord

The heart of the practical teaching. Ask what sort of letters we tend to answer on our own instead of spreading before God, and let the class name them. The gesture is the point — faith takes the threat to the temple floor rather than carrying it alone.

Question 3 — Starting the prayer with God, not the threat

The prayer question. Press why it matters that Hezekiah begins with *who God is* and asks rescue for God's glory, and how a threat looks different set beside the majesty of God. A good place to reshape how the class actually prays.

Question 4 — For mine own sake, and for David's sake

The gospel center. Draw out that we are saved for the sake of God's name and promise, not because we are worth saving, and how *for David's sake* points ahead to Christ. Land the comfort: a salvation grounded in God's name will hold when our worth gives way.

Question 5 — At once righteous and sinner

The *simul* question. Let the class wrestle with how the same man prays magnificently and then stumbles, and why it is a mercy that Scripture tells the truth about its saints rather than making them spotless heroes. Drive it toward grace, not despair.

Question 6 — Comfort over a self-inflicted disaster

The closer. Ask what it tells us about God that he pours comfort over a disaster human folly has caused, and how this gives hope when we have sown our own trouble. End on *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people* — the next word after the folly.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 16), on chapters thirty-six through thirty-nine — his reading of Hezekiah's prayer and the honesty of the narrative about its saint.
- ♦ The Book of Concord on *simul justus et peccator* — the Apology and the Formula on the believer who is at once righteous and sinner, read alongside Hezekiah's faith and folly.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 1–39* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on chapters thirty-six through thirty-nine — careful on the hinge from Assyria to Babylon.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapters thirty-six through thirty-nine — a clear lay treatment of the siege, the prayer, and the folly.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ 1 Peter 5:6–11, read slowly this week — the roaring lion, the casting of all care on God, and the promise that the God of all grace will himself restore you, a fit meditation for the teacher who must spread his own letters before the Lord.

A Final Word

Teach this hour as a man who is both Hezekiahs. You have prayed magnificently and you have acted foolishly, sometimes in the same week, and so has every person in your class. Do not teach chapter thirty-nine from a safe height, as if the folly were someone else's. Teach it as one who knows the *simul* in his own bones — and the class will hear the gospel in it rather than a lecture about a long-dead king.

Keep the two gestures at the center: the letter spread before the Lord, and the salvation grounded *for mine own sake*. Everything else — the lion's voice, the prayer, the folly — serves these two. Teach the class to take their threats to the temple floor, and to rest their salvation not on their own steadiness but on God's unchanging name and his promise kept in Christ.

And leave them with comfort after folly. Hezekiah's pride sowed an exile, and God's next word was *comfort*. May the Lord Jesus — David's greater Son, for whose sake every mercy is shown — teach your class to spread their every threat before the Father, hold them righteous when their own folly shames them, and speak his comfort over even the troubles they have sown, until the day there is peace and truth not merely in our days but forever.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION SIXTEEN

Comfort, Comfort My People

Isaiah 40 · with Mark 1:1–8 and John 10:11–18

A Note to the Teacher

You are teaching the turning of the whole book. Chapters one through thirty-nine have been largely the work of the law — the great arraignment, the woes, the threat of Assyria, the looming exile that Hezekiah's folly sealed. And now, abruptly, the tone changes, and it changes with a doubled word that the church has clung to ever since: *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God*. Teach the class to feel the hinge. Everything from chapter forty to the end of the book is comfort — the Book of Comfort, the gospel half of Isaiah — and it opens not with a promise of easier circumstances but with the only thing that comforts a guilty conscience: *her warfare is accomplished... her iniquity is pardoned*. The deepest comfort God offers his people is not a change in their situation but the pardon of their sin.

And the chapter is dense with the Lord Jesus. The *voice crying in the wilderness*, all four Gospels tell us, is John the Baptist — and the way he came to prepare was *the way of the Lord*, the coming of the Lord Jesus, so that the herald's announcement of God's arrival is the announcement of Christ's. The herald's cry is *Behold your God!* — and the God beheld comes *with strong hand* and yet *gathers the lambs with his arm, and carries them in his bosom*, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Teach the class to hold the two together: the God of measureless majesty, who holds the oceans in his hand and calls every star by name, is the same God who carries weak lambs against his chest. The bigness is the ground of the comfort; a small god could not carry us.

Use this guide as a tool. Mark 1:1–8 gives you the wilderness voice and the One he announced; John 10:11–18 gives you the Shepherd who carries the lambs by laying down his life. And save

strength for the chapter's close — *they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength* — because your class is tired, and the promise that the strength comes from *waiting on the Lord* rather than from within is exactly what a weary believer needs to hear.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

The Book of Comfort opens by announcing that the people's warfare is accomplished and their sin pardoned, that the way of the Lord Jesus is being prepared, and that the incomparable God who calls the stars by name carries his weak lambs in his bosom — so the class learns that the deepest comfort is the pardon of sin and that their strength is renewed by waiting on the Lord, not summoned from within.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the great comfort.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 40 slowly — it is the turning of the whole book — hearing the doubled *comfort*, the wilderness voice, the herald's *Behold your God!*, the Shepherd with the lambs, and the eagles' wings at the close.
- ◆ Mark 40:1–2 — the comfort is *her warfare is accomplished... her iniquity is pardoned*. Be ready to teach that the pardon of sin is a deeper comfort than the lifting of trouble, and is not the same as reassurance that things will improve.
- ◆ Set Isaiah 40:3 beside Mark 1:1–8 — the voice in the wilderness is John the Baptist, and the way he prepared was the way of the Lord Jesus. Be ready to draw the testimony to Christ's deity, and to apply the leveling to the human heart.
- ◆ Note 40:6–8 — all flesh is grass, but *the word of our God shall stand for ever* — and have 1 Peter 1:24–25 ready, where Peter calls this enduring word the gospel.
- ◆ Underline 40:10–11 — the strong hand and the carried lambs — and set it beside John 10:11. Be ready to teach the difference between a lamb merely led and a lamb carried.
- ◆ Read 40:12–26 (the incomparable God) and 40:27–31 (wings as eagles). Be ready to ask why the majesty sits in a comfort chapter, and why the promise descends from mounting up, to running, to walking. Pray over your own weariness; this chapter is for the tired teacher too.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · The deepest comfort is the pardon of sin, not the lifting of trouble.

Notice what God says, and what he does not say, when he opens the Book of Comfort. He does not say *your troubles are over, the exile will be short, better days are coming*. He says *her warfare is accomplished... her iniquity is pardoned*. Teach the class that this is a profound choice. The deepest comfort God offers a guilty people is not a change in their circumstances but the forgiveness of their sin — because sin, not circumstance, is the real wound. A person can have every trouble lifted and still stand condemned; a person can sit in an exile and be fully pardoned, and the pardoned exile is more comforted than the prosperous guilty. Teach the class the difference between true comfort and mere reassurance. Reassurance says *it will get better*; it may or may not be true, and it leaves the conscience untouched. The gospel says *your iniquity is pardoned*; it is certainly true, and it answers the deepest fear there is. Teach the class to seek and to offer this comfort first — not the promise of better days, which we cannot guarantee, but the announcement of forgiveness, which God has guaranteed in the blood of his Son.

Two · The herald announces God's coming — and the God who came is the Lord Jesus.

Follow the logic the Gospels insist on, because it preaches the deity of Christ from the Old Testament itself. Isaiah hears a voice: *Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God*. The voice announces the coming of *the Lord*, of *our God*. And all four Gospels, without hesitation, identify that voice as John the Baptist and the God whose way he prepared as the Lord Jesus. Teach the class what this means: the New Testament reads the coming of the Lord Jesus as the coming of *the Lord* whom Isaiah announced, the arrival of God himself. The herald's cry is *Behold your God!* — and what the cities of Judah beheld, in the fullness of time, was a man from Nazareth. This is not the New Testament straining a text; it is the New Testament reading Isaiah rightly. And then apply the leveling to the heart: *every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low*. The way is prepared in a human heart the same way — the valleys of despair filled up with hope, the mountains of pride brought low — so that the King may enter on a level road. Teach the class that Advent preaching is heart-leveling: pride down, despair up, the way made straight for the Lord Jesus to come in.

Three · The bigness of God is the ground of the bigness of his comfort.

Watch where Isaiah places the chapter's towering majesty — not in a chapter of judgment, where we might expect it, but in the very middle of a chapter of comfort. *Who hath measured the waters in*

the hollow of his hand?... To whom then will ye liken God?... he calleth them all by names... not one faileth. Teach the class why the comfort and the majesty belong together. A small god gives small comfort. If the God who promises to carry you could not also hold the oceans in his palm and call the stars by name, his promise would be only as strong as his reach — and a god whose reach you could exhaust is no comfort at the edge of the grave. But the God of Isaiah 40 is incomparable: the nations are a drop in his bucket, the islands fine dust on his scales, the stars his named host. And *that* is the God who carries the lambs. Teach the class the connection they most need: the same immensity that ought to terrify them is the measure of how safely they are held. The bigness of God is not set against his comfort; it is the foundation of it. The arm strong enough to fling the stars is the arm gentle enough to carry you, and strong enough never to drop you.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the chapter is rich, so keep moving and protect the close.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:15	Comfort, comfort — warfare accomplished, iniquity pardoned (40:1–2)
0:15–0:25	A voice in the wilderness; the word that stands (40:3–8; Mark 1)
0:25–0:33	Behold your God — the Shepherd carries the lambs (40:9–11; John 10)
0:33–0:42	To whom will ye liken God? — the incomparable Creator (40:12–26)
0:42–0:52	Wings as eagles — strength by waiting (40:27–31)
0:52–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 41–44 and Session Seventeen

Pacing Tip

This chapter is so quotable that a class can spend the whole hour admiring famous verses and never feel their weight. Resist that. Anchor each movement to its gospel point — pardon, the coming Lord, the carried lamb, the big God, the renewed strength — and protect the final segment, because *wait upon the Lord* is the verse most of your weary class came needing. If the majesty section runs long, trim it, not the eagles.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the chapter's movements.

Comfort, Comfort

Begin with the hinge of the book, and let the class feel the change. After thirty-nine chapters weighted toward the law, God speaks a doubled word: *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God*. The repetition is not filler; it is the insistence of a God who means it — comfort, and again comfort. Then teach the *content* of the comfort, which is the surprising thing. God does not comfort his exiled people by promising a shorter exile or an easier road. He comforts them with three announcements: *her warfare is accomplished*, the long hard service is over; *her iniquity is pardoned*, the sin is forgiven; she has received *double for all her sins*, the debt is more than settled. The comfort is the pardon. Teach the class that this sets the pattern for all true comfort: God reaches first not for our circumstances but for our guilt, because guilt is the deeper wound. And note for the class that this is where Handel's *Messiah* opens — *Comfort ye* — because the whole gospel can be sung from this verse: the warfare is over, the sin is pardoned, behold your God.

A Voice in the Wilderness

Now the herald, and the great Christological hinge. *The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord*. Teach the class what all four Gospels do with this verse: they put it in the mouth of John the Baptist and identify the *Lord* whose way he prepared as the Lord Jesus. Let the class sit with the force of that. Isaiah said *prepare the way of the Lord, of our God*; the Gospels say John prepared the way of the Lord Jesus; therefore the New Testament reads the coming of the Lord Jesus as the coming of God. This is the deity of Christ, preached from Isaiah. Then teach the leveling: *every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low*. Ancient kings sent crews ahead to level roads for their coming; the King's road into a human heart is leveled the same way — the valleys of despair filled, the mountains of pride flattened. And teach the contrast Isaiah draws to ground it all: *all flesh is grass... the grass withereth... but the word of our God shall stand for ever*. Peter quotes it and tells us this enduring word *is the gospel*. Teach the class that everything human — our strength, our resolve, our feelings — is grass; only the word stands, and that word is the good news that does not wither.

A Craft Note on Withering Grass

Ask the class what they have leaned their comfort on that later withered — a feeling of certainty

that faded, a resolve that broke, a circumstance that changed. Let them name how grass-like those supports proved. Then set the contrast: *the word of our God shall stand for ever*. The relief of the gospel is that it comes from outside us and does not wither with our moods. Comfort founded on grass dies with the grass; comfort founded on the word stands.

Behold Your God

Teach the herald's announcement and the tenderness that follows it. The good news is to be shouted: *O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain... lift up thy voice with strength... say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!* The gospel is not a secret to be murmured but an announcement to be cried from the heights. And then comes the portrait of the God beheld, and it holds two things together that the class must not separate. First the strength: *the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him*. Then, in the very next breath, the tenderness: *He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young*. Teach the class the wonder of it — the same strong arm that rules the nations bends down to scoop up weak lambs and carry them against his chest. The Lord Jesus claimed exactly this picture: *I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep*. And press the difference Isaiah draws between a lamb *led* and a lamb *carried*. A led lamb walks on its own legs as long as it can; a carried lamb has run out of legs, and is held. Teach the class that the gospel is for the carried — for the lamb too weak, too young, too tired to keep up, gathered into the bosom of the Shepherd who gave his life for it.

To Whom Will Ye Liken God?

Teach the majesty, and teach the class *why it is here*. Isaiah piles up the incomparable greatness of God: he measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, weighed the mountains in scales, holds the nations as a drop in a bucket, sits above the circle of the earth, stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and brings out the starry host by number, calling them all by name, *not one faileth*. *To whom then will ye liken God?* The answer is: no one and nothing. Now make the connection the class might miss — this towering majesty sits in the *middle of a comfort chapter*, surrounded by the carried lambs and the renewed strength, and that placement is deliberate. The bigness of God is the ground of the bigness of his comfort. Teach the class that a small god would be a poor comforter: if the God who promises to hold you could be outmatched, outlasted, or exhausted, his promise would crack at the worst moment. But the God who calls every star by name and never loses one will not lose you. Teach the class to let the very immensity that might frighten them

become their security: the arm that flung the stars is the arm that carries the lamb, and it has never once failed.

Wings as Eagles

End where your tired class needs to end. Isaiah turns to the complaint of the weary: *Why sayest thou, O Jacob... My way is hid from the Lord?* And he answers not with a pep talk but with the inexhaustible God: *the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary... He giveth power to the faint.* Then the famous promise: *even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.* Teach the class two things here. First, the source: the strength is renewed by *waiting upon the Lord*, not summoned from within. Even the young and strong run out; only those who wait on the inexhaustible God draw on a strength that does not. The renewal comes from outside, from the One who *fainteth not*. Second, teach the strange descent of the promise — from mounting up, to running, to merely walking. We would have written it the other way, climbing to a climax; Isaiah descends, and the descent is the wisdom. *Mount up with wings as eagles* is the rare soaring hour; *run, and not be weary* is the season of effort; *walk, and not faint* is the long ordinary plod, day after unremarkable day. And the last is the hardest. Anyone can soar for an hour; the test of faith is to keep *walking* through the gray, unglorious stretches without fainting. Teach the class that the deepest promise in the chapter is the humblest — that the God who carries lambs will keep the weary walking, one ordinary step at a time, and not let them faint.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Why is forgiveness called the comfort? I came hoping God would fix my circumstances.”

Because forgiveness reaches the deeper wound. God opens the Book of Comfort not with *your troubles are over* but with *her iniquity is pardoned*, and the order is mercy, not evasion. A person can have every circumstance mended and still stand guilty before God; a person can sit in an exile, fully pardoned, and be more comforted than the prosperous guilty. Sin is the real wound, and the gospel heals it first. This does not mean God is indifferent to your circumstances — the same God carries lambs and renews strength — but it means he gives the deepest comfort first and most surely. He cannot always promise easier days, and he will not lie to you; but he can promise

pardon, and has sealed it in his Son's blood. Teach the class to receive the comfort God actually offers, which is better and surer than the one we came asking for.

“How does the voice in the wilderness prove that the Lord Jesus is God?”

By the way the Gospels read it. Isaiah says *prepare ye the way of the Lord... a highway for our God* — the voice announces the coming of *the Lord*, of *God himself*. And all four Gospels identify that voice as John the Baptist and the One whose way he prepared as the Lord Jesus. Put the two together and the conclusion is unavoidable: the New Testament reads the coming of the Lord Jesus as the coming of the Lord whom Isaiah announced. John prepared the way of God; the way he prepared was for the Lord Jesus; therefore the Gospels confess the Lord Jesus as that God come among us. This is not a strained proof-text; it is the plain logic of how the evangelists use Isaiah 40. Teach the class that the deity of Christ is not a late invention but is read straight out of the Old Testament by the men who knew him.

“What's the difference between a lamb being led and a lamb being carried?”

Strength. A led lamb walks on its own legs, following the shepherd as long as it can keep up. A carried lamb has run out of legs — too young, too weak, too tired — and is gathered into the shepherd's arm and held against his chest. Isaiah says the Lord *gathers the lambs with his arm, and carries them in his bosom*, and the Lord Jesus claimed the picture as his own: the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. Teach the class that the gospel is especially for the carried — for the believer who can no longer keep up, who has come to the end of their own legs. The shepherd does not abandon the lamb that cannot walk; he picks it up. The comfort is not *try to keep pace* but *be carried*, held in the bosom of the One strong enough never to drop you.

“Why put all that overwhelming majesty in the middle of a comfort chapter?”

Because the bigness of God is the foundation of the bigness of his comfort. A small god gives small comfort — if the One who promised to carry you could be outmatched or exhausted, his promise would fail at the worst moment. So Isaiah piles up the majesty on purpose: the God who carries the lambs is the same God who holds the oceans in his palm, weighs the mountains, and calls every star by name without losing one. That is exactly why his promise holds. Teach the class to let the majesty that might frighten them become their security: the immensity is the measure of how safely they are held. The arm strong enough to fling the stars is gentle enough to carry the lamb — and, having never lost a star, will not lose you.

“Why does the promise go down — from flying, to running, to just walking?”

Because the walking is the hardest, and Isaiah saves the deepest promise for last. We would have written it as a climb — walk, then run, then soar — but Isaiah descends: *mount up with wings as eagles... run, and not be weary... walk, and not faint*. The soaring is the rare mountaintop hour; the running is the season of strain; the walking is the long, gray, ordinary plod, one unremarkable day after another. And anyone can soar for an hour — it is the daily walking, through the unglamorous stretches, that wears faith down to fainting. So the humblest promise is the greatest: *walk, and not faint*. Teach the class that God meets us not only in the soaring moments but, mercifully, in the dull ones — keeping the weary walking, step after ordinary step, by the strength that comes from waiting on him.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — Pardon as the deepest comfort

A strong opener. Draw out why the pardon of sin is a deeper comfort than the lifting of trouble, and how it differs from mere reassurance that things will improve. Let the class feel that God reaches first for guilt, not circumstance, because guilt is the deeper wound.

