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# Isaiah and Work

Theology of Work Project

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## Isaiah and Work

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### Introduction to Isaiah

The Prophet Isaiah received a vision of God — of his great power, his glorious majesty, and his purifying holiness. Glimpsing God’s majesty led him to a humble view of himself and his society. “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5). When we glimpse who God is in Scripture, it can cleanse away our inflated self-importance and the insufficiency of our lip-service in worship. But it also can give us a clear picture of what is truly valuable in this life. It changes the way we live, the way we do business and the way we worship. When we understand who God is and where we stand in relation to him, we come out different people in our values and our work ethic.

In particular the book of Isaiah gives a clear, and at times a frightening, picture of God’s expectations of leaders. In a sense, it is an extended — and mostly negative — performance review of the kings and other leaders of Israel and Judah. [1] Modern workplaces differ significantly from those in ancient Israel. For example, the leaders seen in the book work in the government, military or religious spheres, but many of today’s leaders work in corporate, entrepreneurial, scientific and academic institutions. Yet the writing of Isaiah can be applied to today’s world if we understand what this book meant in its original setting, and we work out principles that apply to the workplace today. Moreover, in Isaiah’s view, the way we work today has value and meaning in the New Creation that God promises for his people.

### God's Assessment of Israel and Judah (Isaiah)

The bulk of the book of Isaiah consists of the prophet Isaiah giving voice to God’s assessment of Israel’s failure to live up to the covenant between God and Israel. Isaiah is the first of the major Old Testament “writing prophets” — those whose prophecies are written in books titled with the name of the prophet. Some knowledge of the book of Deuteronomy is necessary in reading the writing prophets because the failing grades God meted out to Israel’s and Judah’s leaders must be understood in light of the covenant embodied in the Law of Moses. Through Moses, God entered a covenant with his people. He promised them security, peace and prosperity, secured by his presence among them. They promised

him worship and observance of the law he gave them. Isaiah, like the other writing prophets, proclaims the people's — and especially the leaders' — failure to obey God's law. It is not incidental that Jews of Jesus' day often summarized the Old Testament succinctly as "the Law and the Prophets." To be most clearly understood, the Prophets should be read not only within their historical setting, but also against the background of God's covenant and law.

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## An Overview of the Book of Isaiah

According to Isaiah 1:1, the prophet Isaiah's career extended through the reigns of four kings in the southern kingdom of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. He served as God's emissary to Judah for more than fifty years (from around 740 to 686 B.C.), roughly a hundred years before the other three major writing prophets — Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. While the political scene in Judah was different from that in the northern kingdom of Israel, the sins of the people were distressingly similar: idol worship, the oppression and marginalization of the poor for personal gain, and business practices that fundamentally threatened God's Law. Like his contemporary Amos (who delivered God's messages at the shrine in Bethel to the unrepentant people of Israel), Isaiah clearly saw that lip-service worship leads to self-serving social ethics.

Isaiah differs from Jeremiah and Ezekiel in that the character of his prophetic ministry blends foretelling (the seer seeing far into the future) in a greater measure with forthtelling<sup>[2]</sup> (preaching the truth to a sinful people). While the book of Isaiah provides several historical touch points that anchor the prophet in a particular period of Judah's history, the book ranges in its visions from Isaiah's own times through to the end of time when God creates "new heavens and a new earth" (Is. 65:17). Some scholars have described the book of Isaiah as a vision of a mountain range in which the various peaks are visible, but the valleys stretching between the peaks (the time periods separating various prophetic insights) cannot be seen. For example, the prophecy to King Ahaz that God would give him the sign of a baby named Immanuel (Is. 7:14) is picked up seven hundred years later by Matthew (Matthew 1:23) as a vision of the coming Messiah about to be born<sup>[3]</sup>.

The historical notes in the book anchoring the prophet Isaiah in the sixth century before Christ, begin with his receiving a vision of God and a call to prophetic ministry "in the year that King Uzziah died," namely 740 B.C. (Is 6:1). The text then passes over the fifteen-year reign of King Jotham (2 Kings 15:32-38) and picks up in Isaiah 7:1 with King Ahaz (2 Kings 16:1ff) who was faced with the apparent imminent destruction of Jerusalem at the hand of the Syrians and their allies at the time, the northern kingdom of Israel. Later, in chapters 36-37, the prophet details King Hezekiah's dilemma when the Assyrian general Sennacherib laid siege to Jerusalem, threatening its total destruction (2 Kings 18:13-19:37).

Isaiah continues Hezekiah's story in chapters 38-39, a story of the king's deathly illness and God's willingness to extend his life an additional fifteen years. In each of these historical touch points, the prophet Isaiah is directly involved with the kings in speaking God's words to them.

