

Isaiah 65:17-66:24

The Puritan pastor, Thomas Watson, is one of my all-time heroes of the faith. He was around in the 1600s. As a faithful pastor and writer, his was a household name in that era. Mr Watson was known for many things, not least of which were his pithy sayings.

One of them is etched on my heart and mind and has been for many a long year: 'Eternity to the godly is a day that has no sunset; eternity to the sinner is a night that has no sunrise.'

Think about that - **repeat it** - the future for you and me who love the Lord Jesus is exhilarating - the best is yet to come; however, for those who live and die without knowing Jesus personally, the contrast is obvious - they have nothing to live for today and nothing to look forward to in all their tomorrows! For them, the worst is yet to come.

Quite simply, that's what this section at the end of Isaiah is all about - it shines the main beam on eternity. But the all-important and searching question is: Eternity. Where?

An old gospel hymn comes to mind, penned by Elisha Hoffman: *Where will you spend eternity? This question comes to you and me! Tell me, what shall your answer be? Where will you spend eternity? Eternity! Eternity! Where will you spend eternity?*

Those are solemn words, but the question needs to be asked - it also needs to be answered! As

'Eternity. Where?'

we shine the torchlight on this section, there is much to thrill us and warm our hearts; there is much to alarm us and cause us to plead for God to show mercy to those who are, as things stand, still outside his global family!

Before we get into the text, I think it's worth pointing out that these verses at the end of chapter 65 have been hotly debated down the years - some folk, like today's preacher, see this cluster of blessings referring to a golden age - a 1,000 year time frame when Jesus is seen to be ruling and reigning on earth - a kingdom age, a millennium; other good folk, and that may be some of you, see them as primarily applying to eternity and the eternal state, and that's ok - I can see where you're coming from; however, we're not going to fall out over it!

What really excites me this afternoon is this, irrespective of what view we hold, the future for the people of God is bright, and beautiful, and so blessed - all the promises in these verses are breathtaking, whether fulfilled in time or eternity, or even a mix of both. It's a matter of you and I sorting out our own eschatology - whatever way we look at it, it's cool, because here is a society transformed under the promise of God.

For us, we are a people of hope, a people with a glorious future - thank God, there is a future for the faithful followers of the Lamb ... and so, from

today's text, we want to look forward to **who** and **what** is coming - a bit like what Paul does when he whets our appetite in Colossians 3:1-4.

A blessed consummation

These words are epic for they speak of a blessed culmination - a glorious climax ... we're talking here about 'new heavens and a new earth' - yes, the great Creator is at it again - a classic case of, He's done it before, he can do it again ... recall Genesis 1:1 where we read, 'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' ... the word the prophet used here in verse 17 is the same Hebrew word that was used back then: in that sense, time is book-ended with an awesome display of sovereign power! Indeed, that's how the Bible ends up in the final vision of John in Revelation 21:1. The Creator makes all the headlines; he steals the show, and rightly so! He started the ball rolling with the onset of time on Day One, and he'll wrap it all up and make 'all things new' at the end of time - a reminder that before time and after time, there is eternity! So precious, isn't it - before time, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were there ... after time, they will still be there, along with his chosen ones, the redeemed of all the ages 'from every tribe, and language, and people, and nation.' No wonder the hymn writer exclaimed, *O that will be glory for me!*

So Isaiah is looking over the horizon when he focuses on something brand new ... truly, a

blessed consummation! But there's more, for there are:

Blessings in the city

Isaac Watts was right when he penned that *Blessings abound where'er he reigns ...* look at them, they're all set out for us - they are mouth-wateringly glorious. Many of these are cast in terms of old covenant realities - the people can tick all the boxes as they identify with what he's saying. We can catch a flavour of the grandeur of what Isaiah is promising - he sets the wheels in motion when he affirms that there will be no PTSD in this golden age (17b).

Some memories are precious, other memories are painful - they live on and they often return to haunt us in the wee small hours. Some trauma we have passed through triggers off a host of emotions and we end up battered and bruised. All thoughts of the old life in the old world will be eradicated - deleted from our memory banks.