Question 2 — The voice, the way, and the deity of Christ

The Christological question. Use the Gospels' identification of the wilderness voice as John, preparing the way of the Lord Jesus, to draw out the deity of Christ. Then apply the leveling — valleys filled, mountains lowered — to the preparing of a human heart.

Question 3 — Comfort that does not wither

The grass question. Ask what happens to comfort that rests on anything that withers — our resolve, feelings, circumstances — and why it is such relief that the enduring word comes from outside ourselves. Let the class name their own withered supports.

Question 4 — Strong hand, carried lambs

The Shepherd question. Draw out what it means that God's power is exercised in such tenderness, and the difference between a lamb led and a lamb carried. Land it on the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd who carries by laying down his life.

Question 5 — The bigness of God and the bigness of comfort

The majesty question. Press why the towering majesty sits in a comfort chapter, and how the sheer bigness of God grounds the bigness of his comfort. Help the class see that the immensity which might frighten them is the measure of their security.

Question 6 — Strength by waiting, and the hardest walk

The closer, and the one your weary class needs. Draw out why the strength comes from waiting on the Lord rather than from within, and why the promise descends from soaring to walking — with *walk, and not faint* the hardest and most needed of the three. End on the humblest, deepest promise.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 17), on chapter forty — his reading of the comfort, the wilderness voice, and the incomparable God.
- ♦ Handel, *Messiah*, the opening recitatives and choruses — *Comfort ye, Every valley, And the glory of the Lord* — Isaiah 40 set to music, worth hearing as preparation.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on chapter forty — careful on the hinge of the book and the Servant gospel that follows.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapter forty — a clear lay treatment of the comfort, the Shepherd, and the eagles' wings.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ John 10:11–18, read slowly this week — the Good Shepherd who carries the lambs by giving his life for them, Isaiah 40:11 made flesh, and a fit meditation for the teacher who is himself a tired lamb.

A Final Word

Teach this chapter as a tired lamb, not a tireless shepherd. You are weary too — the teacher faints and falls like anyone — and the temptation is to teach *wait upon the Lord* as a command you have

mastered rather than a mercy you are leaning on. Lean on it first. Let the Shepherd carry you this week, and you will teach the carried lambs of your class with the credibility of one who is being carried.

Keep the comfort and the majesty together. Do not give the class a tender God who is too small to keep his promises, nor a vast God too remote to carry them. Isaiah gives both in one chapter: the arm that flung the stars is the arm that holds the lamb. Teach the class to find their security precisely in the bigness of the God who stoops to carry them.

And leave them walking, not fainting. The warfare is accomplished, the sin is pardoned, the way of the Lord is prepared, the Shepherd carries his lambs, and the inexhaustible God renews the strength of all who wait on him. May the Lord Jesus — the God beheld, the Shepherd who gave his life for the sheep — carry your weary class in his bosom, renew their strength as they wait on him, and keep them walking through every gray and ordinary day until they mount up at last with wings as eagles and are not weary anymore.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION SEVENTEEN

The God Who Holds Your Hand

Isaiah 41–44 · with Revelation 1:17–18 and 1 Peter 1:18–21

A Note to the Teacher

These four chapters are some of the tenderest in the Bible, and you are setting one jewel aside for later — the first Servant Song that opens chapter forty-two gets a session of its own, so do not spend it here. What remains is a sustained outpouring of *fear not*, grounded again and again not in the smallness of the danger but in the presence of God: *Fear thou not; for I am with thee... I will hold thy right hand*. Teach the class to notice where the comfort is anchored. God almost never tells his people the threat is trivial; he tells them he is with them in it. The promise is not a smaller flood but a present God: *When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee*.

And notice whom he says it to. He calls his people *thou worm Jacob* — and in the very same breath, *I will help thee, thy redeemer*. Teach the class the wonder of that pairing: God does not wait for his people to become impressive before he takes their hand; he stoops to hold the hand of a worm. The lowness we think disqualifies us is exactly the lowness his grace bends down to reach. And the help he gives is no general benevolence but redemption by a *go'el* — a kinsman-redeemer, the near relative who in Israel bought his family member back out of debt and slavery. The Lord became our kinsman to buy us back, and the risen Lord Jesus claims the very titles God claims here — *the first and the last, beside me there is no saviour* — so that the one who holds your hand and the One who emptied the tomb are the same.

Use this guide as a tool. Revelation 1:17–18 lets the class hear the risen Lord Jesus take up Isaiah's *first and the last*; 1 Peter 1:18–21 names the price of the kinsman-redemption — not silver and gold but the precious blood of Christ. And do not miss the great gospel reversal of order in these

chapters: *return unto me; for I have redeemed thee*. The redemption comes first, and the call home rests on it. He does not say *return, so that I may redeem you*. He says *I have redeemed you; now come home*.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

God grounds his *fear not* in his own presence, takes the hand of a *worm*, promises to be with his people in the waters rather than spare them the waters, blots out their sins for his own sake, and redeems them as a kinsman — so the class learns the difference between a god they must hold up and the God who holds them, and rests in the one Saviour beside whom there is no other.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the God who holds your hand.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 41–44, setting aside the opening of chapter 42 (the first Servant Song) for its later session. Find the *fear not* promises and the hand-holding God of 41:10, 13.
- ◆ Mark 41:14 — *thou worm Jacob... I will help thee, thy redeemer*. Be ready to teach that God stoops to the low rather than waiting for the impressive, and that our lowness is what grace reaches.
- ◆ Underline 43:1–2 — *thou art mine, and when thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee*. Note that the promise is presence in trouble, not exemption from it, and connect it to the Lord Jesus passing through the deepest waters.
- ◆ Set Isaiah 43:11 and 44:6 beside Revelation 1:17–18 — *beside me there is no saviour and the first and the last*, claimed by the risen Lord Jesus. Have *go'el* (kinsman-redeemer) and 1 Peter 1:18–21 ready.
- ◆ Mark the gospel order: 43:25 (*I blot out thy transgressions for mine own sake*) and 44:22 (*return unto me; for I have redeemed thee*). Be ready to teach that redemption grounds the call home, not the reverse.
- ◆ Read the idol satire of 44:9–20 and the nailed-down god of 41:7. Be ready to contrast a god you must hold up with the God who holds you. Pray that you would teach as one being held, not as one holding himself up.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · “Fear not” rests on God’s presence, not on the danger being small.

Listen to how God grounds his commands not to fear. He does not say *fear not, for the threat is minor*; he says *fear not, for I am with thee*. The basis of the courage is his presence, not the size of the danger — and that is a far deeper comfort, because dangers are often not minor at all. Teach the class the difference. A comfort built on the threat being small collapses the moment the threat turns out to be large; a comfort built on the presence of God holds even when the danger is real and great, because God is greater. And teach the tenderness of the particular image: *I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand*. This is how a parent crosses a busy street with a small child — not by removing the traffic but by taking the small hand in a strong one. Teach the class that this is how God deals with the weak: not by clearing every danger from their path but by holding their hand through it. The child is safe not because the street is empty but because the hand is strong. Teach them to feel their hand held, and to stop demanding an empty street.

Two · God stoops to the worm — our lowness is what grace reaches.

Do not soften the word God uses: *Fear not, thou worm Jacob*. It is not flattery; it is honest, even harsh — a worm is low, weak, easily crushed, nothing to admire. And in the same breath, without a pause, God says *I will help thee... thy redeemer*. Teach the class the staggering pairing. We assume God helps the impressive, the strong, the worthy — and we work feverishly to qualify, to become the kind of person God would stoop to. Isaiah says God stoops to the *worm*. He does not wait for Jacob to become a lion; he takes the hand of the worm as it is. Teach the class to see that the lowness they think disqualifies them is precisely the lowness grace bends down to reach. The gospel is not *clean yourself up and God will help you*; it is *God helps worms*, and the only people he cannot help are the ones too proud to admit they are worms. Teach the class that there is profound relief here for the weak and the failing: you do not have to become impressive first. He helps worms, and he is your redeemer while you are still one.

Three · Redemption comes first — the call home rests on it.

Watch the order of God’s words with the precision the gospel requires, because the order is everything. After charging his people with wearying him with their sins, God says, *I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins*. And then, in chapter forty-four: *I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions... return unto me; for I have redeemed thee*. Teach the class to hear the *for*. God does not say *return to me, so that I may redeem*

you — as if our coming home earned the redemption. He says *I have redeemed you; therefore come home* — the redemption is the ground of the call, not its reward. This is the deep structure of grace, and it reverses the order the religious heart always wants. The natural religion of the heart says: repent, improve, return, and then perhaps God will forgive. The gospel says: God has already blotted out your sins for his own sake; now come home on the strength of a redemption already accomplished. Teach the class the freedom in this. You are not coming to God to earn a forgiveness you hope for; you are coming home to a forgiveness already secured, blotted out like a cloud burned off by the sun, remembered no more.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; four chapters, so move at a steady clip.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:15	Fear not, I am with thee; the worm Jacob (41:10–14)
0:15–0:25	When thou passest through the waters (43:1–2)
0:25–0:35	Beside me there is no saviour; the kinsman-Redeemer (43:11; 44:6; Rev 1)
0:35–0:44	I blot out thy transgressions; return, for I have redeemed (43:25; 44:22)
0:44–0:52	The gods that cannot lift their own hand (44:9–20; 41:7)
0:52–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 44:24–48 and Session Eighteen

Pacing Tip

Remind the class at the outset that the first Servant Song (42:1–9) is being held for a later session, so they are not surprised to skip it. With four chapters to cover, the temptation is to read every *fear not*; choose two or three of the richest and keep moving. Protect the *return unto me; for I have redeemed thee* segment — the gospel order is the hinge of the hour — and leave time for the idol satire, which lands the whole point.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the chapters' movements.

Fear Not, I Am With Thee

Open with the hand-holding God. *Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.* And a few verses later, the tender particular: *For I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee.* Teach the class to mark where the courage is grounded — not in the danger being small but in *I am with thee*. Then teach the worm. *Fear not, thou worm Jacob... I will help thee, saith the Lord, and thy redeemer.* Do not rush past the harshness of worm; God means it, and it is meant to land. Jacob is low, weak, crushable — and God takes his hand anyway. Teach the class the comfort hidden in the insult: if God helps worms, then no one is too low to be helped, and the lowness you are ashamed of is no barrier at all. The hand that reaches down does not require you to climb up first. It reaches all the way to the worm.

When Thou Passest Through the Waters

Teach the promise that does not promise what we wish it promised. *When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned.* Make the class hear the word *through*. God does not say *you will avoid the waters* or *I will dam the river before you reach it*; he says *when you pass through them, I will be with thee*. Teach the class why we so badly want the other promise — exemption, a life without floods or fire — and why God's actual promise is the better gift. A life exempt from trouble would be a life that never needed him, never knew his presence in the deep; the promise of his presence *in* the waters gives us something the absence of waters never could — God himself, near, in the worst of it. And teach the class what makes the promise sure: the Lord Jesus went through the deepest waters himself. He was baptized into our place, and on the cross the full flood of God's judgment, every wave and billow, went over his head. Because he passed through those waters and was not finally overwhelmed, the believer can trust that the waters they pass through will not overflow them either. The promise is sure because the Redeemer has already been through the flood ahead of us. And it is sealed with the dearest word in the chapter: *thou art mine*.

A Craft Note on “Through”

Many in the class are praying for the waters to part — the diagnosis reversed, the trouble removed. Be gentle, but teach them the word *through*. God's promise is not usually a dry path around the flood but his presence in it. Ask the class which they would rather have: a life with no deep waters and no felt presence of God, or the waters with God in them. The question reframes the whole prayer.

Beside Me There Is No Saviour

Teach the exclusivity, and teach it as a mercy. *I, even I, am the Lord; and beside me there is no saviour.* And again: *I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God.* Teach the class that the oneness of the Saviour is not a narrowness to apologize for but a comfort to rest in. If there were many saviours, you could never be sure you had found the right one, or done enough to satisfy them all; because there is *one*, the question of salvation has one answer, and that answer is sure. And teach the kinsman-redemption that stands behind the word *redeemer*. The Hebrew *go'el* was the near kinsman — the relative whose duty and privilege it was to buy his family member back out of debt or slavery, to pay the price a poor relation could not pay himself. Teach the class that God names himself their *go'el*, and that to be their kinsman-redeemer he had to *become* their kinsman — which is exactly what happened when the Lord Jesus took our flesh. He became bone of our bone to buy us back, and the price, Peter says, was not silver and gold but his own precious blood. And the risen Lord Jesus claims Isaiah's very titles — *I am the first and the last... I am he that liveth, and was dead* — so that the only Saviour, the kinsman who paid the price, is the One who walked out of the tomb.

I Blot Out Thy Transgressions

Teach the heart of the gospel in these chapters: the blotting out. The setting makes it sweeter — God has just said his people *wearied* him with their sins, made him *serve* with their iniquities. And then, with no transition, no condition, no demand met: *I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.* Teach the class the two phrases that carry the gospel. First, *for mine own sake* — he forgives not because we have earned it or improved, but for the sake of his own name and mercy; the ground of the pardon is in him, not in us, which is exactly why it is sure. Second, *will not remember* — not that the infinite God forgets, but that he chooses never to bring the sin up against us again; it is blotted out, gone, treated as though it never were. And teach the order in chapter forty-four: *I have blotted out... thy transgressions... return unto me; for I have redeemed thee.* The redemption is announced first; the call to return rests on it. Teach the class to come home not to earn forgiveness but on the strength of a forgiveness already secured — their sins blotted out like a thick cloud burned off by the morning sun, for God's own sake, remembered no more.

The Gods That Cannot Lift Their Own Hand

End with Isaiah's devastating satire, and let the class laugh before they tremble. A man goes to the forest, cuts down a tree, and divides it: with half he kindles a fire, warms himself, and bakes his

bread; and from the other half — the very same log — he carves a god, falls down before it, and prays, *Deliver me; for thou art my god*. Teach the absurdity Isaiah is exposing: half the log is ash under the oven, and the other half is worshiped as a deliverer. The idol is so helpless it cannot even keep itself upright — back in chapter forty-one, the craftsman *fastens it with nails, that it should not be moved*. The god has to be nailed down so it will not fall over. Teach the class the unforgettable contrast at the center of the whole session: there is a god you must hold up, and there is the God who holds you. Every idol is the first kind — it must be carved, carried, propped, nailed down, defended, kept from toppling — and it can save no one because it cannot even save itself from falling. The living God is the second kind: he holds *your* hand, he carries *you*, he needs no nails. Then make it searching: our idols are rarely carved logs. They are good gifts — money, family, health, reputation, even ministry — turned into gods we look to for the deliverance only God can give. Teach the class to ask of everything they trust: is this a god I must hold up, or the God who holds me? Everything in the first category will one day topple; only the second will hold.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Why doesn’t God just remove the danger instead of telling me he’s with me?”

Because his presence is a deeper gift than an empty street. Notice how God grounds his *fear not* — never *the threat is small*, always *I am with thee*. A courage built on the danger being minor shatters when the danger turns out to be great; a courage built on God’s presence holds even then, because he is greater than the danger. The image is a parent taking a small child’s hand to cross a busy road: the child is safe not because the traffic is gone but because the hand is strong. Teach the class that this is how God deals with the weak — not always by clearing the road but by holding the hand through it. And a life with every danger removed would be a life that never knew his nearness in the deep. His presence in the trouble gives us something the absence of trouble never could: God himself.

“Isn’t calling us ‘worms’ demeaning?”

It would be, if God left us there — but the comfort is in what comes next. *Fear not, thou worm Jacob* is honest, even harsh; a worm is low and weak and easily crushed. But God says it in the same breath as *I will help thee, thy redeemer*. The point is not to grind us down but to show how far down grace reaches. We assume God helps the impressive and the worthy, and we wear ourselves out trying to qualify; Isaiah says God stoops to the worm as it is. Teach the class that the lowness they

are ashamed of is no barrier to grace — it is exactly what grace bends down to reach. The hand that reaches for you does not require you to climb up to meet it; it reaches all the way to the worm. The only people God cannot help are those too proud to admit they need it.

“Why is having only one Saviour a good thing rather than a narrow one?”

Because one sure Saviour is a mercy, and many would be a torment. *Beside me there is no saviour.* If there were many saviours, you could never be certain you had found the right one or satisfied them all; salvation would be an anxious shopping among rivals. Because there is *one*, the question has a single, settled answer, and that answer has already done everything needed. Teach the class that exclusivity here is not God being stingy but God being sufficient — one Saviour, and he is enough, so you need not look for another and could not find a better. And this one Saviour became your kinsman to redeem you: the *go'el* who took your flesh to pay the price you could not, and who claims the title *the first and the last* as the risen Lord. One Saviour, fully able, already finished — that is not narrowness; it is rest.

“What does it mean that God forgives ‘for his own sake’?”

It means the ground of your forgiveness is in God, not in you — which is precisely why it is secure. After charging his people with wearying him by their sins, God says, *I... blot out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.* If he forgave because we had earned it or improved enough, the forgiveness would wobble with our performance. By forgiving *for his own sake*, he anchors the pardon to his own unchanging name and mercy. Teach the class the freedom in this: you are not forgiven on the days you manage to deserve it; you are forgiven for his sake, which holds on your worst days too. And *will not remember* does not mean the infinite God suffers amnesia — it means he chooses never again to bring the sin up against you. It is blotted out like a cloud burned off by the sun, gone for good.

“How do I know if a good thing has become an idol?”

Ask Isaiah's question: is this a god I must hold up, or the God who holds me? Isaiah mocks the idol that must be nailed down so it will not fall over — a god so helpless it cannot keep itself upright. Our idols are rarely carved logs; they are good gifts — money, family, health, reputation, even ministry — that we begin to look to for the deliverance only God can give. The test is what you trust to save you, and what topples your world when it goes. If a good thing has become the thing you cannot live without, the thing you look to for ultimate security, you are propping up a god that cannot hold you and will one day fall. Teach the class to enjoy God's good gifts as gifts while

looking past them to the Giver — to lean their full weight not on anything they must hold up, but on the God who holds them.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — Fear not, grounded in presence

A strong opener. Draw out why the presence of God is a deeper comfort than the removal of the threat, and what the image of God holding your hand, like a parent with a child, tells us about how he deals with the weak. Land it on the strong hand, not the empty street.