Isaiah's prophecy casts a vision for the people of God that ranges from impending national judgment, to gracious restoration after the ensuing catastrophe, to the eschatological hope of something so different that it can be referred to only as a new heaven and a new earth (Is. 65:17). His work (predictive as well as exhortative) covers a range from the monarchy in Judah to the nation's exile in Babylon, to the restoration and return to Judah. He announces events from the coming of the Messiah to the coming of "new heavens and a new earth." Structurally, chapters 1-39 cover the period of Isaiah's active ministry, while the remaining chapters of the book (40-66) look deeply into the future for God's people. Thus the prophetic word of the Lord through Isaiah spans uncounted generations.

Isaiah's calling was to serve as God's emissary before the people of Judah and proclaim their sinful status in God's eyes. Later, the prophet insisted that his prophecies be recorded for future generations: "Go now, write it on a tablet...that it may be an everlasting witness. For these are rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the Lord's instruction" (Is. 30:8, 9). The people's sinfulness is defined by their disregard of God's law or God's covenant claims on them as his people. The prophecies against the sinful people are so strong that one could describe the situation as follows: God's desire for those whom he has called as *his* people is such that if they will not be *his* people, then they will be no people at all.

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## God's View of Our Work (Isaiah)

Seven major themes touching our work emerge from Isaiah's writings: (1) there is an integral connection between our worship and our work life, (2) arrogant pride and self-sufficiency in our work will bring us down, (3) God despises wealth gained by exploiting poor and marginalized people, (4) God wills that as we trust in him, we may live in peace and prosperity, (5) our creator God is the source of everything, (6) in Isaiah, we see a powerful example of God's servant at work, and finally, (7) today's work finds its ultimate meaning in the New Creation.

These themes are discussed in the order of their first major appearance in the book of Isaiah. An index of all the passages discussed, listed in chapter and verse order, is given at the [end of the article](#).

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## Worship and Work (Isaiah 1ff.)

Isaiah begins by insisting that religious rituals nauseate God when accompanied by sinful living:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.... Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me.... I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Is. 1:11-17)

Later, he repeats God's complaint. "These people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote" (Is. 29:13). The catastrophe coming upon the nation is a direct result of its oppression of workers and lack of provision for those in economic need.

Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.... Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. (Is. 58:1-8)

In our world today in which our daily work seems disconnected from our weekend worship, God says, "No, if you know my Law and love me, you will not mistreat workers in the workplace." Isaiah knew from personal experience that a genuine vision of God changes our lives, including how we live as Christians in the workplace.

How does this work? Again and again, Isaiah gives us a vision of God, high and lifted up above all gods:

- "But the Lord of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. He will become a sanctuary." (Is. 8:13-14)
- God's unequalled power and might are tempered by his compassion for his people: "Why do you say, O

Jacob, and speak, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God'? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary...his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless." (Is. 40:27-40)

- "I am God, and also henceforth I am He; there is no one who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can hinder it?." (Is. 43:13)
- "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no God. Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be." (Is. 44:6-7)
- "Listen to me, O Jacob... I am He; I am the first, and I am the last. My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens." (Is. 48:12-14)

We may tremble at God's power and might, but we are drawn into his compassion for us. In response, we worship him, living our lives around the clock in the light of God's desire that we reflect his concern for justice and righteousness. Our work and our worship are bound together by our view of the Holy One. Our understanding of who God is will change the way we work, the way we play, and the way we view and treat people who could benefit from our work.

The integral connection of our work and the practical application of our worship also show up in the stories of two kings the prophet used to highlight the place of trusting God in the workplace. Both Ahaz and Hezekiah had leadership responsibilities in Judah as monarchs. Both faced terrifying enemies bent on the destruction of their nation and the city of Jerusalem. Both had the opportunity to believe God's word through the prophet Isaiah that God would not allow the nation to fall to the enemy. In fact, God's word to Ahaz was that what the terrified king most feared would not take place, but "if you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all" (Is. 7:9). Ahaz refused to trust God for deliverance, turning instead to an imprudent alliance with Assyria.

A generation later, Hezekiah faced an even more formidable enemy and Isaiah assured him that God would not allow the city to fall to Sennacherib's armies. Hezekiah chose to believe God, and "then the angel of the Lord set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies. Then King Sennacherib of Assyria left, went home, and lived at Nineva" (Is. 37:36-37a).

In these two stories, Isaiah highlights for us the contrast between faith in God (the basis of our worship) and fear of those who threaten us. The workplace is one location where we face the choice between faith and fear. Where is our Lord when we are at work? He is Immanuel, "God with us" (Is. 7:14), even in the workplace. What we believe about the character of God will determine whether we will "stand firm in faith" or if we will be overcome by fear of those who may have the power to do us harm. Worship or work not emanating from a true vision of who God is and what God has promised is not true worship or work at all.