But, in that day, when Jesus is king, and where Jerusalem is hailed as the city of the Great King, we read that 'the former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.' By any stretch, that's a huge plus!

There's a bucketful more in the verses which follow - let me highlight them for you: **It will be:** a world of bliss and joy which emanates from God himself (18-19) - 'the sound of weeping and crying will be heard in it no more'...

a world of safety in which illness has been eradicated (20) - the mortality rate for infant deaths is wiped out, and a man is still a young fella when he clocks up a century on his birthday clock - it's a picture of longevity, of how long people lived in Genesis before sin took hold on this fallen world ...

a world of abundance in which people will enjoy the rich fruit of their labours (21-23) - no crop failures, no natural disasters, no destruction ... a world of divine assistance in which prayers are answered before they have even been offered (24) - it tells of amazing access and intimacy with God ... and a world of peace throughout creation (25, with echoes of 11:6-9) - ah, the law of the jungle is no more for 'the wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, etc.'

The baseline is that life in this utopian era is characterised by the words of verse 23b, 'for they will be a people blessed by the Lord.' And when all is said and done, that's all that counts for anything in time and in eternity. And such blessing is evident in that the characteristics of this idyllic earth are 4-fold: there is holiness, and harmony, and health, and happiness.

This final chapter has been labelled: judgment and hope and it's easy to see why - it's a chapter of stunning contrasts: we see true worshippers on one side of the fence, and false worshippers on the other side! The punchline, as we shall

discover, is that there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned! That's old-time gospel preacher kind-of talk, but that's what the prophet focuses on in his closing chapter - an eternity with God *versus* eternity without God!

The book ends with the new heavens and new earth, and with Zion, the new Jerusalem, filled with worshippers of the living God - and they have come from every nation on Planet Earth. This is the climax of redemption's story - this is why Calvary was worth it all - it's the reason why heaven rejoices when a sinner comes home!

Allied to that, as I've hinted already, the book ends in the last verse with a clear portrayal of hell - that conscious state of eternal death in which sinners will suffer in plain view of those who are redeemed (echoes there, I think, of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16). I shudder and weep when I think of the everlasting fate of those who are unconverted. Ah, beloved, this is the gospel according to Isaiah!

There are 4 main lines of thought in chapter 66, each one shines the torchlight on worship and worshippers - be warned, there is the good and the bad! The outline isn't mine, it's borrowed from a book ...

1. True worshippers are delightful, and false worshippers are detestable (66:1-4)

I love the first two verses - here is God laying all his cards on the table, as it were. He leaves us and them in absolutely no doubt that he's the

boss, he's the one who runs the entire show from eternity to eternity. Here is a God who is immense, who is infinite, who is awesome, who is transcendent - the baseline is, you can't outdo or outshine the great God of the covenant.

He asserts and affirms his status and standing in the clearest of terms, when he says: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.' What a picture that is! God sitting on his throne, and when he puts his feet up, they are both resting on earth.

But he doesn't stop there, he goes on to remind us of his bigness when he says that you can't put him in a box and try to contain him - we read:

'Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?'

Even Solomon in his wisdom conceded this truth at the dedication of his magnificent temple, for we read in 1 Kings 8:27 that he said: 'Even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain you, much less this temple I have built.' I mean, he's stating the obvious, but it needs to be said over and over again. Simple won't go away fact, the matchless Creator cannot be circumscribed or limited in any way, at any time, in any church or cathedral - he is God! One who is ineffable, and immeasurable.

At the end of verse 2 we see the hallmark of a true worshipper - this is the kind of person God blesses and whom God holds in high regard. The

man or woman whom God esteems is one who is marked by humility in all that he is and does, he is aware of his sinfulness and is grateful for a holy God who forgives sinners ...

he lives his life under the authority of God's word - he 'trembles at my word' ... such a person sees himself as a nobody with nothing to offer to a kind God, to a God who has it all; for folks like that, the Lord of heaven and earth is our everything and our all!