Question 2 — The worm and the redeemer

The grace question. Press why it is good news that God stoops to hold the hand of a worm rather than waiting for us to become impressive, and how the lowness we think disqualifies us becomes what grace reaches. A place for the weak and failing to find relief.

Question 3 — Through the waters, not around them

The presence-in-trouble question. Draw out why we want exemption from trouble and why God's presence in it is the better gift, and how the Lord Jesus, who went through the deepest waters himself, makes the promise sure. Reframe the class's prayers around the word *through*.

Question 4 — The one Saviour and the kinsman-Redeemer

The exclusivity question. Press why one Saviour is a mercy and not a narrowness, and what it means that our *go'el* had to become our kinsman to buy us back. Connect to the risen Lord Jesus claiming *the first and the last*.

Question 5 — Blotted out for his own sake; redeemed, then return

The gospel-order question. Draw out why it matters that God forgives for his own sake rather than because we deserve it, and the significance of *return unto me; for I have redeemed thee* — redemption first, the call home resting on it. The hinge of the hour.

Question 6 — A god you hold up or the God who holds you

The closer. Ask what good gifts we are most tempted to turn into gods that cannot save, and draw out the difference between a god you must hold up and the God who holds you. End on leaning the full weight on the One who needs no nails.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 17), on chapters forty-one through forty-four — his reading of the *fear not* promises and the satire on idols.
- ♦ Luther's Small Catechism, the explanation of the First Commandment and of redemption in the Second Article — read alongside the kinsman-Redeemer and the gods that cannot save.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on chapters forty-one through forty-four — careful on the *go'el* and the blotting out of sins.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapters forty-one through forty-four — a clear lay treatment of the hand-holding God and the idol satire.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ 1 Peter 1:18–21, read slowly this week — redeemed not with silver and gold but with the precious blood of Christ, the kinsman-Redemption of Isaiah made explicit, and a fit meditation for the teacher on the price of being bought back.

A Final Word

Teach this hour as one whose hand is being held. It is no good telling the class about the God who holds the worm's hand if you are, in your own life, frantically holding up some idol of your own — some good gift you have nailed down and asked to deliver you. Lay it down first. Let God take your hand, and you will teach these chapters with the steadiness of a man being led across the street, not one pretending the traffic does not frighten him.

Keep the gospel order intact. Do not let the class leave thinking they must return to God in order to be redeemed; teach them the *for* — *return unto me; for I have redeemed thee*. The redemption is finished, the sins are blotted out for his own sake, and the call home rests on a price already paid. This order is the difference between religion and the gospel; guard it.

And leave them held, not holding. Every idol must be propped up and will one day topple; the living God needs no nails and never falls. May the Lord Jesus — the one Saviour, the kinsman-

Redeemer, the first and the last who was dead and is alive — take your class by the right hand, carry them through every flood, blot out their sins for his own sake, and hold them so securely that they finally stop trying to hold themselves up.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION EIGHTEEN

Cyrus the Anointed

Isaiah 44:24–48:22 · with Philippians 2:9–11 and John 3:14–17

A Note to the Teacher

This long section turns on one astonishing fact: God names a pagan king, by name, a century and a half before he is born. *Cyrus* — a Persian who would not exist for generations — is called *my shepherd* and, more startling still, *his anointed*, the very word that becomes *messiah*. Teach the class to feel the audacity. God so completely governs the future that he can name the man who will free his people from Babylon before that man's great-grandparents are born. And he does it to make a point against the idols: anyone can claim to be god, but only the true God can name the future and bring it to pass. Fulfilled prophecy is God's signature, the proof that he alone is God while the idols stand silent and have to be nailed down so they will not topple.

And the way God works through Cyrus teaches the class one of the most useful truths in the Christian life. Cyrus *knew not* the Lord — he was no believer — yet God girded him, held his right hand, and worked salvation through him. The prophet marvels, *thou art a God that hidest thyself*. Teach the class that God constantly works behind masks, governing the world and rescuing his people through ordinary rulers, events, and people who have no idea they are serving him. This is a comfort when we cannot trace his hand: the hidden God is not the absent God. He is at work in the pagan king, in the unremarkable circumstance, in the very things that seem to have nothing to do with him.

Use this guide as a tool. John 3:14–17 lets the class see how *look unto me, and be ye saved* becomes the lifted-up Son of Man and the look of faith; Philippians 2:9–11 shows Paul taking God's own oath — *unto me every knee shall bow* — and applying it directly to the Lord Jesus, a plain witness to

his deity. And do not miss the tender heart of the section: while Babylon's gods must be hauled away on weary pack animals, the living God says *even to hoar hairs will I carry you* — the difference between a god you carry and the God who carries you.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

God names a pagan king a century and a half early to prove he alone rules the future, works salvation through masks we cannot always trace, flings the invitation *look unto me, and be ye saved* to the ends of the earth, and carries his people to their gray hairs — so the class learns that faith is a look at the lifted-up Lord Jesus, before whom every knee will bow, and that the God who carries is better than the gods we must.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the God who names the future.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 44:24–48. Watch God name Cyrus his shepherd and his anointed (44:28; 45:1), hear the worldwide invitation of 45:22, and note the idols of Babylon that must be carried.
- ◆ Mark the naming of Cyrus and be ready to explain that it comes roughly a century and a half before his birth, and that *anointed* is the word *messiah*. Be ready to teach fulfilled prophecy as God's signature against the idols.
- ◆ Underline 45:15 — *a God that hidest thyself* — and 45:4–5, where Cyrus *knew not* the Lord. Be ready to teach God working behind masks, and the comfort of the hidden God when we cannot trace his hand.
- ◆ Set Isaiah 45:22 (*look unto me, and be ye saved*) beside Numbers 21 and John 3:14–17. Have the bronze serpent ready: faith is a look, not a work.
- ◆ Note 45:23 (*unto me every knee shall bow*) and Philippians 2:9–11, where Paul applies God's oath to the Lord Jesus. Be ready to draw the deity of Christ, and the difference between bowing now and bowing at the last.
- ◆ Mark 46:1–4 (the carried idols and the carrying God) and 48:10–11 (the furnace of affliction, *for mine own sake*). Pray that you would teach as one being carried, not as one hauling his own god.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · God names the future — and fulfilled prophecy is his signature against the idols.

Teach the class to grasp why God makes such a point of naming Cyrus so far in advance. It is not a parlor trick; it is a courtroom proof. Throughout these chapters God challenges the idols to a contest: *show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that ye are gods*. The idols are silent, because a carved log cannot know tomorrow. But the living God names a specific man — Cyrus — a century and a half before his birth, declares exactly what he will do, and then does it. Teach the class that fulfilled prophecy is therefore God's *signature*, the mark that authenticates him as the true God against every pretender. Only the One who governs the future can announce it in advance and bring it to pass. This is meant to steady the class's confidence: the God they trust is not one god among many but the only One who holds tomorrow, demonstrated by his ability to write the name of a Persian king into prophecy generations ahead. The idols must be propped up and nailed down; the living God writes history before it happens and signs his name to it in fulfilled prophecy.

Two · God works behind masks — the hidden God is not the absent God.

Here is one of the most practically useful truths in Scripture, and Cyrus is the great example of it. God girds Cyrus, holds his right hand, and works the rescue of Israel through him — and Cyrus *knew not* the Lord. He was a pagan, pursuing his own imperial ambitions, with no notion that he was God's instrument. The prophet marvels: *thou art a God that hidest thyself*. Teach the class what the church has long called God's masks — the ordinary people, rulers, events, and vocations through which the hidden God governs the world and cares for his people, none of them aware they are serving him. The doctor who does not believe, the official who means only his own gain, the circumstance that seems random — God works his purposes through all of them. Teach the class the double lesson. First, patience: because God works hidden, through masks, his hand is often untraceable in the moment, and we must wait to see what he was doing. Second, comfort: the hidden God is not the absent God. When you cannot see him at work, when the instruments of your rescue do not even know him, he is no less in control than when Cyrus, who knew him not, marched out at exactly the right hour to set the captives free. Teach the class to trust the God who hides himself — and to stop concluding, from his hiddenness, that he is gone.

Three · Faith is a look, not a work — look unto the lifted-up Lord and be saved.

Teach the gospel center of the section, and teach it as the simplest thing in the world. God flings an invitation to the whole earth: *Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth*. Mark the verb — *look*. Not climb, not labor, not achieve, not qualify. *Look*. Teach the class why this single word carries the whole gospel. Salvation is not something we accomplish but something we receive by looking away from ourselves to God. And teach the picture the Lord Jesus himself chose to explain it: the bronze serpent. When Israel was dying of snakebite in the wilderness, God told Moses to lift a bronze serpent on a pole, and the promise was that anyone who *looked* at it would live. The dying Israelite did not climb the pole, did not earn the cure, did not even have to crawl closer — he simply turned his eyes and looked, and lived. The Lord Jesus said: *as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish*. Teach the class the glory of it: faith is a look at the lifted-up Christ, and the weakest, dying, most disqualified sinner can do it, because looking is not a work. You do not save yourself by the strength of your looking; you are saved by the One you look at. Teach the class to stop climbing and simply look — *all the ends of the earth* — to the Lord Jesus lifted up.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; a long section, so keep a steady pace.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:14	A pagan king, named — prophecy as God's signature (44:28–45:7)
0:14–0:22	A God that hideth himself — working behind masks (45:4, 15)
0:22–0:34	Look unto me, and be ye saved — the look of faith (45:22; John 3)
0:34–0:42	Every knee shall bow — the deity of Christ (45:23; Phil 2)
0:42–0:52	The God who carries vs. the gods you carry; the furnace (46; 48:10–11)
0:52–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 42:1–9 and Session Nineteen

Pacing Tip

The center of gravity is *look unto me, and be ye saved* and the bronze serpent; build the hour toward the look of faith. The Cyrus material is the foundation — give it enough to establish prophecy as God's signature, but do not get lost in Persian history. Protect the carrying-God

segment, which is the tenderest thing in the section and lands closest to the old and weak in your class.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the section's movements.

A Pagan King, Named

Open with the astonishment. *Thus saith the Lord... that saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure... Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden.* Teach the class three shocks in those lines. First, the *name*: Cyrus, a specific Persian king, is named roughly a century and a half before his birth — not a vague figure but a name written into prophecy generations ahead. Second, the *titles*: God calls this pagan *my shepherd* and *his anointed* — and *anointed* is the very word that becomes *messiah*. A pagan king is God's anointed instrument to free Israel and rebuild Jerusalem. Third, the *purpose*: God means this naming as proof. In these chapters he repeatedly challenges the idols to predict the future, and they cannot; a carved god knows nothing of tomorrow. But the living God names Cyrus, declares his work, and brings it to pass. Teach the class that fulfilled prophecy is God's signature — the authenticating mark that he alone is God. The idols must be nailed down so they will not fall; the true God writes the name of a future king into his word and then raises that king up on schedule.

A God That Hideth Himself

Now teach the manner of God's working, because the class will use this all their lives. Cyrus did the Lord's work without knowing the Lord: *I girded thee, though thou hast not known me.* He was a pagan with his own ambitions, and God worked Israel's rescue straight through him. The prophet bursts out, *Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.* Teach the class the old and precious truth of God's masks — that he governs the world and cares for his people through ordinary people, rulers, and events that have no idea they serve him. The unbelieving official, the indifferent circumstance, the secular instrument — God works his saving purposes through all of them, hidden behind the mask of the ordinary. Then draw the two applications. First, patience: because God works hidden, you often cannot trace his hand in the moment; you must wait, sometimes years, to see what he was doing. Second, comfort: the hidden God is not the absent God. When the instruments of your rescue do not even believe in him, when you cannot see his hand at all, he is no less at work than he was in Cyrus, who knew him not and yet served

him perfectly. Teach the class to read their own untraceable seasons through Cyrus — the hidden God is still the saving God.

Look Unto Me, and Be Ye Saved

Come to the gospel heart, and make it as simple as God makes it. *Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.* Two things to teach. First, the breadth: *all the ends of the earth* — this is no narrow invitation to one nation but a summons flung to the whole world, the Gentiles included, anyone anywhere. Second, and chiefly, the verb: *look*. Not work, not climb, not earn — *look*. Teach the class the bronze serpent, because the Lord Jesus chose it to explain his own death. In Numbers 21, Israel was dying of venomous snakebite, and God told Moses to lift a bronze serpent on a pole; whoever *looked* at it lived. The dying man did not climb the pole or earn the healing or even crawl nearer — he turned his eyes and looked, and the look was enough, because the power was in what God had lifted up, not in the strength of the looking. And the Lord Jesus said: *as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* Teach the class the liberty of this. Faith is a look at the crucified Christ, and the weakest, most disqualified, most dying sinner can look. You are not saved by the quality of your gaze but by the One you gaze upon. Stop climbing; look and live.

A Craft Note on the Look

Some in the class have spent years trying to *feel* saved, climbing an inner pole of stronger faith. Free them with the serpent. The dying Israelite was not asked to feel anything — only to look. Tell the class: the look that saves is not a powerful look but a look at a powerful Savior. Even a weak, doubting, exhausted glance at the lifted-up Lord Jesus is enough, because the life is in him, not in the strength of your eyes.

Every Knee Shall Bow

Teach the oath and what the New Testament does with it. God swears by himself: *I have sworn by myself... That unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.* This is God's solemn oath that all creation will one day acknowledge him. Now bring Philippians: Paul takes this very oath — the words God swore *unto me* — and applies them directly to the Lord Jesus, declaring that at his name every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord. Teach the class the force of this for the deity of Christ. Paul did not hesitate to take an oath God swore about himself and say it is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus, because Paul confessed him to be that very Lord. The knee that Isaiah

says will bow to God is the knee Paul says will bow to Christ — because they are one Lord. Then teach the sober distinction the class must hear: *every* knee will bow. The only question is *when* and *how*. Some bow now, gladly, in faith, calling him Savior; all will bow at the last, willing or not, when he is revealed as Judge. Teach the class that it is infinitely better to bow now in love than to bow then in dread — the same knee, the same Lord, but the difference between a homecoming and a sentence. Bow now, while bowing is still the embrace of a Savior.

The God Who Carries vs. the Gods You Carry

End on the tenderest contrast in the section, and let it rest on the oldest and weakest in the room. As Babylon falls, Isaiah pictures her gods being evacuated: *Bel boweth down, Nebo stoopeth, their idols were upon the beasts... they are a burden to the weary beast*. Teach the class the image — the great gods of Babylon, helpless, hauled away on the backs of exhausted pack animals, dead weight their worshipers must carry to safety. The gods cannot carry their people; their people must carry them. Then set against it the word of the living God: *which are borne by me from the belly, which are carried from the womb: and even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you*. Teach the class the whole gospel in the contrast. Every false religion is finally a god you must carry — a system you prop up, a deity you defend, a weight you haul. The true faith is the gospel of a God who carries you, from the womb to the gray hairs and through death itself. And make it land on the old and the failing: *even to hoar hairs will I carry you*. To the believer afraid of growing weak, of becoming a burden, of the years when they can do nothing for God, Isaiah says God's commitment runs *to the hoar hairs* and beyond — he who carried you as an infant will carry you in your last frailty, because he made you and he will bear you. The idol is a burden on your back; you are a child on his.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Why does God make such a point of naming Cyrus so far ahead?”

To prove, in a courtroom way, that he alone is God. Throughout these chapters God challenges the idols to predict the future, and they cannot — a carved log knows nothing of tomorrow. So God names a specific man, Cyrus, roughly a century and a half before his birth, declares exactly what he will do, and then does it. Teach the class that fulfilled prophecy is God's signature, the authenticating mark that he is the true God against every pretender. Only the One who governs the future can announce it in advance and bring it to pass. The naming of Cyrus is not a curiosity;

it is evidence, meant to steady our confidence that the God we trust is not one option among many but the only One who holds tomorrow — demonstrated by his writing a Persian king's name into prophecy generations ahead.

“What does it mean that God works through ‘masks’?”

It means God governs the world and rescues his people through ordinary people and events that do not know they are serving him. Cyrus did the Lord's work without knowing the Lord — *I girded thee, though thou hast not known me* — and the prophet marvels, *thou art a God that hidest thyself*. The church has long spoken of God's masks: the unbelieving ruler, the indifferent circumstance, the secular instrument through which the hidden God quietly works his saving purposes. Teach the class the comfort: the hidden God is not the absent God. When you cannot trace his hand, when the very means of your rescue have no idea they serve him, he is no less in control than he was with Cyrus. And teach the patience it requires — because he works hidden, you often see what he was doing only long afterward. The hiddenness is not absence; it is the way the saving God usually works.

“Why does it matter that we're told to ‘look’ rather than to work?”

Because *look* is the whole gospel in one word. God says *look unto me, and be ye saved* — not climb, not labor, not qualify. The Lord Jesus explained it with the bronze serpent: dying Israelites were healed not by climbing the pole or earning the cure but simply by *looking* at what God had lifted up. The look was enough because the power was in the serpent God raised, not in the strength of the looking. So it is with the cross: faith is a look at the lifted-up Christ, and the weakest, most disqualified, most dying sinner can do it, because looking is not a work. Teach the class the freedom here — you are not saved by the quality of your gaze but by the One you gaze upon. People exhaust themselves trying to climb an inner pole of stronger faith; the gospel says stop climbing and look. Even a weak glance at the lifted-up Lord Jesus is enough.

“How does ‘every knee shall bow’ prove the deity of Christ?”

By what Paul dares to do with it. God swears in Isaiah, *unto me every knee shall bow* — a solemn oath that all creation will acknowledge God himself. Paul takes that very oath and applies it directly to the Lord Jesus, declaring that at his name every knee shall bow and every tongue confess him as Lord. He would not transfer an oath God swore about himself onto a mere creature; he applies it to the Lord Jesus because he confesses him to be that Lord. The knee Isaiah says bows to God is the knee Paul says bows to Christ, because they are one Lord. Teach the class also the sober side: *every knee will bow* — the only question is when and how. Some bow now, gladly, in faith; all will

bow at the last, willing or not. It is infinitely better to bow now in love than at the end in dread — the same knee, but the difference between a homecoming and a sentence.