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## Arrogant Pride and Self-Sufficiency (Isaiah 2ff.)

In the writings of Isaiah, arrogant pride and self-sufficiency are particularly related to the denial of the authority and majesty of God in all spheres. We replace God's uniqueness with trust in human ingenuity or foreign gods. Isaiah addressed this issue head-on early in the book: "The haughty eyes of people shall be brought low, and the pride of everyone shall be humbled; and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day" (Is. 2:11).

The nation's pride is exhibited in three things: its *wealth*, *military might*, and *idolatry*. The combination of these three factors creates a pernicious triad drawing the people away from a humble reliance on God. Instead, they rely on the work of their hands — idols as well as wealth and military might.

Isaiah describes their wealth in silver and gold: "there is no end to their treasures" (Is. 2:7). He makes the same statement of their military prowess and the idols: there seemingly is no end to which the people do not go. The prophet ridicules the idols, crafted by their own hands and then worshiped as gods (Is. 44:10-20). God abhors human pride and self-reliance. Accumulated wealth or the pursuit of wealth that presses the majesty of God to the margins of our daily lives is an offense to God: "Stop trusting in human beings, who have only breath in their nostrils, for of what account are they?" (Is. 2:22). In chapter 39, King Hezekiah comes under the judgment of God because he took it upon himself to show off the temple treasury to the emissaries from distant Babylon. Instead of trying to impress an adversary with the kingdom's wealth, the king should have been humbling himself before God.

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## Exploitation and Marginalization (Isaiah 3ff.)

A recurring charge throughout the book of Isaiah is that the leaders were unfaithful to God's covenant because they pursued wealth and status at the expense of the marginalized and the poor. In Is. 3:3-15 God pronounced judgment on the elders and the leaders of God's people for expanding their own wealth by plundering and grinding down the faces of the poor. Williamson observed that "this [the situation described in Is. 3:14] is generally associated with the development during this period of a class structure whereby the wealth, and hence power, came to be increasingly concentrated in the hands of a privileged minority at the expense of small-holders and the like. The need for loans, with the consequent perils of slavery..., foreclosure and ultimately debt slavery, were the means whereby this could be pursued legally but, in the opinion of the prophets, unjustly."<sup>[4]</sup> Similarly, in the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5, the first of several "woes" pronounced against the people of Judah was precisely related to their exploitation of the poor for the accruing of their own wealth: "Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!" (Is. 5:8).<sup>[5]</sup>

As the people of God, they were called to be different from the surrounding and competing cultures. The exploitation of the poor for the advancement of the social elite was a breach of God's covenant claims on his people to be *his* people. This pattern can be seen earlier in Israel's history in the reign of King Ahab through his foreign wife, Jezebel, who stole the vineyard of a farmer named Naboth after having him murdered. The prophet Elijah was incensed, stating, "The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel!" (1 Kings 21:23). As Isaiah saw that pattern continuing in Judah, he prescribed the antidote to this selfish ambition at the expense of the poor and the marginalized: true kingship will come in the Messianic era when "with righteousness [God's Messiah] will judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth" (Is. 11:4).

While Isaiah zeroed in on the sins of God's people in Judah, he included God's judgment on the nations: "This is the plan that is planned concerning the whole earth; and this is the hand of judgment upon all the nations" (Is. 14:26). Babylon would be brought down (Is. 13:9-11); within three years Moab's glory would end (Is. 15); Syria would go down (Is. 17:7-8); as would Ethiopia (Is. 18), Egypt (Is. 19:11-13), and Tyre (Is. 23:17). God would bring down Assyria's king for his arrogant heart and haughty looks (Is. 10:12). "The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws.... Therefore a curse devours the earth, its inhabitants suffer for their guilt" (Is. 24:5-6).

God's concern for justice and righteousness leads him today to judge nations, corporations and individuals who defraud and deceive others for personal gain. In our day, we see exploitation of entire nations by their own leaders, as in Myanmar, disaster brought on by the negligence of foreign corporations, as in the Bhopal disaster in India, and the defrauding of investors by individuals like Bernie Madoff. Just as significantly, we see — and engage in — seemingly minor injustices such as unfair compensation, excessive workloads, oppressive contract terms and conditions, cheating on exams, and looking the other way when abuse occurs at home, at work, in church and on the street, God will ultimately judge those who gain wealth or preserve their jobs or privileges by exploiting the poor and marginalized.

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## Peace and Prosperity (Isaiah 9ff.)