When was the last time any one of us trembled at his word? When we were shaking as we knelt in his presence. We tremble when we think of the just wrath of God that we deserve. And we tremble with expectation and excitement when we see how majestic and beautiful our God is. No matter how you look at it, it means we are taking God at his word, we take him seriously.

See the glaring contrast in verses 3-4, where the telltale traits of false religion are graphically painted for us. A person may be up to their neck in religion, they may do all the things demanded of them - but that's not saving faith. We read:

'they have chosen their own ways, and their souls delight in their abominations.' That's a sad and sorry epitaph on any man's life and worship!

When a man embraces religion, when he toes the party line and goes through all the motions, a holy God is not in the least impressed! In his pure eyes, they are like killing a man, breaking a dog's neck, offering pig's blood, or praising an idol - false worshippers look after Number One,

they will do all in their power to curry favour with the domesticated god of their own making. God does not mince his words when he says of them, because you have done this against me, 'I will choose harsh treatment for [you] and will bring upon [you] what [you] dread. For when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, no one listened.'

So, the first point is that true worshippers are delightful and false worshippers are detestable.

2. False worshippers persecute, and true worshippers prosper (66:5-14a)

It's worth noting that the dynamics of this chapter are like a see-saw ... we are going back and forth from the righteous to the wicked and back again. It weaves all the way through the entire chapter as it does all the way through our own experience in life. Ah, my friend, this is a world of wheat and weeds, of good fish and bad fish, all gathered by the same dragnet.

And, so, from now on God directly speaks to his children. These words are written to them, but he never stops talking about the wicked, those who are false worshippers - did you note, he always refers to them in the third person. In that sense, God has written them off - they get their comeuppance when his purposes ripen. We see that at the end of verse 5 and into verse 6.

'... they will be put to shame. Hear that uproar from the city, hear that noise from the temple! It is the sound of the Lord repaying his enemies all they deserve.' God gets the last laugh, when all

his enemies bite the dust. God will judge his mocking adversaries - he did it in the time of Jeremiah by destroying the temple, he did it again in AD 70 when the Romans fulfilled his plan ...

What is the noise, what is the uproar? It is God on the move, he's on the march wreaking havoc and destruction against those who oppose him and whose false worship is a stench in his nostrils. He always has the final say.

So, false worshippers are destroyed by the Lord, but true worshippers are born instantly by the Lord - that's in verses 7-9 ... **read them** ...

We have the most unbelievable statement in verse 7, followed by a couple of questions in verse 8 ...! I mean, ask any woman who has given birth and they'll all tell you that verse 7 is a dream, but it ain't reality ...! It just doesn't happen that way at all - no pain, no labour, just instant birth ... wow! If only ... then we read:

'Can a country be born in a day or a nation be brought forth in a moment?' Big question! My Jewish friends would say, that's what happened on 14 May 1948 when the people were back in the land - a nation born politically in a day. Well, maybe ... but I think it's much bigger than that!

For me, it highlights the unstoppable growth of the church of Jesus Christ around the world - the explosive expansion of the church as the gospel is proclaimed to the nations. Think alone of the day of Pentecost when 3,000 were added in one day - the flame started to spread like wildfire

and within 30 years they had turned the world upside down. And, all these years later, we have entered into the blessing first promised to father Abraham and predicted here!

We are born again in a moment - we are now numbered among Zion's children in verse 8. Did you notice, and I say this sensitively, there are no miscarriages here, none are stillborn, none die in labour - ah, when God pours out his Spirit on the elect, they will come to faith in Christ. No one gets left behind, no one gets lost, John 6:37 confirms that! Our God is able!