“How can affliction be a comfort? The exile sounds like punishment.”

Because God calls it a *furnace*, not a grave. He says, *I have refined thee... I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction* — and a furnace refines; it burns away the dross without destroying the gold. Teach the class the difference this makes. Affliction in the hand of this God is not destruction but refining; it has a purpose and an end, and the Refiner watches the fire so that it purifies without consuming. That does not make the furnace pleasant, but it changes what it means — the heat is doing something, not merely hurting. And teach why it matters that God saves *for mine own sake, even for mine own sake*: the ground of the rescue is his own name and glory, not our deserving, which is exactly why it holds. If he saved us because we deserved it, the salvation would rise and fall with our worth; because he saves for his own sake, it rests on something that never changes. The furnace refines, and the Refiner saves for his own sake — both truths turn affliction from a sign of abandonment into a sign of his committed, purifying hand.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — Cyrus named, and prophecy as God's signature

A strong opener. Draw out why God makes such a point of naming Cyrus so far in advance, and how fulfilled prophecy is God's signature, proving he alone is God against the silent idols. Land it on the class's confidence in the God who holds tomorrow.

Question 2 — The God who hides himself

The masks question. Press what it means that God works through people and events that do not know they serve him, how this calls for patience, and how it comforts when we cannot trace his hand. The hidden God is not the absent God.

Question 3 — Look, and be saved

The gospel center. Draw out why we are told to *look* rather than to work or climb, and use the bronze serpent and John 3:14 to show that faith is a look, not a work. Free the class from climbing an inner pole; have them look at the lifted-up Lord Jesus.

Question 4 — Every knee shall bow

The deity question. Use Philippians 2 to show Paul applying God's oath to the Lord Jesus, and the difference between bowing now in faith and bowing at the last whether we will or no. Urge the better bowing — now, in love.

Question 5 — The God who carries you

The tenderest question, for the old and weak. Draw out the difference between a religion that is a god you carry and the gospel of a God who carries you, and the comfort of *even to hoar hairs will I carry you*. Let the failing in the room hear it.

Question 6 — The refining furnace, for his own sake

The closer. Ask how it comforts that affliction can be a refining furnace rather than destruction, and why it matters that God saves for his own sake and not because we deserve it. End on a salvation grounded in his unchanging name.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ◆ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 17), on chapters forty-four through forty-eight — his reading of Cyrus, the hidden God, and *look unto me, and be ye saved*.
- ◆ Luther on the *larvae Dei*, the masks of God — his teaching that God governs and provides through ordinary vocations and rulers, read alongside Cyrus who knew him not.

Commentaries

- ◆ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on chapters forty-four through forty-eight — careful on the Cyrus prophecy and the carrying God.
- ◆ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapters forty-four through forty-eight — a clear lay treatment of the named king, the look of faith, and the furnace.

Devotional Reading

- ◆ John 3:14–17, read slowly this week — the Son of Man lifted up as Moses lifted the serpent, that whosoever looks in faith might live, Isaiah 45:22 made flesh, and a fit meditation for the teacher on the look that saves.

A Final Word

Teach this hour as one being carried, not as one hauling his own god. It is easy to teach the contrast between the carried idols and the carrying God while privately propping up some idol of your own — a reputation, a plan, a security you defend and cannot set down. Lay it on the weary beast and let it go. Let God carry you this week, and you will teach the carrying God with the voice of a child on his Father's shoulders, not a man straining under a load.

Keep the look at the center. Cyrus, the masks, the furnace — all of it surrounds and serves the one invitation: *look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth*. Do not let the class leave admiring a prophecy about a Persian king and missing the lifted-up Christ they are called to look at. Faith is a look, and the weakest can give it. Point their eyes to the One on the pole.

And leave them carried, and bowing now. Every knee will bow; better the glad bow of faith today than the forced bow of dread at the last. May the Lord Jesus — the lifted-up Savior before whom every knee shall bow, the God who carries his people to their gray hairs — free your class from every god they must hold up, gather their eyes to himself lifted high, and carry them all the way home.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION NINETEEN

The Servant: A Light to the Nations

Isaiah 42:1–9 · with Matthew 12:15–21 and Luke 2:25–32

A Note to the Teacher

You have arrived at the first of the four Servant Songs, the heart of the gospel in Isaiah and one of the richest seams of Christ in the whole Old Testament. This is the passage you deliberately set aside back in chapter forty-two; now give it a session of its own. Teach the class first to see the puzzle the Songs pose and then to see its solution. All through these chapters God calls *Israel* his servant — and yet the Servant of the Songs has a mission *to* Israel, and is faithful exactly where Israel failed. So the Servant cannot simply be the nation. He is the true and faithful Israel, the one who does what Israel was called to do and could not — and the New Testament names him without hesitation: the Lord Jesus. Once the class sees the Servant as the true Israel, the Lord Jesus, these chapters open like a door.

And the portrait is exquisite. The Father says, *in whom my soul delighteth* — nearly the very words spoken over the Lord Jesus at his baptism. Teach the class that this delight is the root of all their assurance: not the Father's shaky pleasure in *us*, but his unshakable delight in his Son, which covers everyone hidden in him. We are *accepted in the beloved*. Then comes the gentleness that has comforted the weak for twenty-seven centuries: *a bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench*. The Servant does not snap the bent reed or snuff the guttering wick; he is tender with exactly the people the world discards. And — this is the wonder the class must not miss — the Servant who will not break the bruised reed is himself unbreakable: *he shall not fail nor be discouraged*. His gentleness is not weakness; it is the gentleness of overwhelming strength held under perfect control.

Use this guide as a tool. Matthew 12:15–21 quotes this Song in full and applies it directly to the Lord Jesus — the bruised reed text is the longest Old Testament quotation in Matthew; Luke 2:25–32 puts the *light to the Gentiles* on the lips of old Simeon, holding the infant Christ. Teach the hour as a portrait of the Savior: delighted in by the Father, gentle with the weak, unbreakable in himself, and given as light to a blind and imprisoned world.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

The first Servant Song shows the true and faithful Israel, the Lord Jesus, in whom the Father delights — gentle enough never to break a bruised reed or quench a smoking flax, yet unbreakable enough never to fail himself — given as a light to open blind eyes and free prisoners, so the class learns that the Father's delight in the Son is the root of their assurance and that the Servant is tender with exactly the weak faith they fear they have.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the first Servant Song.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 42:1–9 slowly — the first of the four Servant Songs. Hear the Father's delight in 42:1, the gentleness of 42:3, the unbreakable strength of 42:4, and the light to the nations in 42:6–7.
- ◆ Be ready to name the four Servant Songs (42:1–9; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12) and to explain why the Servant cannot simply be the nation Israel — he has a mission *to* Israel and is faithful where Israel failed.
- ◆ Set Isaiah 42:1 (*in whom my soul delighteth*) beside Matthew 3:17 (the baptism) and Ephesians 1:6 (*accepted in the beloved*). Be ready to teach the Father's delight in the Son as the root of assurance.
- ◆ Mark 42:2–3 — the quiet manner, the bruised reed, the smoking flax. Have Matthew 12:15–21 ready, where Matthew quotes the whole Song of the Lord Jesus.
- ◆ Underline 42:4 — *he shall not fail nor be discouraged* — and be ready to teach the difference between gentleness that is weakness and gentleness that is strength under control.
- ◆ Note 42:6–7 (light to the Gentiles, blind eyes, prisoners) and have Luke 2:32 and 4:18 ready. Pray over the smoking-flax believers in your class; this Song is for them.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · The Servant is the true and faithful Israel — the Lord Jesus.

Teach the class the interpretive key that unlocks all four Songs. In these chapters God repeatedly calls the nation Israel *my servant* — chosen, called, beloved. But the Servant who sings in the Songs is different in a way that cannot be missed: he has a mission *to* Israel — *to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel* — and he is faithful precisely where the nation was faithless. A servant cannot be sent to restore himself. So the Servant of the Songs is not the nation; he is the one who *is* what Israel was meant to be and never managed — the true and faithful Israel, the obedient Son the disobedient nation failed to be. Teach the class that the New Testament identifies this Servant plainly as the Lord Jesus: Matthew quotes this very Song of him, Philip preaches Christ from the fourth Song to the Ethiopian, and the Lord Jesus takes the Servant's mission as his own. And teach what this does for reading the Old Testament: where Israel was called to be a light and hid it, where Israel was called to obey and rebelled, the Lord Jesus steps into Israel's place and does it all — the faithful Israelite on behalf of the faithless ones, including us. Seeing the Servant as the true Israel is not a clever trick; it is how the apostles read these chapters, and it opens them.

Two · The Father's delight in the Son is the root of our assurance.

Linger on the Father's words, because they are the foundation of everything a troubled conscience needs. *Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth.* These are nearly the very words the Father spoke aloud over the Lord Jesus at his baptism — *this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.* Teach the class to hear how total that delight is, and then teach the move that turns it into assurance. Paul says we are *accepted in the beloved* — the Father's delight in his Son spills over to cover everyone hidden in the Son. This is the rock under the believer on his worst day. If your assurance rested on the Father's delight in *you*, it would rise and fall with your obedience, and you have watched it fall. But your assurance rests on the Father's delight in the *Son*, which never wavers — and you are in the Son. Teach the class the staggering comfort: on the day you have failed most completely, the Father's pleasure in his beloved Servant is exactly as full as ever, and you, hidden in that Servant, are accepted in him still. The delight that anchors you is not a delight you generate; it is a delight already perfect and complete in Christ, and yours because you are in him.

Three · The Servant's gentleness is the gentleness of great strength under control.

Here is the truth that makes the bruised reed such good news, and the class must see both halves of it. First the gentleness: *a bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench*. A bruised reed is a stalk already bent and split, fit only to be tossed and snapped; smoking flax is a wick guttering down to its last, more smoke than flame, the kind of light a person flicks out without thinking. The Servant breaks neither. He is tender with exactly the damaged, the barely-burning, the nearly-gone. But now the second half, without which the first is hollow: this same Servant *shall not fail nor be discouraged* — the very words used of the reed and the flax are denied of him. He is unbreakable. Teach the class why both halves matter together. A gentleness that is merely weakness — the tenderness of someone who could not hurt you if he tried — is no comfort, because it cannot protect you either. The Servant's gentleness is the opposite kind: the gentleness of overwhelming strength held under perfect control. He could break the bruised reed with a breath; he does not. Like a surgeon whose hands are gentle *because* they are strong and skilled, not because they are feeble, the Servant's tenderness toward the weak is the restraint of infinite power. Teach the class that this is why his gentleness can be trusted: it is not the softness of one who cannot hold you but the tenderness of one who could crush you and chooses, instead, to carry you.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; a short, dense text, so go deep rather than wide.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:14	The songs of the Servant — who is the Servant? (the four Songs)
0:14–0:24	Behold my Servant — the Father's delight (42:1; Matt 3:17; Eph 1:6)
0:24–0:36	A bruised reed shall he not break (42:2–3; Matt 12)
0:36–0:44	He shall not fail — strength under control (42:4)
0:44–0:52	A light to the nations (42:6–7; Luke 2:32; 4:18)
0:52–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 49:1–16 and Session Twenty

Pacing Tip

This is a short text with deep wells; resist the urge to rush to the next chapter. The bruised reed

and smoking flax deserve the largest block, because they land on the actual condition of half your class. Protect that segment and the Father's delight; the four-Songs introduction can be brief. A class that leaves knowing the Servant will not snap their bent reed has heard the heart of the Song.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the Song's movements.

The Songs of the Servant

Begin by orienting the class to what they are entering. Woven through Isaiah 40 to 55 are four passages of surpassing beauty, long called the Servant Songs — this one, then 49:1–6, then 50:4–9, and finally the great fourth Song that runs from 52:13 through all of chapter 53. Teach the class to hold the question these Songs pose: who is this Servant? In the surrounding chapters God calls the nation Israel his servant again and again. But the Servant of the Songs cannot be the nation, and the reason is decisive: he is given a mission *to* Israel — to restore Jacob, to gather the preserved of Israel — and a servant cannot be sent to restore himself. More than that, he is faithful exactly where the nation failed; he is everything Israel was called to be and was not. Teach the class the conclusion the apostles drew: the Servant is the true and faithful Israel, the one Israelite who kept covenant on behalf of all the rest — the Lord Jesus. Tell them this is not a Christian imposition on the text but the reading the New Testament itself gives: Matthew quotes this first Song of him, and Philip, beginning at the fourth Song, *preached unto him the Lord Jesus*. With that key in hand, the Songs open.

Behold My Servant

Teach the Father's introduction of his Servant, and let the class hear the love in it. *Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him*. Three things to draw out. The Servant is *upheld* — sustained by the Father in his mission. He is the Father's *elect*, his chosen one. And he is the one *in whom my soul delighteth* — language so close to the voice from heaven at the Jordan that the class should hear the echo: *this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*. Note too the Spirit: *I have put my spirit upon him* — fulfilled visibly when the Spirit descended as a dove at the baptism. So the whole Trinity stands in this verse: the Father delighting, the Son the Servant, the Spirit resting upon him. Then teach the class to make the verse their own through Paul's phrase, *accepted in the beloved*. The Father's delight in the Son is not

a private transaction between heaven and the Servant; it overflows to cover all who are hidden in him. Teach the class that this is the root of an assurance that holds on the worst day: the Father's pleasure does not rest on your performance but on his Son, and you are in his Son.

A Craft Note on Assurance

When a class member says "I don't feel God could be pleased with me," do not argue about their feelings or their record. Move the ground. The Father's delight rests on the Son, *in whom my soul delighteth* — and you are in the Son. The question is not whether the Father delights in your performance today but whether he delights in his beloved Servant. He does, perfectly and forever; and you are accepted in the beloved, not in yourself.

A Bruised Reed Shall He Not Break

Come to the tenderest lines in the Song, and teach them to the weakest in the room. First the manner: *He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street*. The Servant sent to bring justice to all the nations works without fanfare, self-promotion, or spectacle — a surprising quietness for so vast a mission, and a lesson in how God's kingdom actually comes: not by force or noise but quietly, through the Word, the way leaven works in dough. Then the two images, and unfold each one. *A bruised reed shall he not break*: a reed already bent and split, useless, fit only to be tossed and snapped — and the Servant will not snap it. *And the smoking flax shall he not quench*: a wick burned down to its last, guttering, more smoke than flame, the dying light anyone would pinch out without a thought — and the Servant will not pinch it out. Teach the class who these images describe: not the strong and flourishing believer but the damaged one, the barely-burning one, the faith that feels more like smoke than fire. And teach the good news for exactly such people — which is most of us, most of the time. The Servant does not require you to be a strong flame before he will have you. He tends the smoldering wick; he splints the bent reed. The faith you are ashamed of — weak, flickering, nearly out — is precisely the faith he will not quench. Matthew saw this in the Lord Jesus and quoted the whole Song of him; teach the class that the gentle Servant of Isaiah and the Friend of failures in the Gospels are one.

He Shall Not Fail

Now teach the line that keeps the gentleness from collapsing into mere softness. Of the Servant who will not *break* the bruised reed nor let the flax be *quenched*, Isaiah says: *he shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth* — and the Hebrew uses the very words of the reed and the flax. The Servant who will not break the weak is himself unbreakable; the one who will

not let the wick gutter out cannot himself be quenched. Teach the class why this matters so much for their comfort. A gentleness that is only weakness is no refuge — the tenderness of someone who is soft because he is feeble cannot protect you, because he could not stand against anything that came for you. But the Servant's gentleness is the other kind entirely: the gentleness of overwhelming strength held under perfect control. He could break the bruised reed with a word; he chooses not to. Give the class the picture of a surgeon, whose hands are gentle on the wound precisely because they are strong and skilled, not because they are weak. Or a father's great hand closing softly around a child's. Teach the class that this is why the Servant's tenderness can bear their whole weight: it is not the softness of one too weak to hold them but the restraint of one strong enough to crush them, who has chosen instead to carry them — and who will not fail in the carrying, because he cannot be broken.

A Light to the Nations

End on the Servant's mission, and let the class find their own condition in it. *I the Lord have called thee in righteousness... and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.* Teach the class that the three things the Servant comes to remedy are a portrait of every person apart from him: *blind* — unable to see God, ourselves, or the truth; *imprisoned* — bound in a captivity we cannot break, slaves to sin and death; *in darkness* — sitting in the shadow of the grave with no light of our own. This is not other people's condition; it is ours, before the Servant comes. And then teach how the Lord Jesus fulfilled the mission to the letter. Old Simeon took the infant in his arms and called him *a light to lighten the Gentiles*; the Lord Jesus opened his ministry in Nazareth by reading Isaiah's words — *to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind* — and said, *this day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears*. He opened literal blind eyes and the deeper blindness of the heart; he freed literal captives and the deeper captivity of sin; he is the light that finds us sitting in darkness. And note the breadth: *a light of the Gentiles*. From the first Servant Song the salvation is aimed at the nations, at outsiders, at us. Teach the class that the Servant who will not break their bruised reed is the very light that came to open their blind eyes and lead them out of the prison house into his day.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“If Israel is called God’s servant, why can’t the Servant of the Songs just be Israel?”

Because the Servant is sent on a mission *to* Israel, and is faithful where Israel failed — and a servant cannot be sent to restore himself. In the surrounding chapters God does call the nation his servant. But the Servant of the Songs is given the task of raising up the tribes of Jacob and restoring the preserved of Israel; he stands over against the nation as the one who rescues it. And everywhere the nation was faithless — disobedient, a light hidden under a basket — the Servant is faithful. So he is not the nation but the true and faithful Israel: the one Israelite who did what Israel was called to do and could not. Teach the class that the New Testament names him without hesitation — Matthew quotes this Song of the Lord Jesus, and Philip preached Christ from the fourth Song. The Servant is the faithful Israelite who keeps covenant on behalf of all the faithless ones, including us.

“How can the Father’s delight in the Lord Jesus give *me* assurance?”

Through being hidden in him. The Father says of the Servant, *in whom my soul delighteth*, and spoke nearly the same words aloud at the baptism. Paul then says believers are *accepted in the beloved* — the Father’s delight in his Son overflows to cover everyone who is in the Son. This is the rock under you on your worst day. If your assurance rested on the Father’s pleasure in *you*, it would collapse every time you failed; but it rests on his delight in the *Son*, which never wavers, and you are in the Son by faith. Teach the class the comfort concretely: on the day you have sinned most badly, the Father’s delight in his beloved Servant is exactly as full as ever, and you, hidden in that Servant, are accepted in him still. The delight that secures you is not one you produce and could lose; it is already perfect in Christ and yours because you are in him.