In contrast to the arrogant pride and self-sufficiency that will bring us down or the exploitation of the poor in order to gain wealth, a fourth theme in Isaiah is that, as we put our trust in the one true God, we will live in peace and prosperity. The people of God rejoice at the time of harvest (Is. 9:3). By the power of God's spirit, people will dwell in peace, security and the enjoyment of their work (Is. 32:15): "Happy will you be who sow beside every stream, who let the ox and the donkey range freely" (Is. 32:20).

Similarly, one of the promises that followed Hezekiah's trust in God's deliverance from the Assyrian



general Sennacherib was the people's enjoyment of the fruit of their own labors: "And this shall be the sign for you: This year eat what grows of itself, and in the second year what springs from that; then in the third year sow, reap, plant vineyards, and eat their fruit" (Is. 37:30). Because of the stress of the impending invasion by Sennacherib, the land had lain dormant. God promised food from it even though it was not farmed. But for a people to enjoy the fruit of the vine, years of peace are required to carry out proper cultivation. Peaceful conditions are a blessing from God. Judah's successful labor in the field and vineyard served as a continuing sign of God's covenant love. [6]

In the vision of the new Zion in Is. 62, one of God's promises related to the people's enjoyment of their own food and their own wine for which they had toiled (Is. 62:8-9). Similarly, in the depiction of the new heavens and the new earth where the former things will be forgotten in the new creation, the people of God will no longer be oppressed but will build their own houses, drink their own wine, and eat their own food (Is. 65:21-22).

In the Old Testament, farming was the major occupation of the majority of the people. Thus many examples in the Bible are drawn from agrarian life and expectations. But the larger principle is that God calls us, regardless of our vocation, to trust him in our work as well as in the more apparently religious aspects of our lives.

God enjoys the creative roles his people play as they endeavor to excel at what they do under God's covenant. "They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit!" (Is. 65:21). The problems arise we try to overturn the Creator/creature distinction by replacing God's values and provision with our own values and unchecked ambition. This happens when we compartmentalize our work as a secular affair that seems to have nothing to do with the kingdom of God. Of course, in a fallen world, living faithfully does not always result in prosperity. But work done apart from faith can lead to even worse outcomes than material poverty. The early chapters of Isaiah's prophecy witness to Judah discovering exactly this.

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## Life, Knowledge, and Wisdom (Isaiah 28ff.)

More than any other writing prophet, Isaiah takes us repeatedly to a vision of God that, once grasped, will cause us to bow low in humble adoration. God is the source of all that we are, all that we have and all that we know. Three hundred years earlier, Solomon had encapsulated this truth: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7) and "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). Now Isaiah shows us the God who is the source of that knowledge and wisdom, and why our understanding of who God is matters in our life and work.

God has given us our very being: "[You] have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save" (Is. 46:3-4).

God has given us knowledge and understanding: “I am the Lord your God who teaches you for your own good, who leads you in the way you should go” (Is. 48:17). The God who made us and gave us understanding is the only source of such knowledge:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?... See, he takes up the isles like fine dust. Lebanon would not provide fuel enough, nor are its animals enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before him; they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness. To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? (Is. 40:12-18).

Once we recognize God as the source of our life, our knowledge and our wisdom, it gives us a new perspective on our work. The very fact that we have the knowledge or the skill to do the work we do takes us back to our source, God, who created us with the skill sets and interests that come together in our lives. Living in the “fear” (the awe-filled awareness) of the Lord is the starting point for knowledge and wisdom. Recognizing this also allows us to learn from others to whom God has given complementary knowledge or skill. Creative teamwork on the job is possible when we respect God’s work in others as well as in ourselves.

When we experience God at work in us, our work becomes fruitful. “The farmer knows just what to do, for God has given him understanding” (Is. 28:26, NLT). We could also say that “the artisan knows just what to do, for God has given him or her understanding.” Or, “the entrepreneur knows just what to do, for God has given that person understanding.” In mysterious ways, we become co-creators with God in our work as instruments in God’s hand for purposes deeper than we even know.

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## Servant at Work (Isaiah 40ff.)

Where *righteousness* in Isaiah 1-39 (often associated with justice, *mishpat*) is a term used to reveal Judah’s shortcomings and infidelity, *righteousness* in Isaiah 40-55 is understood primarily as a gift from God that he accomplishes on behalf of his people.<sup>[7]</sup> Isaiah himself serves as the prime example of the servant of God who brings this gift of God.

Justice or judgment is established in Isaiah 40-55 by the enigmatic “servant” embedded within this portion of Isaiah’s witness. Isaiah 42:1-4, the first of the so-called “servant songs,” speaks of the servant as one who establishes justice in the earth. Here, in the figure of the servant, God answers Judah’s cry for justice in Is. 40:27: “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right (*mishpat*) is

disregarded by my God.” God’s own divine initiative is now enacted to accomplish for his people what they could not accomplish for themselves. The means by which God will accomplish salvation both for Israel and for the nations is in this developing figure of God’s *servant*. Righteousness and justice are accomplished by the servant.