In verses 10-14a we see that true worshippers prosper richly in Zion. Talk about blessing, this is it! There's a river of blessing flowing into Zion from the ends of the earth - these Gentiles, who are adopted sons and daughters of God, will be jumping up and down with elation in the new Jerusalem (Paul hints at that in Galatians 4) - we will flourish because we are on the receiving end of his comfort, and compassion, and care. God, as Jehovah Shammah, is near us, we are near him - what else do we need? God in our midst! Ah, the soul thrilling prospect of a bright new world!

3. False worshippers are condemned, and true worshippers are commissioned (66:14b-21)

The gracious and good hand of the Lord is upon his servants in verse 14a ... and that's for their benefit and blessing ... however, see what happens when God turns his hand against those

who are false worshippers. We read that 'his fury will be shown to his foes.'

This is no softly-softly approach from an angry God - justice is meted out fairly and swiftly. Ah, says one of old, 'it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.' And so it is! God is going to pour out his vengeance on these rebels and they will get their comeuppance. I think the pictorial language of verses 15-16 crystallises our thinking - every other word is indicative of his serious intent. No messing around here!

If there are any lingering doubts in the front of your mind, I'd suggest you read the entire centre section of the book of Revelation - it'll make the hair stand on the back of your neck. My friend, this is terrifyingly scary - the prophet spells it out with such clarity when he concludes in verse 17 that 'they will meet their end together.'

In a day not too far distant, all that is foretold here by Isaiah will become a harsh reality - there is no element of doubt, for when God moves in judgment, sinful men are left reeling from one blow after another. The Bible says with candour in verse 16 that 'many will be those slain by the Lord.' For them, it's too late! The party's over.

Basically, in verse 18, he ups the ante; God has had enough of sinful man's shenanigans - he's on the march and he's returning. A day in the future is anticipated when he will 'gather all nations and tongues, and they will come and see [his] glory.'

Here is a glimpse of the beating heart of God when for the last time in Isaiah he talks about mission! He says he will 'set a sign among them' - I'm assuming that refers to the Lord Jesus! His birth, his life, his death, his resurrection - what an unmissable sign, and that's the heart of the gospel - it's Jesus!

And the mission of God is from everywhere to everywhere - a few places are mentioned in verse 19, but the key phrase is that the message reaches out 'to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory.' His heart is for the unreached and least reached peoples of the world! For you and I, the challenge is there on a daily basis - we are to 'proclaim [his] glory among the nations.'

That's our mandate, that's our responsibility as individuals and as a local congregation - we're here to tell the world about Jesus! Now, very quickly, the final thought is that:

4. True worshippers eternally live, and false worshippers eternally die (66:22-24)

There is confirmation in verse 22 that the new heavens and earth will endure for eternity - so long as God is, they are! And there's another thrilling and humbling disclosure here - so too shall we endure. Ah, beloved, there's no end date to what God has planned for his people - it's everlasting! The sun will never set on our eternal home. Praise God!

And, as John Newton reminds us: *When we've been there ten thousand years, Bright shining as*

*the sun, We've no less days to sing his praise,
Than when we first begun!*

The bliss envisaged for the followers of the Lamb is in stark contrast to the doom awaiting those who spurn his offers of love and mercy. They are consigned to hell itself - a place of everlasting, conscious torment ... you know, this isn't just Old Testament teaching, Jesus in the gospels had an awful lot to say about it as well. Read Mark 9 and Luke 16 for starters!

When it says 'the worm will not die,' it reminds us that the worm gnaws on a corpse. It gnaws on the dead body and it keeps eating until there is nothing left to eat, and then the worm dies. But here in verse 24, the worm does not die - ah, that says everything, doesn't it!

I think if I'd be writing this book, I'd have shut up shop at verse 23 ... it almost seems as though he wants to leave sinful man with a kind-of parting shot that he needs to get his relationship with God sorted out in time - eternity is a long time to wish you'd done the right thing. And it's too late!

Well, we've unpacked the teaching of these two chapters - and it's back to what I said at the very beginning ... eternity is ahead for every one of us and the big question is, where will you spend it? There is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned ... I ask you gently, very gently, are you destined for a land that has no sunset, or are you bound for a place where there is no sunrise?