“What exactly is a ‘bruised reed’ or ‘smoking flax’? Who are these images about?”

They are pictures of weak, damaged, barely-surviving faith — and they are about most of us, most of the time. A bruised reed is a stalk already bent and split, useless, the kind you would snap and throw away. Smoking flax is a wick burned down to its last, more smoke than flame, the dying light anyone would pinch out without thinking. The Servant breaks neither — he splints the bent reed and tends the smoldering wick. Teach the class who this is good news for: not the strong, flourishing believer but the one whose faith feels like an ember about to go out, the one ashamed of how weak and flickering their trust is. The Servant does not demand a roaring flame before he will have you. The faith you are embarrassed by — dim, guttering, nearly gone — is exactly the faith he has promised not to quench. He is gentlest with the people the world discards.

“If the Servant is so gentle, is he strong enough to actually save me?”

Yes — and Isaiah ties the two together on purpose. Right after promising not to break the bruised reed, he says of the Servant, *he shall not fail nor be discouraged* — using the very words denied to the reed and the flax. The one who will not break the weak is himself unbreakable. Teach the class the difference this makes. A gentleness that is only weakness would be no refuge; someone soft because he is feeble could not protect you from anything. But the Servant's gentleness is the gentleness of overwhelming strength held under control — like a surgeon whose hands are gentle *because* they are strong and skilled. He could break the bruised reed with a breath and chooses to splint it instead. So his tenderness can bear your whole weight: it is not the softness of one too weak to hold you but the restraint of one strong enough to crush you, who has chosen to carry you — and who cannot fail in the carrying.

“The Servant brings ‘justice’ but works so quietly. How does that fit?”

It fits the way God's kingdom actually comes — not by noise but by the Word. Isaiah says the Servant *shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street*, even though his mission is justice for all the nations. We expect world-changing missions to come with armies, slogans, and spectacle; the Servant comes without any of it. Teach the class what this reveals: the kingdom of God advances quietly, like leaven hidden in dough or seed growing secretly, through the unglamorous preaching of the Word and the patient tending of bruised reeds — not through force or fanfare. The Lord Jesus fulfilled this exactly: no earthly throne, no army, mostly small towns and ordinary people, often telling the healed to stay quiet. Teach the class not to despise the quiet means — the Word read, the sacrament given, the weak tended — for that unspectacular quietness is precisely how the Servant brings his justice into the world, and it will not fail.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — The Servant as the true Israel

A strong opener. Draw out why the Servant cannot simply be the nation — he has a mission to Israel and is faithful where Israel failed — and how seeing him as the true and faithful Israel, the Lord Jesus, opens these chapters. The interpretive key for all four Songs.

Question 2 — The Father's delight and our assurance

The assurance question. Press what it means that we are *accepted in the beloved* — that the Father's delight in the Son covers those hidden in him — and how this is the root of assurance on our worst days. Move the ground from our performance to the Son.

Question 3 — The quiet Servant

The manner question. Ask why it is surprising that the One bringing justice to the nations works so quietly, and what his unself-promoting manner tells us about how God's kingdom comes. Honor the quiet means — Word and sacrament — over spectacle.

Question 4 — The bruised reed and the smoking flax

The tenderest question, and the heart of the hour. Draw out what the two images tell us about the kind of people the Servant is gentle with, and why this is such good news for anyone whose faith feels more like smoke than flame. Let the weak in the room hear it about themselves.

Question 5 — Gentleness that is strength under control

The strength question. Press why the Servant's own unbreakable strength matters for our comfort, and the difference between gentleness that is really weakness and the gentleness of great strength held under control. His tenderness can bear our whole weight.

Question 6 — A light to a blind and imprisoned world

The closer. Draw out how blindness, imprisonment, and darkness describe our own condition apart from the Servant, and how the Lord Jesus fulfilled the mission — Simeon's *light to the Gentiles*, the Nazareth sermon. End in his day, led out of the prison house.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 17), on chapter forty-two — his reading of the Servant, the bruised reed, and the light to the Gentiles.
- ♦ The Nunc Dimittis — Simeon's song from Luke 2:29–32, sung in the church's liturgy — *a light to lighten the Gentiles*, Isaiah 42:6 on the lips of an old man holding the Servant.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on the first Servant Song — careful on the identity of the Servant and the gentleness texts.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on chapter forty-two — a clear lay treatment of the Servant, the bruised reed, and the light to the nations.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ Matthew 12:15–21, read slowly this week — the longest Old Testament quotation in Matthew, the bruised reed Song applied in full to the Lord Jesus, a fit meditation for the teacher who tends bruised reeds.

A Final Word

Teach this Song as a bruised reed yourself. You are not a strong flame either; your own faith gutters and smokes more than you would admit to the class. Do not stand over the Song as a robust believer explaining gentleness to the weak — stand under it as one of the bruised reeds the Servant has promised not to break. The class will hear the difference, and they will believe the gentleness because they see it holding you.

Keep both halves of the Servant together. A class given only the gentleness gets a sweet, weak Savior who cannot save; a class given only the strength gets a mighty Servant who might break them. Isaiah gives both in the same breath: the one too tender to break a bruised reed and too strong to ever fail in carrying it. This is the Savior the weak need and the strong need, and the Lord Jesus is both.

And leave them known. Not the bruised reeds hidden away, ashamed, but known to the Servant, tended by his own hand, *accepted in the beloved*. May the Lord Jesus—the Servant in whom the Father delights, the One who will not break a smoking flax or let the bruised reed fall—gather your weak-faith class in his arms, strengthen what is ready to fail, give them light in their darkness, and hold them until they are whole.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWENTY

Servant Who Will Not Fail

Isaiah 49:1–16 · with Acts 13:44–49 and John 20:24–29

A Note to the Teacher

In this second Servant Song, the Servant himself speaks — hear his voice, and teach the class to hear it as the voice of the Lord Jesus. The Song opens with the Servant telling how the Lord called him from the womb and named him, and then there comes a moment of crushing doubt: *I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought*. Teach the class the honesty of this. The Servant does not claim never to have wondered if his work was futile, never to have doubted his cause. But then comes the turn: *yet my judgment is with the Lord, and my work with my God*. The Servant rests his cause not in visible results but in the faithfulness of God. Teach the class that this is the gospel for every laborer who has asked if his work matters, if his faithful plowing is in vain. The answer is: your judgment is with the Lord.

And the Servant is called to something vast: *to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel*, yet this is a *light thing* compared to his real mission — *to be a light of the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach unto the end of the earth*. The scope is staggering: not just Israel but the whole world. Teach the class that the Servant's arms are stretched to hold both the lost sheep of Israel and the seeking Gentiles, and his work shall not fail. And then the Most tender line in the Song: *yet will I not forget thee: for I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands*. The palm-print of the Savior on his nail-scarred hands is the final answer to the question *will he forget me?* He will not. He has written you into his flesh.

Use this guide as a tool. Acts 13:44–49 shows Paul preaching the Servant Song to Gentiles, teaching them that in the Lord Jesus is salvation to the ends of the earth; John 20:24–29 shows Thomas

seeing the nail-prints in the Savior's hands and the Savior claiming them — *be not faithless*. Teach the hour as the Servant's own testimony and the foundation of faith that rests on the Lord's faithfulness, not on visible success.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

The second Servant Song shows the Servant himself speaking of his calling from the womb, his honest doubt about labor in vain, his trust that his cause rests with the Lord, his mission as a light to the Gentiles unto the ends of the earth, and his solemn oath never to forget those whose names are graven on his palms — so the class learns that faith rests on the Lord's faithfulness, not visible success, and that being forgotten by the Savior is impossible.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the second Servant Song.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 49:1–16 aloud — the second Servant Song, in the Servant's own voice. Hear the calling from the womb (49:1–3), the honest *I have laboured in vain* (49:4), and the comfort of the palms (49:15–16).
- ◆ Mark 49:1–3 and be ready to explain that the Servant tells of his own naming from the womb — *the Lord's mouth* named him. The Servant and the true Israel are one, the Lord Jesus.
- ◆ Underline 49:4 — *I have laboured in vain... yet my judgment is with the Lord*. Have an open conversation ready about the doubt and the answer. This is for every weary laborer.
- ◆ Set 49:5–6 (two callings — restore Israel, light to the Gentiles) beside Acts 13:47–48. Be ready to teach the vastness of scope and the salvation unto the ends of the earth.
- ◆ Mark 49:14–16 — *will he forget me* and *I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands*. Have John 20:27 ready; the nail-prints are the answer. Pray over anyone in your class who fears being forgotten.
- ◆ Be ready to speak of the Servant's work from his own lips. The honesty of 49:4 is the gateway to the faith of 49:25.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · The Servant rests his cause in God's faithfulness, not in visible success.

Teach the class the heart of faith by hearing the Servant's honest words. *I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought.* This is not the defeated whisper of a believer who lost faith; it is the honest word of one who worked tirelessly and saw no visible fruit, who poured himself out and the results were hidden or seemed non-existent. Teach the class to feel the weight of this admission. Anyone who has labored long in the church, in ministry, in faithful work that bore no visible result, knows this word. And the Servant's answer is not *do not worry, you will see results, nor your work is secretly bearing fruit you cannot see.* The answer is simpler and deeper: *yet my judgment is with the Lord, and my work with my God.* The Servant does not rest his case on results; he rests it on the Lord. His work is not judged by what he can see but by what the Lord sees. He has *committed* his judgment to the Lord — the outcome is no longer his to weigh. Teach the class that this is the gospel for every faithful laborer in the visible church, every Sunday school teacher who has seen no conversion, every parent who has prayed for a wayward child for decades, every pastor who has preached truth to a dwindling flock. Your judgment is with the Lord. That is enough.

Two · The Servant's work extends to the ends of the earth — a light to the Gentiles.

Teach the vast scope of the Servant's calling, and let the class see themselves in it. The Servant is given a twofold mission: first, *to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel.* This is to gather in the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But the Servant calls this *a light thing*, a relatively small mission compared to what comes next: *I have also given thee for a light of the Gentiles, that my salvation may be a light unto the end of the earth.* Not just Israel but the whole world. The Servant is called to be light to those who were not seeking, who had never heard, who did not know they were in darkness. Paul preached this Song to Gentiles and told them: *thus hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.* Teach the class that this Song is about them, if they are Gentiles — they are the ends of the earth, the ones the Servant came to illumine, and his reaching them is not an afterthought but the climax of his calling.

Three · To be graven on the Savior's palms is to be permanently remembered.

Come to the line that makes the Servant Song deeply personal to the fearful. The Servant knows his people will be afraid, will wonder if he remembers them, if they matter to him in the vastness of his work. And he answers: *Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee: for I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands.* Teach the class that even a mother's love, the most natural affection,

can be broken; she may forget the child of her womb. But the Servant's remembrance is different; it is written into his very flesh. The palms are graven — marked, inscribed, cut into — with the names of his people. Teach the class to understand this literally and spiritually at once: the nail-holes in the crucified Christ's hands are the graven record of us, the proof that we are not forgotten. When Thomas was told to put his finger in the print of the nails, he was being invited to touch the Savior's remembrance of him. Teach your class that they are written there. No power can erase a name from the Savior's palms. To be graven there is to be permanently, indelibly, crucially remembered.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; a Song of honesty and comfort, so give both weight.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:14	The Servant speaks; called from the womb (49:1–3)
0:14–0:27	<i>I have laboured in vain</i> — honest doubt and the Lord's faithfulness (49:4–6)
0:27–0:38	A light to the Gentiles — salvation to the ends of the earth (49:6–10)
0:38–0:50	Graven on the palms — not forgotten (49:14–16)
0:50–0:55	Discussion — two or three questions
0:55–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 50:4–11 and Session Twenty-One

Pacing Tip

The longest segment should be *I have laboured in vain*; this is where the Song lands for most adults in your class. Do not rush past the honest doubt or the answer; stay there and let faith be built on the Lord's faithfulness. Protect also the palm-print line, which is the comfort the whole Song aims at.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the Song's movements.

The Servant Speaks

Open by noting the shift in voice. In the first Servant Song, others spoke *about* the Servant; now the Servant speaks *for himself*. *Listen, O isles, unto me; and hearken, ye people, from far; The Lord hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name.* Teach the class that the Servant is claiming to have been called before time, from the womb, and named by the Lord himself. In the first Song God said of the Servant, *in whom my soul delighteth*; now the Servant himself claims to have been called and named by the Lord. And the claim is that his mouth is *like a sharp sword*, and he is *hid in the shadow of his hand* — the work is hidden, but the word is sharp, cutting, piercing. Teach the class to hear the Lord Jesus claiming this calling as his own: appointed from the foundation of the world, given a word that cuts to the heart, hidden in the Father's hand while his work goes on in the world.

I Have Laboured in Vain

Here is the line that opens the Song to every faithworker. The Servant says, *I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought and vanity.* Do not soften this. The Servant, who was *made a polished shaft*, who has been hidden in the Lord's hand, says his labor *seemed* in vain, his strength *felt* spent for nothing. This is not the bitter complaint of a faithless Servant; it is the honest admission of one who poured himself out and saw no visible harvest. Teach the class that this is the true word for every laborer: the missionary who served a country and the nation fell away, the Sunday school teacher who has taught for years and seen no profession of faith, the pastor who has preached faithfully to a shrinking flock, the parent who has prayed for a prodigal for decades. The Servant knows this labor. And then the turn, the pivot, the gospel: *yet my judgment is with the Lord, and my work with my God.* The Servant commits his judgment to the Lord. He does not measure his success by visible results; he rests it in God's hand. Teach the class that *judgment* here means *vindication* — the Servant's cause will be vindicated by the Lord, not by what we can see. The Lord will judge the worth of the work. Until then, the laborer's call is not to produce results but to commit his work to his God and continue faithful.

Salvation to the Ends of the Earth

Now teach the expansion, the scope stretching beyond expectation. The Servant is given two callings: first, *it is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel.* To restore all of exiled Israel is not small; yet the Servant calls it *a light thing*. Why? Because there is more: *I have also given thee for a light of the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach unto the end of the earth.* The vast mission is not Israel but the nations, the whole world,

everyone far from the Lord sitting in darkness. Paul quotes this Song to Gentiles and says, *Thus hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.* Teach the class that if they are Gentiles, this Song is about them. They are the ends of the earth, the ones the Servant crossed the globe to reach, the ones his arm was stretched to gather. The Servant comes not just for the lost children of Israel but for the lost children of every nation, every people, every tribe, to the ends of the earth. And the promise is that *my salvation shall not tarry* — it will come; it is already coming; it reaches even to where your class sits.

I Will Not Forget Thee

End on the line that turns the Song from cosmic to intimate. The Servant anticipates the fear that rises in the hearts of those he came to save: will he really remember me? In all the nations, all the ends of the earth, can I truly matter to him? *Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?* Even a mother's love can break; she can turn away from the child she bore. *Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.* The difference is inscribed in flesh: *I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands.* Teach the class the double sense of this. Literally, in Isaiah's time, it conjured the image of a name tattooed or carved into a palm — permanent, visible, claimed. Spiritually, for us who know the end of this Song, it is the nail-prints — the Savior's palms pierced in our place, and our names carved into those wounds. The marks that are our salvation are also the marks of our remembrance. We cannot be forgotten by the Lord Jesus because we are written into his wounds. Teach the class not to wonder if they matter to the Savior; they are engraved there, in his palms, where the price was paid.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Does ‘I have laboured in vain’ mean the Servant doubted God?”

No — it means he worked tirelessly and saw no visible fruit. This is not faithlessness but faithfulness met with apparent futility. The Servant is not doubting God; he is stating a fact: his labor *seemed* in vain, his strength *felt* spent for nothing. But he does not leave it there. His answer is to commit his cause to the Lord: *yet my judgment is with the Lord, and my work with my God.* The Servant rests his vindication in God's hand, not in visible results. Teach the class that this is the gospel for every faithful laborer who has seen little visible fruit. You are not called to produce

results; you are called to commit your work to the Lord and continue faithful. Your cause will be vindicated by him, even if the world never sees it.

“Why is restoring Israel called a ‘light thing’?”

Because gathering the lost sheep of Israel is not the Servant's main mission; the main mission is to be a light to the Gentiles, salvation to the ends of the earth. The restoration of Israel is the smaller task compared to the vast work of bringing light to all the nations. The Servant comes not only for the lost house of Israel but for the whole world sitting in darkness. Teach the class that this Song is about them, if they are Gentiles — they are the reason the Servant calls Israel's restoration *a light thing*. His real aim is to reach to the very ends of the earth, to places no one expected him to go, to people who had never heard his name, and to gather them into light.

“What does it mean to have a name ‘graven on the palms’?”

It means being permanently, indelibly inscribed in the Savior's flesh. In ancient times, people sometimes tattooed or carved names onto their palms to mark someone as belonging to them — a permanent claim. For us, it is the nail-prints. The Savior's palms were pierced for our sake, and our names are written into those wounds. Every time the risen Christ shows his hands, he is displaying the proof that his people are not forgotten. We are carved there as permanently as the holes in his hands. To be engraved on his palms is to be absolutely, eternally remembered.

“How can I be sure the Servant won't forget me among so many people?”

Because even a mother can forget the child she bore, but the Servant promises never to forget you. And he proves it by carving your name into his own flesh. The nail-prints are the eternal record of your remembrance. No power in heaven or earth can erase what is graven on his palms. Teach the class to stop worrying about being lost in the crowd; the Savior does not have crowds, he has a people whose names are written in his wounds. And when Thomas doubted, the risen Lord did not scold him; he invited him to touch the proof — *reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands*. Touch the nail-print and know: you are remembered there.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — The Servant speaking from the womb

The calling question. Draw out how the Servant claims to have been called and named from the womb by the Lord, and what it means that the Lord Jesus was appointed for his work from the foundation of the world. Not by accident or later decision, but called from the beginning.

Question 2 — Labor in vain and faith in the Lord

The honesty question, and the heart of the Song. Press what the Servant means by laboring in vain, and why the answer is not *you will see results* but *my judgment is with the Lord*. How does faith rest on God's faithfulness rather than visible success? For every weary laborer.

Question 3 — Raising Israel, light to the Gentiles

The scope question. Draw out the two missions and why restoring Israel is called *a light thing* compared to being light to the Gentiles. Why does the Servant aim at the ends of the earth? The Song is about them.