The servant’s narrative identity develops within these chapters from Israel *per se* in chapters 40-48 to an individual figure who takes on his own shoulders Israel’s missional identity for both herself and for the nations in chapters 49-53. The reason for this shift from national Israel to a figure who is Israel incarnate (or an idealized Israel) is Israel’s failure to fulfill her mission because of her sin.[8] What one observes in this servant figure is the unique means by which God communicates his gracious presence and restorative intentions to his wayward people. It is by the figure of the servant that righteousness (now understood as covenant fidelity to his people) is offered to them as a gift on the basis of God’s own freedom and sovereign commitment to his promises. Righteousness is something to be received rather than attained.[9]

The two portraits of righteousness presented in Isaiah 1-39 and 40-55 are pursued to give us a nuanced understanding of righteousness in Isaiah 56-66. It is in this portion of Isaiah that some of the clearer portraits of a theology of work are offered. The righteousness offered as a gift in Isaiah 40-55 is now an obligation to be performed in chapters 56-66: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Maintain justice, and do what is right, for my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed’” (Is. 56:1).

The appeal to maintain justice and do righteousness in Isaiah 56-66 is a realized possibility now for the people of God because of God’s prior gracious claim on them in the figure of the servant. The language of Is. 56:1 is linked to Is. 51:4-8 in which again Judah is called to pursue justice and righteousness. In this passage, the created possibility for the people of God to do righteousness is found in the last clauses of Is. 51:6, 8: God’s righteousness and God’s salvation will not fail but will last forever. As chapters 40-55 move in their literary shape, we see God’s righteousness and salvation enacted in the person of the servant (chapter 53) who suffers on behalf of and in the place of others. The appeals to “doing righteousness” in chapters 56-66 are made possible because of God’s prior dealings with Israel’s infidelity in the gracious and substitutionary action of the servant. In theological language, God’s grace precedes law, as demonstrated by God’s gracious initiative to redeem his people at all costs. This is the only means by which talk of human responsibility or righteous actions can occur. It is in the security of the forgiveness of God found in Jesus Christ that the impetus for good works materializes.[10]

The prophet turns the argument from the negative to the positive by presenting “the fast that I [God] choose” (Is. 58:6). This fast includes: Loosing the chains of injustice, setting the oppressed free, sharing food with the hungry, providing the poor wanderer with shelter, clothing the naked, caring for one’s family (Is. 58:6-7).[11] Isaiah paints a picture of the values that must characterize the people of God, in stark contrast to those of most surrounding cultures. External religion or religious performance that

can co-mingle with a work ethic characterized by a lack of concern for one's laborers (where laborers or employees or subordinates are mere instruments for personal or business development), or by a leadership style that is given to strife, quarreling, backbiting, shortened fuses and uncontrolled anger — these breach our loyalty to God. A claim is made on the people of God because of the prior forgiveness of our sins in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The promise following on the heels of the invective in chapters 58 is the breaking forth of all of God's promises in the midst of God's people: "Your light will break forth.... your vindicator will go before you.... the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard" (Is. 58:8-9; cf. Is. 52:12).

As we trace the development of "the Servant" from national Israel to an idealized Israel, then to the Servant of the Lord in chapters 52-53, then to the servants of that Servant, we pause to reflect on the workplace implications of the model of servanthood we see in Jesus Christ. Isaiah carefully constructs his description of the servant to make it clear that he is a reflection of God himself.<sup>[12]</sup> Therefore, Christians have traditionally equated the Servant with Jesus. Isaiah's picture of the Servant's suffering in chapters 52-53 reminds us that as servants of God, we may be called to self-sacrifice in our work, as Jesus was.

So marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals....He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account....But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed....Yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent. (Is. 52:14, 53:3, 53:5, 53:7).

An adequate vision of God will motivate us to make God's standard our standard, so that we do not allow self-interest and self-aggrandizement to pervert our work.

Jesus, in his death and resurrection, met a need we could not meet. God's standard calls us to meet the needs of justice and righteousness through our work: "Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled. The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him" (Is. 59:14-16). As servants of the Servant of the Lord, we are called to meet unmet needs. In the workplace, this may have many faces: concern for a downtrodden employee or co-worker, alertness to the integrity of a product being sold to consumers, eschewing process shortcuts that would deprive people of their input, even rejecting

hoarding in times of scarcity. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

As servants of the Servant of the Lord, we may not receive the acclaim we desire. Rewards may be deferred. But we know that God is our Judge. Isaiah put it this way: “For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Is. 57:15).