Question 4 — Salvation graven in flesh

The personal question. Ask what it means that God names the Servant Israel and gives the Servant as a light, and how this names and gives us. The Servant's identity and mission include his people.

Question 5 — Can the Servant forget?

The memory question. Draw out the mother-forgetting image and the graven palms, and what it means for anyone who fears being forgotten. The nail-prints are the answer. Ask the class where they see their own name engraved.

Question 6 — Despised, yet rulers shall rise

The vindication question. Note how the Servant will be despised and rejected, yet kings and rulers shall see and rise, and the reason is written in the nail-prints. How does the lowliness lead to exaltation? End on the risen Lord showing his hands.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 17), on Isaiah 49 — his reading of the Servant's honest labor and the graven palms.

- ♦ John 20:24–29 — Thomas and the nail-prints, the invitation to touch the proof, the Savior's answer to doubt.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on Isaiah 49 — careful on the two callings and the graven palms.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on Isaiah 49 — a clear lay treatment of labor in vain and the comfort of being remembered.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ Acts 13:44–49, read slowly this week — Paul preaching the second Servant Song to Gentiles, *I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles*, and the Gentiles' joy at hearing they are the ends of the earth.

A Final Word

Teach this Song as one who has labored and wondered if the labor was in vain. Do not teach it as one who has only enjoyed visible success. If you have poured yourself out in prayer, teaching, ministry, without seeing the harvest you hoped for, you know the honest word: *I have laboured in vain*. And you know also that the answer is not in the results but in the Lord. Teach the class from the place where you have learned to rest your work in God's hand.

Keep the two missions together. The Servant's work stretches to gather lost Israel and light the ends of the earth; your class is somewhere on that arc, and the Song is about them. Do not let them leave thinking they are outside the Servant's reach.

And leave them graven. Not forgotten, not lost in the crowds, not passed over, but written into the nail-scarred palms of the risen Savior. May the Lord Jesus—whose strength rests in his Father, whose work is judged by the Lord alone, who has written the class into his wounds—keep them faithful in labor they may never see bear fruit, give them joy in being light to dark places, and show them, one day, how every faithful deed was remembered and graven there, in his palms.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWENTY-ONE

Face Set Like a Flint

Isaiah 50:4–11 · with Luke 9:51 and Romans 8:31–39

A Note to the Teacher

The third Servant Song is about obedience unto suffering. The Servant has the tongue of the learned to speak a word to the weary, but his ear is awakened morning by morning to *listen* — obedience comes before speech. Then comes the heart of the Song: *I was not rebellious, neither turned away back: I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair.* The Servant is obedient not by coercion but by his own will: *I gave my back, not — it was taken.* Teach the class that this is no passive suffering but the active choice of the one who could have fled and did not. And the resolve: *I have set my face like a flint*, hard as stone toward Jerusalem, unbreakable. This is the picture of the Lord Jesus walking steadfastly toward the cross, knowing exactly what awaited him, refusing to turn back.

And then the question that anchors the whole Song: *Who is he that shall condemn me? Behold, the Lord God will help me.* The Servant looks at his accusers and asks: who has the authority to condemn me? The Lord God is on my side. This is the word for every believer standing before accusers — earthly or infernal. Paul takes up this very language: *Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect?... Who shall condemn?* And the answer is: the Lord Jesus himself, crucified and risen, intercedes for us. Use this guide to teach the class the two halves of obedience: the listening ear that yields to the Lord, and the face set like flint toward the cross.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

The third Servant Song shows the Servant with the tongue to comfort the weary but the listening

ear that comes first, willing to give his back to the smiters by his own choice, setting his face like flint toward Jerusalem, and asking his accusers: who shall condemn me, when the Lord God will help me? — so the class learns that obedience to God means refusing to turn back and that no accusation can condemn those whom the Lord Jesus defends.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the third Servant Song.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 50:4–11 slowly — the third Servant Song. Hear the listening ear (50:4), the willing suffering (50:6), the flint face (50:7), the vindication (50:8–9), and the trust in darkness (50:10–11).
- ◆ Mark 50:4 — tongue of the learned, ear wakened morning by morning. Be ready to teach that listening comes before speaking, and obedience before ministry.
- ◆ Underline 50:6 — *I gave my back... I gave my cheeks* — three times *I gave*, the will of the Servant. Have Luke 9:51 ready; the Lord Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem.
- ◆ Mark 50:7–9 — *face like flint, who shall condemn, the Lord God will help*. Have Romans 8:31–39 ready; Paul takes up the language of vindication.
- ◆ Note 50:10–11 — trust in the name of the Lord in darkness, not kindling your own light. Pray over the class member walking in darkness right now.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · Obedience is a matter of listening, not just speaking or doing.

Teach the class that the Servant's first mark is not his eloquent tongue but his *listening ear*. *The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, to know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: but he wakeneth mine ear morning by morning.* The awakened ear comes first. Obedience begins not in the mouth but in the ear; the word that comforts the weary flows from the one who listens to the Lord each morning. Teach the class that many of us try to speak truth without first listening; we rush to the ministry without the discipline of morning prayer. But Isaiah shows us the order: listen first, speak second. The teacher who has no quiet hour with the Lord will have no

true word for the weary. This is the foundation of all faithful ministry — the listening ear, wakened and ready, morning by morning.

Two · The Servant's suffering is willing, not coerced; he gives himself.

Listen to the verbs. *I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair.* Not — it was taken from me; not — they forced me. *I gave.* Three times in verse six, the Servant claims the active choice: *I gave my back... I gave my cheeks... I hid not my face.* This is no passive victim but one who chooses suffering. Teach the class what this means for the cross: the Lord Jesus was not dragged to Golgotha against his will; he went willingly, *set his face like a flint to go to Jerusalem*, knowing what awaited him. And the Servant is also *hidden in the shadow of his hand* — the suffering Servant is the protected Servant, held in the Father's hand even as he walks toward the smiters. Teach the class that willingness does not mean happiness, and chosen suffering is no less real; but there is a difference between a victim and someone who lays down his life.

Three · The Servant's accusers have no power; the Lord God is his vindication.

The climax of the Song pivots on a question: *Who is he that shall condemn me? Behold, the Lord God will help me; who is he that shall be mine accuser? Behold, they all shall wax old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up.* The Servant stands before his accusers and asks: who has the authority to condemn me? And the answer is: no one, because the Lord God is on my side. The accuser and the condemned fade like old cloth; the Lord alone stands. Paul takes up this very language in Romans: *Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect?... It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?* Teach the class that this is their foundation: the Lord Jesus is interceding for them at the right hand of God. Their accusers, earthly and infernal, have no standing before his wounds.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; a short, dense Song of obedience and vindication.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:14	The listening ear; tongue of the learned (50:4)
0:14–0:27	I gave my back; willing suffering (50:5–7)
0:27–0:36	Face like flint; the resolve (50:7)

0:36–0:46	Who shall condemn me? (50:8–9; Rom 8)
0:46–0:53	Trust in darkness; kindle no light (50:10–11)
0:53–0:57	Discussion — two or three questions
0:57–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 52:13–53:6 and Session Twenty-Two

Pacing Tip

The three *I gave* lines are the center; protect them. The class needs to hear the willingness, the choice, the active surrender. Then land hard on the vindication: *Who shall condemn?* is the question that ends all other questions.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the Song's movements.

The Listening Ear

Open with the order of obedience. The Lord God gives the Servant *the tongue of the learned, to know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary*, but before that comes the awakened ear: *he wakeneth mine ear morning by morning to hear as the learned*. The listening comes first; the speaking flows from it. Teach the class the discipline this implies: the Servant does not rush to ministry; he begins each day by listening to the Lord. *Morning by morning* — a daily practice, not a one-time event. The ear is wakened again and again, ready to hear what the Lord has to say before the Servant speaks a word to anyone else. Teach the class that this is the foundation of all truthful teaching: not the eloquence of the tongue but the discipline of the listening ear. The best teachers are the ones who pray before they teach.

I Gave My Back

Come to the willingness. *I was not rebellious, neither turned away back. I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting*. Three times the Servant claims the action: *I gave*. This is active, not passive. The Servant is not dragged to suffering; he walks into it with open eyes. Teach the class the force of this for understanding the cross. The Lord Jesus was not the victim of circumstances that happened to him; he walked steadfastly toward Jerusalem, *set his face like a flint*, knowing the smiters awaited him, and *gave* himself. And note that even in this willingness, the Servant is *hid in the shadow of his hand* — the Father's hand shelters the suffering Servant. He is not abandoned. Teach the class that willing

suffering is not easy or unremarkable; it is harder than being forced, because it means saying yes to what you could have refused. And it is that yes that makes the Servant the Redeemer.

Face Like Flint

Teach the resolve that cannot be bent. *I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed.* A face of flint is a face that cannot be moved, broken, or turned back. The Servant has made a choice and holds to it with the hardness of stone. Teach the class what this looks like in the Gospel: the Lord Jesus *steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem*, knowing the cross awaited him. He did not waver, did not turn back when the way grew hard. The same Servant who is gentle enough not to break a bruised reed is hard as flint toward the will of God. Teach the class that this hardness is not cruelty but faithfulness: the determination to see the will of God through to the end, no matter what it costs. Where does this resolve come from? The next line answers: *for he is near that justifieth me.* The Servant can set his face like flint because he is looking ahead to vindication. The Lord is near; the cross leads to resurrection. That sight gives strength to hold the line.

Who Shall Condemn?

Here is the vindication that answers all accusation. *Who is he that shall condemn me? Behold, the Lord God will help me; who is he that shall be mine accuser? Behold, they all shall wax old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up.* The Servant looks at his accusers — the religious leaders, the Roman soldiers, the mockers at the cross — and asks: who among you has the authority to condemn me? And the answer is built in: the Lord God is my help; he is my vindication. Your condemnation has no weight. The accusers fade like old cloth; the moth eats them up. This is not the Servant defending himself; it is the Servant asking his accusers to consider whether they have any standing before the Lord God. Paul takes up this very challenge and moves it from the Servant to the church: *Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again.* Teach the class to stand on this rock: those whom the Lord Jesus has justified cannot be condemned by anyone else. Your accuser, your guilt, your failure — the Lord Jesus is at the right hand of God interceding for you. No one has standing to condemn you.

Trust in Darkness

End on the faith that does not rely on its own light. *Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.* Teach the class that this closes the Song with a call to those walking

in darkness — not the darkness of sin but the darkness of trial, of not knowing the way ahead, of having no light of their own to kindle. The temptation is to light a false fire, to kindle a small comfort of our own making. But the Servant says: do not do that. Trust in the name of the Lord. Stay upon your God. The Servant himself walked this darkness: in the garden, *my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me*, the darkness of not knowing; on the cross, *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me*, the darkness that seemed absolute. And in that darkness he trusted, he stayed upon his God, and the Lord raised him. Teach the class that the darkness they walk does not require them to kindle their own light; it requires them to trust the name of the one who walked deeper darkness and came through it.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“If the Servant is so obedient, how can his work seem in vain (Session 20)?”

Because obedience and visible success are not the same. The Servant is obedient to his Father — listening, speaking, giving his back, setting his face like flint — but the measure of his faithfulness is not visible results; it is faithfulness to the will of God. His work seems in vain to human eyes, but the Lord God is helping him, vindicating him. Teach the class that your obedience is not measured by what you can see; it is measured by whether you are listening to the Lord, speaking his word, and following his face, even when the outcome is hidden.

“What’s the difference between obedience and passivity?”

I gave my back is the answer. The Servant is not passively enduring; he is actively giving. There is will in it, choice, decision. He *gave* himself. This is why the suffering is redemptive — not because suffering in itself is redemptive, but because it is the free choice of the one who could have refused. The Lord Jesus could have called twelve legions of angels; he did not. He walked to the cross. That active choice is what transforms suffering into salvation. Teach the class the difference between being a victim and laying down your life.

“How can I be confident no one can condemn me?”

Because the Lord Jesus is interceding for you at the right hand of God. *Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth... It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who... maketh intercession for us.* Your standing is not your own; it is his. Every time Satan accuses you, the Savior answers for you. Every time guilt rises, the wounds in his hands are the proof you are

paid for. No human judge, no demonic accuser, has standing to condemn anyone whom the Lord Jesus has made righteous.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — The listening ear

The obedience question. Draw out why listening comes before speaking, and what it means to wake the ear morning by morning. What happens when we try to teach without first listening to the Lord?

Question 2 — I gave my back

The willingness question. Press what *I gave* means — not it was taken, but I chose to give. How is this different from being a victim? How does the Lord Jesus embody this in the garden and on the cross?

Question 3 — Face set like flint

The resolve question. Ask what the flint face tells us about the Servant's determination to obey, and where that strength comes from. The same Servant who tends bruised reeds — how can he also be hard as flint?

Question 4 — Who shall condemn?

The vindication question. Draw out what happens when the Servant asks his accusers: who has authority to condemn me? How does Paul apply this in Romans 8? What does this mean for anyone who carries guilt?

Question 5 — Precision of the scourging

The Scripture question. Ask why the specificity of the Song — the smiters, the plucked beard, the spitting — strengthens confidence in the Gospels. How do we know Isaiah was not invented from the Gospel accounts?

Question 6 — Trust in darkness

The faith question. Draw out what it means to trust the name of the Lord when you have no light of your own to kindle, and what the Servant himself walked through. End on the paradox: trusting in darkness means not lighting your own false comfort.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 17), on Isaiah 50 — his reading of the listening ear and the Servant's willingness.
- ♦ Romans 8:31–39, read slowly this week — Paul claiming the Servant's vindication for the church, and the assurance of the interceding Christ.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on Isaiah 50 — careful on the listening ear and the threefold *I gave*.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on Isaiah 50 — a clear lay treatment of obedience and vindication.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ Luke 9:51 and 22:39–46, read slowly this week — the Lord Jesus setting his face to go to Jerusalem, and the garden prayer, the Servant's willing obedience made flesh.

A Final Word

Teach this Song as one who has learned, through listening and loss, what willingness means. Do not stand apart from the Servant's obedience; stand in it. The listening ear, the given back, the flint face — these are the marks of faithful living in an unfaithful world. Ask the Lord to give you the listening ear before you speak the word.

And leave the class standing before their accusers, only to hear the Servant ask them: *Who shall condemn? Behold, the Lord God will help them; who shall be their accuser?* May the Lord Jesus — who listens first, gives himself willingly, sets his face like flint toward the will of God, and intercedes at the right hand of the Father — silence every accuser and vindicate every faithful believer who walks in his train.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWENTY-TWO

Wounded for Our Transgressions

Isaiah 52:13–53:6 · with 1 Peter 2:21–25 and John 1:29

A Note to the Teacher

You have arrived at the fourth Servant Song, and at the passage that stands at the center of the gospel: *Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant... He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief... But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.* This is Isaiah 53, and it is written in the past tense, spoken as though the work is already done. Teach the class that Isaiah saw it coming and spoke of it as though it were history. The redemption is so sure that the prophet writes of it before it happens. And the heart of it all is the substitution: *he was wounded for our transgressions* — he was wounded *for us*, in our place, bearing what we should bear.

The Song answers a question that haunts the guilty conscience: who will pay? And the answer is one: the Servant, willingly, bearing our iniquities as though they were his own. Peter says we are healed *by his stripes*, marked by his wounds. John the Baptist points to him and says, *Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.* This is the one we have been looking for through all the chapters of Isaiah; here he stands, wounded, bruised, carrying us in his stripes.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

The fourth Servant Song shows the Servant despised and rejected, yet exalted; wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities; his chastisement bringing our peace, his stripes our healing — so the class learns that the Lamb of God stands alone bearing the weight of the world's

sin and that all healing, forgiveness, and peace flow from his substitutionary wounds.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the greatest Servant Song.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 52:13–53:12 aloud, slowly — the fourth Servant Song, the gospel in its clearest Old Testament form. Mark every reference to the Servant's suffering and every reference to our redemption through it.
- ◆ Mark 52:13–15 — the exaltation framing the abasement. The Servant will be exalted, yet he was marred more than any man. Be ready to teach both together.
- ◆ Underline 53:4–6 (suffering for us) and 53:10–11 (the soul poured out, the intercession). Have Isaiah 53:12 ready: *he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors*.
- ◆ Set Isaiah 53:5 (*with his stripes we are healed*) beside 1 Peter 2:24. Have John 1:29 (*Behold the Lamb of God*) ready.
- ◆ Be ready to speak of substitution plainly. This is the doctrine that makes the Song Christian: he was wounded *for us, in our place*, bearing *our* transgressions.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · The Servant is wounded for our transgressions, not his own.

Teach the heart of the gospel: *He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities*. The prepositions matter. Not *because of* our transgressions (as though the transgressions caused the wounding), but *for* our transgressions — *in our place*, substitutively, bearing what we should bear. Teach the class that this is the great reversal: the Servant had no sin to answer for, yet he answers for everyone else's. The weight of the world's guilt falls on him. *The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all*. Not a portion of it, distributed among many bearers — all of it. All the transgressions, all the iniquities, all the guilt of all people, past and future, becomes his burden. Teach the class to feel the weight of this claim. The Servant stands alone, bearing what no single person could bear, so that everyone else is free. This is not a nice thought; it is too great, too terrible, too wonderful. This is the gospel.

Two · The Servant's suffering is the price of our healing and peace.

Notice the strange trading that the Song describes. *He was wounded for our transgressions... the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.* Our peace is bought with his chastisement; our healing flows from his wounds. This is not poetic language but the hardest realism — our wholeness comes from his brokenness, our righteousness from his condemnation, our life from his death. Teach the class the comfort hidden in this difficulty: if our healing cost him this much, it is genuine; if our peace is this hard-bought, it is secure. We are healed not by cheap forgiveness but by the stripes of the Servant. Our peace rests not on our promises to do better but on his completed work. Peter says of the church, *by whose stripes ye were healed*, and makes plain that we are healed *not* by our own reformation but by looking to the Servant who bore our sins in his own body on the tree.

Three · The Servant pours out his soul and makes intercession for the transgressors.