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## Work’s Ultimate Meaning (Isaiah 60ff.)

Throughout the book, Isaiah encourages Israel with the hope that God will eventually put to rights the wrongs the people are suffering in the present. Work, and the fruits of work, are included in this hope. By chapter 40, as the book moves from telling the truth about the present to telling the truth about the future, the sense of hope increases. The material about the suffering servant in chapters 40-59 can hardly be understood except as God’s gift of hope in the future fulfillment of God’s kingdom.

In chapters 60-66, this hope is finally expressed in full. God will gather his people together again (Is. 60:4), vanquish the oppressors (Is. 60:12-17), redeem the rebellious who repent (Is. 64:5-65:10), and establish his just kingdom (Is. 60:3-12). In place of Israel’s faithless leaders, God himself will rule: “You shall know that I, the Lord, am your Savior and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (Is. 60:16). The change is so radical that it amounts to a new creation, of parallel power and majesty to God’s first creation of the world. “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Is. 65:17).

Chapters 60-66 are rich with vivid portraits of the perfect kingdom of God. In fact, a large fraction of New Testament imagery and theology are drawn from these chapters in Isaiah. The final chapters of the New Testament (Revelation 21 and 22) are, in essence, a recapitulation of Isaiah 65-66 in Christian terms.

It may be surprising to some how much of Isaiah 60-66 is related to work and the outcomes of work. The things people work for in life come to complete fruition at last, including:

- Markets and trading, including the movement of gold and silver (Is. 60:6,9), the bringing of firs, and the opening of gates for trade. “Your gates shall always be open; day and night they shall not be shut, so that nations shall bring you their wealth, with their kings led in procession.” (Is. 60:11)
- Agricultural and forest products: including frankincense, flocks, rams (Is. 60:6-7), cypress and pine (Is. 6:13)
- Transportation by land and sea (Is. 60:6, 60:9), and even perhaps by air (Is. 60:8)
- Justice and peace (Is. 60:17-18, 61:8, 66:16)

- Social services (Is. 61:1-4)
- Food and drink (Is. 65:13)
- Health and long life (Is. 65:20)
- Construction and housing (Is. 65:21)
- Prosperity and wealth (Is. 66:12)

All these things have eluded Israel in their faithlessness to God. Indeed, the harder they tried to achieve them, the less they cared to worship God or follow his ways. The result was to lack them even more. But when the book of Isaiah presents Israel's future hope as the New Creation, all the preceding promises in the book come to the fore. The picture portrayed is that of a future eschatological or final day when the "righteous offspring of the servant" will enjoy all the blessings of the messianic age depicted earlier. Then people will actually receive the things they work for because "they shall not labor in vain" (Is. 65:23). Israel's sorrow will be turned into joy, and one of the dominant motifs of this coming joy is the enjoyment of the work of their own hands.

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## Conclusion to Isaiah

As Christians living in the tension between the inauguration of God's kingdom and its coming fulfillment, our enjoyment of our work and the fruit of our labor to the praise of God's glory foreshadows the coming day when the tension will be removed. It might be said like this: when Christians enjoy their work and the fruit it produces to the praise of God's glory, they taste a bit of heaven on earth. When all is made right and the heavens and earth are as they were originally intended, work will not cease. It will continue and will be a great delight for those involved, for the sting of the Fall will have been finally and irrevocably removed.

Work and enjoying the fruits of one's hard work, are gifts of God to be enjoyed and shared with others. Using these gifts, we can contribute to human flourishing and to alleviating suffering. The prophecy of Isaiah presents a beautiful portrait of the fact that even in our work as we clock in Monday to Friday, we are to fulfill the law by loving God and loving our neighbor (cf. Matthew 22:33-40). In God's economy, we cannot love God and fail to love our neighbor. When our work is performed in this gracious context made possible by the forgiving, restorative work of Jesus Christ, our joy may be full. When labor and work become the twisted focus of our own self-aggrandizement at the expense of our subordinates' dignity and the oppression of the poor and marginalized, the invective prophetic word of Isaiah still comes to us with power: "This is not the fast I have chosen." When work and labor are enjoyed in the context of loving God and loving neighbor, a little bit of the new heavens and the new earth are tasted in the here-and-now.

## Cross Reference of Cited Passages and Theme Sections in Isaiah

Passage (in order of chapter and verse)	Discussed in which theme section of this article (Click link to jump there)
<b>Is. 1:11-17</b> God desires no sacrifices from people who practice oppression and injustice.	<a href="#">Theme 1</a> - Integration of worship and work
<b>Is. 2:11</b> God will humble those who trust in themselves rather than in him.	<a href="#">Theme 2</a> - Arrogance in work leads to destruction
<b>Is. 2:22</b> Don't trust human power apart from God.	<a href="#">Theme 2</a> - Arrogance in work leads to destruction
<b>Is. 2:7</b> Wealth is no source of security.	<a href="#">Theme 2</a> - Arrogance in work leads to destruction
<b>Is. 3:3-15</b> God judges leaders for gaining wealth by grinding down the poor.	<a href="#">Theme 3</a> - God despises wealth gained by exploitation
<b>Is. 5:8</b> The nation is judged for allowing the rich to accumulate all the resources needed for production.	<a href="#">Theme 3</a> - God despises wealth gained by exploitation
<b>Is. 7:14</b> God is with his people wherever we are.	<a href="#">Theme 1</a> - Integration of worship and work
<b>Is. 7:9</b> Faith is the pre-requisite of action pleasing to God.	<a href="#">Theme 1</a> - Integration of worship and work

<b>Is. 8:13-14</b> Worshiping God is the source of strength for work.	<b>Theme 1</b> - Integration of worship and work
<b>Is. 9:3</b> The people of God rejoice at harvest time.	<b>Theme 4</b> - God wills our peace and prosperity in trusting him
<b>Is. 24:5-6</b> Corrupt practices degrade the earth, for which the people pay a price.	<b>Theme 3</b> - God despises wealth gained by exploitation
<b>Is. 28:26</b> God gives understanding to people who work the land.	<b>Theme 5</b> - God is the source of life, knowledge and wisdom
<b>Is. 29:13</b> The people honor God with their lips, but not their lives.	<b>Theme 1</b> - Integration of worship and work
<b>Is. 32:15-20</b> By the power of God's spirit, people will dwell in peace, security and enjoyment of their work.	<b>Theme 4</b> - God wills our peace and prosperity in trusting him
<b>Is. 37:30</b> God promises to restore the people's productivity as they return to trust in him.	<b>Theme 4</b> - God wills our peace and prosperity in trusting him
<b>Is. 37:36-37a</b> God's people can rely on God's power to bring forth what God desires in the world.	<b>Theme 1</b> - Integration of worship and work
<b>Is. 39:1-8</b> Boasting in wealth and power brings destruction.	<b>Theme 2</b> - Arrogance in work leads to destruction



<b>Is. 40:12-18</b> God is the source of all knowledge and power.	<b>Theme 5</b> - God is the source of life, knowledge and wisdom
<b>Is. 40:27</b> God's people cry out for justice from God's hand.	<b>Theme 6</b> - The example of God's servant at work
<b>Is. 40:27-40</b> God gives strength to the weak and powerless.	<b>Theme 1</b> - Integration of worship and work
<b>Is. 42:1-4</b> God's servant establishes justice.	<b>Theme 6</b> - The example of God's servant at work
<b>Is. 43:13</b> God is the source of power and compassion.	<b>Theme 1</b> - Integration of worship and work
<b>Is. 44:10-20</b> Nothing humans make can bring true security.	<b>Theme 2</b> - Arrogance in work leads to destruction
<b>Is. 44:6-7</b> Only God has lasting power.	<b>Theme 1</b> - Integration of worship and work
<b>Is. 46:3-4</b> God teaches and leads his people.	<b>Theme 5</b> - God is the source of life, knowledge and wisdom
<b>Is. 48:12-14</b> The created order comes from God alone.	<b>Theme 1</b> - Integration of worship and work
<b>Is. 51:4-8</b> God's people are called to pursue justice and righteousness.	<b>Theme 6</b> - The example of God's servant at work

<p><b>Is. 56:1</b> Justice, doing right, and salvation go hand in hand.</p>	<p><b>Theme 6</b> – The example of God’s servant at work</p>
<p><b>Is. 58:1-8</b> God expects his people to look after workers’ interests and provide for people in economic need.</p>	<p><b>Theme 1</b> – Integration of worship and work</p>
<p><b>Is. 58:6-9</b> God wants his people to worship him by loosing the chains of injustice, setting the oppressed free, sharing food, shelter and clothing, and providing for their families.</p>	<p><b>Theme 6</b> – The example of God’s servant at work</p>
<p><b>Is. 59:14-16</b> God’s servant uses whatever power he has to bring justice to the oppressed and truth to God’s people.</p>	<p><b>Theme 6</b> – The example of God’s servant at work</p>
<p><b>Is. 60:1-18</b> God will bring his people together under his own leadership, establish justice, and vanquish oppression.</p>	<p><b>Theme 7</b> – Today’s work finds meaning in the New Creation</p>
<p><b>Is. 60:5</b> The New Creation includes products of work from every nation.</p>	<p><b>Theme 7</b> – Today’s work finds meaning in the New Creation</p>
<p><b>Is. 61:8</b> God will recompense those who have suffered hardship.</p>	<p><b>Theme 7</b> – Today’s work finds meaning in the New Creation</p>
<p><b>Is. 62:8-9</b> God promises a time when his people can enjoy the fruits of their labor in peace.</p>	<p><b>Theme 4</b> – God wills our peace and prosperity in trusting him</p>
<p><b>Is. 64:5-65:10</b> God will redeem the rebellious who repent, and give them a share in the blessings of the New Creation.</p>	<p><b>Theme 7</b> – Today’s work finds meaning in the New Creation</p>