Listen to the Song's close: *He poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.* The Servant does not just die; he *pours out his soul*, an act of total self-giving. He is *numbered with the transgressors* — placed in the company of the guilty, counted as one of them, taking the place assigned to the criminal. And then, from that place of death and identification with transgressors, he *makes intercession* for them. The Servant does not condemn the guilty; from the cross he prays for them. *Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.* This is the shape of redemption — the innocent bearing the guilty's fate and then praying for the guilty from within that fate. Teach the class that this is not justice in the ordinary sense; it is mercy, grace, redemption.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the greatest Servant Song, so go deep and reverent.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:15	Exalted and abased (52:13–15)
0:15–0:28	Who hath believed? The Servant's appearance (53:1–3)
0:28–0:41	Wounded for our transgressions (53:4–6)
0:41–0:50	Poured out, interceding (53:10–12)
0:50–0:55	Discussion — two or three questions
0:55–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 53:7–12 and Session Twenty-Three

Pacing Tip

The heart of the Song is the substitution: *for our transgressions, with his stripes we are healed*. Give this the time it deserves. Do not rush the redemption. This is where the whole Old Testament points; teach it with reverence and pause.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the Song's movements.

Exalted and Abased

Open with the paradox that frames the whole Song. *Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high*. The Song begins by announcing the exaltation. The Servant will be lifted up, honored, crowned. And then, immediately, the contradiction: *As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men*. The one who will be exalted is marred, disfigured, broken. Teach the class to hold both: the Servant is simultaneously despised and exalted, abased and lifted high. This is not one thing and then another; it is the same event viewed from two angles. The crucifixion is the exaltation; the abasement is the glory. The cross is the throne. Do not let the class choose one and leave the other. The Servant Song is the gospel only if both are true.

Who Hath Believed?

Then comes the prophet's question: *Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?* The report is unbelievable; the arm of the Lord seems hidden. The Servant grows up before the Lord *as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground*, with no form or comeliness to attract. *He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not*. Teach the class what this portrait means: the Servant is not impressive, not beautiful, not the kind of savior the world imagines. He is marked by sorrow, rejected, hidden. And yet this unattractive, despised, grieving figure is the Savior. Teach the class not to expect the gospel to come in a form the world finds compelling; the cross looks like failure.

Wounded for Our Transgressions

Here is the center. *Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows... But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and*

with his stripes we are healed. Teach the double work: the Servant *bore* our griefs and *carried* our sorrows (the emotional weight), and then was *wounded* for our transgressions and *bruised* for our iniquities (the guilt itself). Not metaphorical; literal, physical, substitutive. The chastisement that should have come on us came on him; his stripes are our healing. Teach the class the relief in this: if the Servant has borne the judgment, the judgment is borne. If his stripes are our healing, we are healed. The work is done. Not in progress, not awaiting our contribution, but accomplished. *And all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.* All our wandering, all our willfulness, all our sin — *all* — is laid on him. He carries what we deserve. And we are free.

Poured Out

Close with the Servant's full self-giving. *He shall pour out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.* The Servant does not hold back; he pours out his soul. He is not separated from sinners, held at a distance; he is *numbered with the transgressors*, counted as one of the guilty, standing where the guilty stand. And from that place, bearing their sin, he *makes intercession*. The Servant prays for those whose sin he bears. This is the inverse of judgment: not condemnation from above but intercession from below, from the place of death, from the cross itself. *Father, forgive them.* Teach the class what this means: there is someone at the right hand of God praying for them. The wounds are not a past event; they are a present reality, still bleeding out intercession.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“Why does Isaiah 53 describe the Servant's suffering so exactly if it was written 700 years early?”

Because the one who knows the end from the beginning saw the cross coming and gave his people the words in advance. The specificity — despised, rejected, wounded, bruised, numbered with transgressors, poured out — proves the resurrection. The Gospels did not invent Isaiah 53; Isaiah 53 *framed* what the Gospels testified to. The precision is the signature of the God who governs history and speaks truth in advance.

“What does ‘wounded for our transgressions’ actually mean?”

For means *in our place, substitutively, bearing what we should bear*. The Servant is not just sympathizing with us or modeling virtue; he is taking on himself the punishment we deserve. *The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all*. All our guilt, all our failure, all our sin is transferred to him, and he bears it. This is not fair; that is the point. It is mercy, grace, redemption. He is treated as though he had sinned, so that sinners are treated as though they were righteous.

“If the Servant poured out his soul, is there anything left of him?”

Yes — he rises. Isaiah 53 ends with *he shall see his seed*, and 52:13 opens with *my servant shall be exalted*. The Servant pours out his soul unto death, but he does not remain dead. The complete self-giving leads to resurrection and exaltation. Teach the class that the one who held nothing back is the one who holds everything. He rose with power to intercede, to give life, to save sinners.

Leading the Discussion

Six questions in the student chapter; choose two or three.

Question 1 — Exalted and abased together

The paradox question. Draw out the Song's opening claim of exaltation alongside the marring, and what it means that the crucifixion is the throne. How do both truths belong together?

Question 2 — The unimpressive Savior

The form question. Ask why the Servant has no form or beauty to attract, why he is despised and rejected, and what this tells us about God's way. Why is the cross not impressive to the world?

Question 3 — For our transgressions

The substitution question. Press what *for* means — in our place, bearing what we should bear. How is this different from a martyr or example? How does laying all our iniquity on him set us free?

Question 4 — By his stripes we are healed

The healing question. Draw out how our peace is bought with his chastisement and our healing flows from his wounds. What does it mean that healing is finished, not in progress?

Question 5 — Numbered with transgressors

The identification question. Ask what it means that the Servant is not separated from sinners but counted as one of them, and from that place makes intercession. How is this the opposite of judgment?

Question 6 — Shall he see his seed

The resurrection question. Note how Isaiah 53 ends with *he shall see his seed*, and close by asking what becomes possible because the Servant rose. How does the exaltation of the abased one give hope?

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 17), on Isaiah 52–53 — his reading of the Servant as the sin-bearer.
- ♦ 1 Peter 2:21–25, read slowly this week — *by whose stripes ye were healed*, Isaiah 53 applied to the church's healing through the Servant's stripes.

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on Isaiah 52–53 — the centerpiece of the Servant Songs and the gospel itself.
- ♦ *Isaiah* (People's Bible, Northwestern), on Isaiah 52–53 — a clear lay treatment of the substitution and the healing.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ John 1:29 and 1 Peter 1:18–21, read slowly this week — John pointing to the Lamb of God, Peter claiming the ransom paid with precious blood.

A Final Word

This is the hour to stand silent before the wound. Do not explain it away; do not dilute the substitution. The Servant was wounded for our transgressions. Say it. Let it rest. Teach the class from a place of awe and gratitude, not argument. The one who poured out his soul for us has saved us. That is enough.

And leave them healed. *With his stripes ye were healed.* The work is done. Not awaiting their contribution, not dependent on their worthiness. The Servant has borne the judgment, poured out the soul, made the intercession. The healing is finished, the peace is bought, the transgressions are borne. May the Lord Jesus—the Lamb of God, the sin-bearer, the Servant who poured out his soul for the transgressors—hold the class in those stripes and give them the peace that was purchased with his wounds.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWENTY-THREE

He Shall Justify Many

Isaiah 53:7–12 · with Hebrews 9:27–28 and Romans 4:25

A Note to the Teacher

The fourth Servant Song closes with the Servant's vindication and the fruit of his work. *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth... For he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.* But then the turn: *he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.* The Servant who was silent, oppressed, cut off, now *sees his seed*, his *days are prolonged*, he is *satisfied*. And his work bears fruit: he justifies many. Teach the class that the resurrection is not a surprise ending but the necessary completion of the work; without it, the redemption would be unfinished.

And the key word: *justify*. The Servant does not just forgive sins and move on; he justifies his people. He makes them righteous. *By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many* — through the knowledge of him, through faith in him, the many are made righteous. This is the climax: the work that seemed to end in failure — the Servant cut off, seeming to be overthrown — actually ends in the justification of multitudes. Use this guide to teach the triumph at the heart of the gospel: the Servant rises, prolongs his days, sees his seed, and makes righteousness overflow to cover the many.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

The fourth Servant Song closes by showing the Servant silent in his oppression, cut off and

stricken, yet rising to see his seed, to have his days prolonged, to behold the satisfaction of his labor, and to justify many through his knowledge, bearing their iniquities — so the class learns that the Servant's resurrection and ascension are the vindication of his redemptive work and the guarantee that his people are justified and made righteous.

Before You Walk In

Preparations for teaching the Servant's vindication.

- ◆ Read the student session twice. Then read Isaiah 53:7–12 aloud — the Servant's silence, his being cut off, and then his resurrection, satisfaction, and justification of many.
- ◆ Mark 53:7 (the dumb lamb, the silent Servant), 53:8 (cut off out of the land of the living), and 53:9–12 (the resurrection and the fruit).
- ◆ Underline 53:10–11 — *he shall see his seed... he shall be satisfied*. Be ready to explain the resurrection as the inversion of the cross — what seemed like failure becomes completion.
- ◆ Mark 53:11 — *by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many*. Have Romans 3:21–26 and Hebrews 9:27–28 ready. Be ready to teach justification as the core of the Servant's work.
- ◆ Note 53:12 — *he shall make intercession for the transgressors*. The risen Servant is still praying for sinners.

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions to hold before you teach.

One · The Servant's silence in oppression is his refusal to defend himself.

Teach the Servant's perfect submission. *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.* The Servant is silent. Not because he cannot speak, but because he will not defend himself. He is innocent and wrongly condemned, yet he does not protest, does not claim justice, does not appeal to the Father for twelve legions of angels. The Servant is dumb — mute, voiceless — in the presence of his accusers. This is not weakness; it is the strength of absolute obedience. The Lord Jesus walks to his execution without uttering a self-defense. Teach the class that this silence is the mark of the true Servant: not a cry of protest but a complete yielding to the will of God. *Not my will, but thine, be done.* And the silence is vindicated by the resurrection.

Two · The Servant's resurrection and ascension complete his work and prove his justification.

Listen to the language shift. *For he was cut off out of the land of the living... And he made his grave with the wicked... yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.* The Servant is cut off, dead, buried. And then the resurrection: *he shall see his seed.* Not a metaphorical seed, but an actual lineage, actual offspring, actual fruit. *He shall prolong his days* — after death, the Servant lives. And *the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand* — the work that seemed to fail is actually completed and blessed. Teach the class that the resurrection is not an interruption in the Servant's work; it is the vindication of it. Without the resurrection, the cross would be a tragic ending; with it, the cross is revealed as the hinge of history.

Three · The Servant justifies many; his knowledge is the instrument of their righteousness.

Come to the climax. *He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.* Teach two things here. First, the Servant is satisfied — not merely finished, but satisfied, pleased with what he has wrought. The labor was not in vain; it bore the fruit he aimed at. Second, the instrument of justification is *his knowledge* — the knowledge of him, the knowledge of Christ. Not the believer's knowledge of their own righteousness, but knowledge of the one who is righteous and has made them righteous. Paul says we are justified by faith, and faith is the knowledge of Christ. The Servant *justifies many*, not just forgives them, not just cleanses them, but *makes them righteous*. The many stand before God not in their own righteousness (which is rags) but clothed in the Servant's righteousness. This is the gospel.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour assumed; the Song's completion and vindication.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer and welcome
0:05–0:15	Silent as a lamb; the dumb Servant (53:7–8)
0:15–0:26	Cut off, yet he shall see his seed (53:8–11a)
0:26–0:38	Shall be satisfied; by his knowledge justify many (53:11b–12)
0:38–0:47	Divided spoils; making intercession (53:12)
0:47–0:53	Discussion — two or three questions

0:53–1:00

Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 55 and Session Twenty-Four

Pacing Tip

The resurrection is the key; the Servant's *shall see* and *shall be satisfied* are the hinge. Do not rush past the satisfaction — the Servant is pleased with the work, which means it is complete and eternal. Then land on justification: by his knowledge, many are made righteous. This is the gospel's core.

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Background for teaching, following the Song's movements.

The Dumb Servant

Open with the Servant's absolute silence. *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.* The Servant endures oppression and affliction without complaint, without self-defense, without protest. *Yet he opened not his mouth.* Twice the clause returns, hammering home the silence. Teach the class what this refusal to defend himself means. He is innocent; he knows his innocence; he could claim it. He does not. He is brought to die like a lamb led to slaughter, a sheep before the shears, voiceless and accepting. The Lord Jesus fulfilled this exactly: before the Sanhedrin, before Pilate, in the face of mocking and spitting, he spoke little in his own defense. He did not silence the lies; he bore them. This is not the way of the world; it is the way of the Servant. Teach the class the strength hidden in this silence: the Servant could have fought and lost; instead, he yields and wins.

He Shall See His Seed

Now teach the resurrection that inverts the cross. *For he was cut off out of the land of the living... And he made his grave with the wicked... yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.* The Servant is cut off — execution. He is buried with the wicked — shame. And then, without transition, the resurrection. *He shall see his seed.* Not metaphorically; the Servant will have offspring, will see a lineage, will have a people. *He shall prolong his days* — he will live again after death. Not a shadowy immortality, but a real existence in which he sees his work bear fruit. And *the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand* — the work

succeeds. What looked like final defeat was actually the hinge of victory. Teach the class that the resurrection is not Plan B or an afterthought; it is written into the work from the beginning. The Servant's death and resurrection are a single act, and without the resurrection, the death would be meaningless.

Shall Be Satisfied

Then the word that settles everything: *He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied.* The Servant was not satisfied at the cross; his work was not complete. But in the resurrection, beholding the fruit of his labor, he is satisfied. Teach the class what this means: the Servant is pleased with what he has done. He looks at the church, the justified many, the sons brought to glory, and he is satisfied. The work is sufficient, complete, and eternally blessed. Teach the class that because the Servant is satisfied, they can be satisfied. If the one who did the work is pleased, the work is done. No additional payment is needed, no further satisfaction is required. The Servant has done all that needs doing, and he is at rest in it.

Justify Many

Come to the fruit of his labor. *By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.* The Servant justifies — not merely forgives, not just cleanses, but *makes righteous*. And the instrument is *his knowledge* — the knowledge of who he is and what he has done. When a sinner knows the Lord Jesus, trusts in him, believes his work, that knowledge transforms the sinner into a righteous person. Not in themselves, not in their own merit, but *in the Servant*. *He shall bear their iniquities* — their guilt is his, and his righteousness is theirs. The great exchange is complete. Teach the class that justification is the core of the gospel: the Servant makes his people righteous, not by reforming them but by imputing his righteousness to them. They stand before God clothed in his righteousness, hidden in his wounds, counted as members of his body.

Making Intercession

Close with the Servant's continued work. *Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great... and he shall make intercession for the transgressors.* The exalted Servant is given a place of honor, *a portion with the great*, because he has accomplished his task. And from that exalted place, he *makes intercession for the transgressors* — he prays. The resurrection does not end the Servant's work for his people; it continues it in a new form. The risen Christ pleads for sinners. Teach the class that there is someone at the right hand of God whose job is to intercede for them, to present their cause, to pray for their faithfulness and their ultimate redemption. The Servant's wounds are still speaking; his prayers are still rising.

Anticipated Questions and Suggested Responses

Questions you may hear, with workable responses.

“If the Servant is cut off and dead, how can he see his seed and prolong his days?”

By resurrection. Isaiah 53:10 speaks of what happens *when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin*. After the offering, the Servant rises. Death does not end his work; it completes it. The resurrection is not a parenthesis in the story; it is the vindication of the cross. The Servant dies and rises, and in the resurrection prolongs his days and sees his seed.

“What does it mean that the Servant justifies us?”

It means he makes us righteous, not in ourselves but in himself. We are clothed in his righteousness. When the Father looks at a believer, the Father sees the Servant's righteousness covering the believer's sin. Justification is not reformation; it is imputation. The Servant's righteousness is credited to the believer. That is why Paul can say he has *no righteousness of his own*, but is found *in Christ*.

“What's the difference between the Servant forgiving us and justifying us?”

Forgiveness removes the debt; justification goes further and imputes righteousness. The Servant could have just forgiven us — wiped the slate clean — and left us neutral. Instead, he justifies us, puts us in a state of positive righteousness. We are not just forgiven sinners; we are righteous ones, dressed in the Servant's own righteousness.

Leading the Discussion

Choose two or three questions from the student chapter.

Question 1 — The silence of the Servant

The obedience question. Draw out why the Servant does not open his mouth to defend himself, and what his silence shows about true strength. How does the Lord Jesus embody this silence?

Question 2 — Cut off, yet he shall see

The resurrection question. Ask what the resurrection means for the Servant's work and why *he shall see his seed* proves the work is complete. How does the resurrection vindicate the cross?

Question 3 — Satisfied

The satisfaction question. Press what it means that the Servant is satisfied with the fruit of his labor, and how this gives us assurance. If the Servant is pleased, what can we fear?

Question 4 — Justify many

The justification question. Draw out what justification means — not just forgiveness but imputation of righteousness — and how *by his knowledge* we are made righteous. What is the difference between reformation and justification?

Question 5 — Making intercession

The intercession question. Ask what it means that the exalted Servant still makes intercession for transgressors, and how the risen Christ prays for us.

Question 6 — Divided spoils

The exaltation question. Note how the Servant divides spoils and makes intercession, and what his exaltation means for his people. Close on the victorious Servant who is also still praying.

For Further Study

For deeper preparation or to recommend.

Primary Sources

- ♦ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (LW 17), on Isaiah 53:7–12 — his reading of the Servant's silence and justification.
- ♦ Romans 4:25, read slowly — *Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.*

Commentaries

- ♦ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 40–55* (Concordia Commentary, CPH), on Isaiah 53:7–12.
- ♦ Hebrews 9:27–28, read slowly — the Servant as the one offering, his death and resurrection as the completion of the work.

Devotional Reading

- ♦ Luke 22:39–46 and 23:34, read slowly — the garden prayer and the cross-word, the Servant's silence before the Sanhedrin and Pilate.

A Final Word

Teach this passage as the end of the gospel story: the Servant rises, is satisfied with his labor, justifies his people, and continues to intercede for them. This is not tragedy; this is triumph. Do not apologize for the cross; it is the foundation of eternal justification.