<p><b>Is. 65:13</b> There will be plenty to eat and drink.</p>	<p><a href="#">Theme 7</a> - Today's work finds meaning in the New Creation</p>
<p><b>Is. 65:20</b> Everyone will enjoy health and long life.</p>	<p><a href="#">Theme 7</a> - Today's work finds meaning in the New Creation</p>
<p><b>Is. 65:21</b> There will be plenty of housing for everyone.</p>	<p><a href="#">Theme 7</a> - Today's work finds meaning in the New Creation</p>
<p><b>Is. 65:21-22</b> God promises a time when his people will build houses and live in peace.</p>	<p><a href="#">Theme 4</a> - God wills our peace and prosperity in trusting him</p>
<p><b>Is. 65:23</b> The labor of God's people is not in vain.</p>	<p><a href="#">Theme 7</a> - Today's work finds meaning in the New Creation</p>
<p><b>Is. 66:13</b> Prosperity and wealth will be enjoyed by all.</p>	<p><a href="#">Theme 7</a> - Today's work finds meaning in the New Creation</p>
<p><b>Is. 66:16</b> God will bring to an end everything that would mar the New Creation.</p>	<p><a href="#">Theme 7</a> - Today's work finds meaning in the New Creation</p>

## ENDNOTES

- [1] In Isaiah, "Judah" refers to the southern kingdom of the divided nation of Israel, while "Israel" can refer either to the northern kingdom or — more frequently — to the Jewish people as a whole.

- [2] A prophet's job description includes both telling the truth and telling the future. Isaiah continually called the people back to just living by God's righteous Law (telling the truth), but he also saw far into the future and predicted events to come (telling the future). Most of the prophets were primarily preachers of righteousness, and their foretelling (predictive) work was less extensive into the future than was Isaiah's, Daniel's or Micah's. While they warned sinful people of the impending disaster God would visit on them because of their sin, only a few prophets extended the range of their prophecies beyond the next punishment God would bring upon a sinful people.
- [3] More precisely, this prophecy has a near-term fulfillment in the birth of a baby at the time of Ahaz, and an ultimate fulfillment in the virginal conception and birth of Jesus.
- [4] H. G. M Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1-27: Volume 1* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 271.
- [5] Cf. Is. 1:23, 3:9, 5:23, 10:1-2; 29:21. See also John Barton, "Ethics in the Book of Isaiah," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 89-70.
- [6] In the Old Testament, farming was the major occupation of the majority of the people. Thus many examples in the Bible are drawn from agrarian life and expectations.
- [7] For a fuller treatment of this issue as it relates to the final form of the book as a whole, see John N. Oswalt, "Righteousness in Isaiah: A Study of the Function of Chapters 56-66 in the Present Structure of the Book," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies in an Interpretive Tradition*, ed. C.C. Broyles and C. A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 177-91.
- [8] On the development of the servant in the literary presentation of Isaiah 40-55, see Christopher R. Seitz, "'You Are My Servant, You Are the Israel in Whom I Will Be Glorified': The Servant Songs and the Effect of Literary Context in Isaiah," *Calvin Theological Journal* 39 (2004): 117-34.
- [9] It was Gerhard von Rad who highlighted Isaiah 40-55's synonymous association of righteousness [*tsadeqah*] and salvation [*yeshua*]. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Volume 1*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962), 372.
- [10] Commenting on "righteousness" in Is. 56-66, Oswalt states, "In short, there is a whole new motivation for doing righteousness. It is not now so much the fear of impending doom which compels righteousness, as it is the recognition that God is going to mercifully and righteously keep his covenant promises. We should be righteous, the writer says, because of the righteousness of God." Oswalt, "Righteousness in Isaiah," 188.

- [11] Even if such a list has to do initially with the particular problems associated with the release from exilic bondage, the figural extension of these problems into other spheres of human conduct is not only legitimate, but necessary. See Christopher R. Seitz, "The Book of Isaiah 40-66: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible VI* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 499.
- [12] Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 50.