And leave them justified — not reformed, not trying harder, but clothed in the Servant's own righteousness. May the Lord Jesus, whose silence vindicated him, whose resurrection completed his work, whose knowledge justifies the many, and whose intercession never ceases, hold the class in the knowledge that makes them righteous.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWENTY-FOUR

Ho Every One That Thirsteth

Isaiah 55 · with John 4:10–14 and John 7:37–39

A Note to the Teacher

After the Servant Songs and the gospel at their heart, Isaiah turns to the invitation: *Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; and he that hath no money, come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.* The thirst is real, the hunger is urgent, and the invitation is free. Teach the class that the gospel, after being announced as a work accomplished in the Servant, is now opened to the hungry. *Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.* The invitation is to abundance, to true nourishment, to a feast after years of famine. And the condition is only one: you must be thirsty, you must hunger, you must come acknowledging you have nothing to pay. The Lord Jesus himself claimed this verse as his own: *If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink.* Use this guide to teach the hour as the opening of the great banquet to all who hunger.

The chapter closes with the word of the Lord going out and not returning empty: *So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.* The word spoken is the word that does the work. Teach the class that the invitation is not a polite offer; it is an active, powerful word that accomplishes salvation.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

Chapter 55 opens the gospel to all who thirst and hunger, offering abundance without price,

calling the weary to true nourishment, promising an everlasting covenant, and assuring that the word spoken shall not return empty but shall accomplish the salvation of all who come.

Before You Walk In

Read Isaiah 55 twice. Then mark the invitation (55:1–3), the call to listen (55:2–3), the covenant (55:3), the exaltation of David (55:3–5), the nations (55:5), the seeking of the Lord (55:6–7), and the word that does not return empty (55:10–11).

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions.

One · The gospel invitation is to the thirsty and hungry, with no payment required.

Teach the opening as the most inclusive invitation in Scripture: *Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters.* Not — the righteous, not — the respectable, not — the worthy. *Every one that thirsteth.* The only condition is thirst, and thirst is an admission of need. And the price is nothing: *buy... without money and without price.* The Lord Jesus said, *If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink.* The gospel is free not as a token but as actual, complete freedom from payment. Teach the class that the only barrier to the feast is the refusal to admit hunger.

Two · The invitation is to true nourishment, not the counterfeits that satisfy nothing.

Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? The prophet asks the people what they are doing trading their lives for things that do not satisfy. Come instead to the feast, to bread and wine and milk, to a soul that delights itself in fatness. The Lord offers not a restriction but an abundance. Teach the class the difference between the pleasures that exhaust and the nourishment that fills.

Three · The word spoken accomplishes what it is sent to do.

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void. The invitation is not empty; it is active, powerful, accomplishing the thing it aims at. Teach the class that the word of God does not depend on human response to succeed; it goes forth with power and accomplishes.

Suggested Time Plan

One hour; the great feast and the word that does not fail.

Time	Segment
0:00–0:05	Opening prayer
0:05–0:15	Ho, every one that thirsteth (55:1–3)
0:15–0:25	Wherefore spend money? True nourishment (55:2–3)
0:25–0:35	The covenant of David; the nations (55:3–5)
0:35–0:45	Seek the Lord; the word that does not fail (55:6–11)
0:45–0:53	Discussion
0:53–1:00	Closing prayer; assign Isaiah 56–59 and Session Twenty-Five

Teaching Notes, Part by Part

Framework for teaching.

The Invitation

Open with the audacious invitation. *Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; and he that hath no money, come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.* The Servant has accomplished the work; now the invitation goes out to all. *Every one that thirsteth* — come as you are, with your empty hands and your thirst. *Without money and without price* — nothing is charged. The feast is set, and all are welcome. Teach the class that this is the shape of grace: the one who can offer nothing is the one who is welcomed.

True Nourishment

Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. The prophet asks: why labor for what does not satisfy? Come to the feast instead, to real nourishment, to a soul that delights itself. Teach the contrast between the counterfeits that promise much and deliver nothing, and the bread that truly fills.

The Covenant

Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David. The Servant is called *David* here — the true king,

the true shepherd. And the covenant is *everlasting*, not conditional, not temporary. The mercies are *sure*. Teach the class that the gospel is not a probationary offer; it is an eternal covenant, sealed in the blood of the one who is the sure mercy of David.

The Word

For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud... So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please. The word of the Lord is as sure as the rain — it falls, it accomplishes, it succeeds. Teach the class that the invitation is not an empty gesture; it is a word that goes forth with power.

Anticipated Questions

Three responses.

“If the gospel is free, why did the Servant have to die?”

Because the gospel is free to us, but it cost him everything. The Servant paid the price so that we could come without payment. The feast is free, but the lamb was slaughtered for it.

“What does it mean to thirst for God?”

It means to hunger for him the way your body hungers for water in a drought. It is a genuine, desperate need, not a polite interest. The gospel is for the thirsty — the ones who know they are dying without him.

“How can I be sure the word will accomplish salvation in my life?”

Because the Lord swears that his word shall not return empty. It goes forth with power and accomplishes. Your faith is not the power; his word is. Trust the word, not your faith in the word.

Leading the Discussion

Three questions.

Question 1 — The thirsty invitation

Why every one that thirsteth? What does thirst mean, and what is promised to the thirsty?

Question 2 — Without money and without price

What does it cost to come to the feast, and what does this tell us about grace?

Question 3 — The word that does not fail

How is the word like the rain, and what does it mean that it accomplishes what it is sent to do?

For Further Study

Primary Sources

- ◆ John 4:10–14 and 7:37–39 — the Lord Jesus claiming the water and the feast.

Devotional

- ◆ Revelation 22:17 — *And the Spirit and the bride say, Come... And let him that is athirst come.*

A Final Word

Teach the feast as already prepared and waiting. Come as you are, with empty hands and thirsty hearts. The Servant has paid. The feast is set. The word goes forth and does not fail. May the Lord Jesus gather all who thirst to the table and satisfy them with the bread of life.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWENTY-FIVE

House of Prayer for All Peoples

Isaiah 56–59 · with Mark 11:17 and Romans 10:12–13

A Note to the Teacher

These chapters turn the gospel toward the ends of the earth. The Temple will be *a house of prayer for all people*. Foreigners and eunuchs, the ritually excluded, are now explicitly welcomed: *Neither let the son of the stranger that hath joined himself to the Lord speak, saying, The Lord hath utterly separated me from his people*. The Lord welcomes all. And the call goes out to the watchmen on the walls: *Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion*. Teach the class that the gospel is not a private possession but a public proclamation, not for one nation but for all nations, and that it turns the world's exclusions upside down.

Chapters 56–59 also sound the themes of idolatry, justice, and the character of the people. The Lord calls for justice in the gates, denounces the shepherds who feed themselves, and calls the people to true fasting. These chapters prepare the way for the final vision of a new heavens and a new earth.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

These chapters open the Temple as a house of prayer for all peoples, welcome foreigners and eunuchs into the covenant, call the watchmen to awaken and proclaim, denounce false shepherds and false worship, and insist that true fasting is the loosing of injustice and the feeding of the hungry — so the class learns that the gospel is radically inclusive, that judgment begins with the people of God, and that faith without justice is empty.

Before You Walk In

Read Isaiah 56–59 twice. Mark the welcome to foreigners and eunuchs (56:3–8), the denunciation of the watchmen (56:10–12), the call to awake (52:1), and the character of true fasting (58:6–7).

Key Theological Points to Anchor

Three convictions.

One · The gospel belongs to all peoples; the Temple is a house of prayer for all.

Teach the radical inclusion of the gospel. The Temple, which had been a place of Jewish privilege and exclusion, is now declared *a house of prayer for all people*. Foreigners, long excluded, are now explicitly welcomed. Eunuchs, rendered ritually unclean by their condition, are now promised *a name better than of sons and of daughters*, a permanent memorial in the Lord's house. This is not a marginal note; it is the heart of the gospel. The Lord Jesus was crucified outside the city because he broke the boundaries of purity and inclusion. And when he rose, he sent the gospel to all nations. Teach the class that the gospel sweeps away all boundaries: *There is neither Jew nor Greek... male nor female; for ye are all one in the Lord Jesus*. The house of prayer belongs to all.

Two · God's judgment begins with his own people.

Chapters 56–59 are largely a denunciation of Jerusalem and its leaders. *His watchmen are blind... sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber*. The shepherds *cannot understand and are all looking to their own way*. The people *make a covenant with death*. God calls for justice in the gates, yet it is absent. The judgment Isaiah announces is not primarily against the nations but against the people of God who have failed to be the light they were called to be. Teach the class that God takes the faithlessness of his people seriously — more seriously, perhaps, than the faithlessness of those who never knew him.

Three · True fasting is the undoing of injustice and the feeding of the hungry.

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? Teach the class that religion without justice is an abomination to the Lord. Fasting, prayer, and worship mean nothing if they are not accompanied by the feeding of the hungry and the loosing of the oppressed. This is not a late addition to the gospel; it is written into the text from the beginning.

Teaching Notes

Framework.

The House of Prayer

Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer. The Temple is a house of prayer for all peoples. *Let not the son of the stranger... speak, saying, The Lord hath utterly separated me from his people.* The excluded are explicitly welcomed. Teach the class the scope of gospel inclusion.

The Sleeping Watchmen

His watchmen are blind: they are all ignorant, they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber. The leaders of God's people have failed in their watch. They do not see the danger, do not warn, do not guard. Teach the class that the failure of leaders is especially grave because others depend on their faithfulness.

The Call to Awake

Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city. The call goes out to a sleeping people to awaken and put on the garments of their calling. Teach the class that the gospel is not a static thing but a living proclamation, always calling the people to attention and faithfulness.

True Fasting

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness... Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry? True worship is inseparable from justice. Teach the class that faith and works are not opposed; they are one reality seen from different angles.

Leading the Discussion

Three questions.

Question 1 — House of prayer for all peoples

What does it mean that the Temple is open to all, including foreigners and eunuchs? How does this change the shape of the gospel?

Question 2 — The sleeping watchmen

Why does Isaiah denounce the leaders of God's people so harshly? What is the responsibility of those who are meant to guard and warn?

Question 3 — True fasting

How is the loosing of injustice and feeding of the hungry an essential part of worship? What does this say about faith without works?

A Final Word

Teach the radical inclusion of the gospel and the serious judgment it brings on those who claim to know the Lord but turn away the stranger and the hungry. May the Lord Jesus, whose table is open to all peoples and who judged the Pharisees for making the house of prayer a den of thieves, make the class a people of radical welcome and radical justice.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWENTY-SIX

Anointed Herald

Isaiah 61:1–3 · with Luke 4:16–21

A Note to the Teacher

This short passage is the Lord Jesus's own text. He read these lines in the Nazareth synagogue and said, *This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears*. Teach the class that the passage they are reading is the autobiography of the Lord Jesus: *The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord*. The Lord Jesus is the one anointed, sent, and empowered by the Spirit to announce the gospel, to bind wounds, to free captives, to proclaim the year of jubilee. This is his mission, his work, his identity.

And note what is *not* in the passage: no mention of coming in judgment, no threat to the wicked, no condemnation. The first coming is entirely the opening of the doors, the binding of wounds, the proclamation of release. Teach the class that the Lord Jesus came first as the Servant of mercy; he comes again as the Judge.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

Isaiah 61 is the autobiography of the Lord Jesus, showing him anointed with the Spirit, sent to preach good tidings to the meek, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and to announce the acceptable year of the Lord — so the class learns that the Lord Jesus is himself the prophet, the healer, the liberator, and the one who brings the jubilee.

Teaching Notes

Framework.

The Anointing

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me. The Lord Jesus is anointed by the Spirit. At his baptism, the Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove. Teach the class that the anointing is not a title but an empowerment; the Lord Jesus begins his public work in the power of the Spirit.

The Fourfold Mission

To preach good tidings unto the meek; to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives; and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. Four works, and the Lord Jesus fulfills them all: preaching the gospel, healing the wounded, freeing the demonized, opening the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf. Teach the class that the Lord Jesus's mission is complete — to the meek, the broken, the captive, the bound — the very people the world dismisses.

The Year of Jubilee

To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. The jubilee year in Leviticus was the year of release, when debts were forgiven, slaves were freed, and land was returned. The Lord Jesus proclaims that year. Teach the class that the age of grace is the age of jubilee; debts are forgiven, the captive goes free, the enslaved finds rest.

A Final Word

Teach this passage as the portrait of the Lord Jesus in his own words, his own mission, his own identity. He is not a distant judge; he is the healer, the liberator, the one who binds wounds and opens prison doors. May the Lord Jesus himself, anointed with the Spirit, gather the meek, bind the broken, proclaim liberty to every captive in the room.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWENTY-SEVEN

Warrior from Edom

Isaiah 63:1–6 · with Revelation 19:11–15

A Note to the Teacher

Now the tone shifts. The opening chapter of Isaiah 56–66 moves from the gospel of grace to the gospel of judgment. *Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah? this that is glorious in his apparel, travelling in the greatness of his strength? I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save.* The figure comes stained with blood, from treading the winepress alone, drinking the cup of the fierceness of God's wrath. Teach the class that this is the other coming, the coming in judgment, the coming to condemn what refuses to be saved.

But note the beginning: *I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save.* The one who comes in judgment is still first and foremost *mighty to save*. The salvation comes first; the judgment is reserved for those who refuse the salvation.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

Isaiah 63 shows the returning Lord Jesus, dyed with the blood of his enemies, treading the winepress of judgment alone, drinking the cup of God's wrath against sin — so the class learns that the gospel ends in judgment on those who reject it, and that the Lord Jesus is mighty to save and mighty to execute wrath.

Teaching Notes

Framework.

The Coming Warrior

Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah? Edom, the land of Esau, represents the enemies of God's people. The returning Lord comes stained red — with the blood of his enemies, the blood of those who refused his salvation. Teach the class that the coming is real, and the judgment is real. The Lord Jesus is *mighty to save*, but he is also *mighty to judge*.

The Winepress

I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me. Judgment is the Lord's work alone. He treads the winepress — crushing the grapes, pressing out the wine — and the grapes are the enemies of God's people. He drinks the cup of God's wrath. Teach the class that the judgment is real and terrible, and it is the work of the Lord Jesus alone.

A Final Word

Teach the judgment without softening it. The Lord Jesus comes with salvation, and he will come in judgment. Those who refuse the salvation will face the judgment. May the class hear both the mercy and the gravity of the gospel.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWENTY-EIGHT

New Heavens and New Earth

Isaiah 65–66 · with Revelation 21:1–4

A Note to the Teacher

Isaiah closes with the vision that closes all Scripture: a new heavens and a new earth, a new Jerusalem, the marriage supper of the Lamb, the restoration of all things. *For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind.* Everything that was broken is mended; everything that was marred is made new. The chapter is full of joy, of feasting, of satisfaction: *Before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear.* The Lord hears and answers at the very moment of the prayer. The wolf and the lamb feed together; the lion eats straw like the ox. Enmity is ended. Death is no more.

Teach the class that the gospel does not end in flight from the world but in the renewal of the world, the bringing of heaven to earth, the wedding of the Lord Jesus and his Bride, the church.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

Isaiah ends with the vision of new heavens and new earth, where the Lord dwells with his people, where death is no more, where enemies are reconciled, where prayer is answered before it is spoken, and where all things are made new — so the class learns that the gospel hope is not escape but renewal, not individual heaven but a redeemed creation with the Lord Jesus and his Bride at the center.

Teaching Notes

Framework.

New Heavens and New Earth

For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth. Not a retreat from the creation but its renewal. The old passes; the new is made. Teach the class that God loves the creation; he does not destroy and abandon it but remakes it.

The Feasting

They shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them... And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer. The life is not a disembodied eternity of harps and clouds but a real life: building, planting, eating, praying, working. Teach the class that heaven is not less real than earth; it is *more* real.

The Reconciliation

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock. The enmity is ended. The predator and prey live in peace. Teach the class that the gospel heals not just the relationship between God and humanity but between all things.

A Final Word

Teach the gospel hope: not escape from the world but the renewal of the world, not flight but the marriage of heaven and earth. May the Lord Jesus gather the class into the hope of the new heavens and new earth, where all things are made whole.



Soli Deo Gloria

SESSION TWENTY-NINE

Things Concerning Himself

Luke 24:25–27, 44–47 · with Luke 24:32

A Note to the Teacher

The series ends where Isaiah ends: with the Lord Jesus on the Emmaus road, opening the Scriptures, and showing his disciples *all the things concerning himself*. And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. Isaiah has been a journey from the call to comfort to the Servant to the consummation. Now the risen Lord gathers it all and shows that every page points to him.

Teach the class that the Old Testament is *about the Lord Jesus*, not just a preparation for him. Luke 24:27 is the governing principle of all Scripture reading: *was Christum treibet* — that which drives toward Christ. The Scriptures are not a lockbox of doctrines or a rulebook; they are a story, and the story is the story of the Lord Jesus.

The Big Idea in One Sentence

The risen Lord Jesus walks with the Emmaus disciples and opens all the Scriptures, beginning at Moses and all the prophets, showing them all the things concerning himself — so the whole journey of Isaiah closes in the recognition that every page, every prophecy, every type, every promise points to the Lord Jesus, risen, crucified, glorified, and coming again.

Teaching Notes

Framework.

The Journey

The risen Lord Jesus joins two discouraged disciples on the Emmaus road. They had hoped he was the redeemer; now he is dead. The Lord asks them what they are discussing, and they explain their disappointment: *We trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel*. They do not recognize him. And then the Lord opens the Scriptures. Teach the class that the only medicine for despair is the Word rightly interpreted — *was Christum treibet*.

The Interpretation

And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. The risen Lord does not explain the Scriptures in isolation; he shows how all of them point to him. The law, the psalms, the prophets — all *concerning himself*. Teach the class that this is the interpretive key: every text must be read with the question, *How does this concern the Lord Jesus?*

The Burning Heart

Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures? When the Scripture is truly opened, the heart burns. Not excitement or emotion for its own sake, but the deepening recognition that this is the living Word, that this is not a dead text but the voice of the risen Lord Jesus, speaking through Moses and the prophets.

A Final Word

Teach this capstone session as a return to where Isaiah began: *To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them*. The light is the Lord Jesus. All the Scriptures point to him. The Servant is he. The gospel moves from Isaiah's opening comfort to the final vision of the new heavens and new earth, and at every point, the Lord Jesus stands at the center, offering himself, calling the weary to drink, inviting all peoples to the feast, descending into death, rising in triumph, and interceding forever.

End the series as the risen Lord ends: *Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day; And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem*. The Lord Jesus is alive, the Scriptures are fulfilled, and the gospel continues to go out to all nations. May the class leave with burning hearts, knowing that the Scriptures concern the Lord Jesus, and that the Lord Jesus is alive and present in the Word.



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