

The Theme of Fire and Purification in Isaiah

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Fire as a Literary Theme: Starting Point

^{1:24} Therefore the Lord GOD of hosts,
The Mighty One of Israel, declares,
'Ah, I will be relieved of My adversaries
And avenge Myself on My foes.
²⁵ 'I will also turn My hand against you,
And will **smelt away your dross** as with lye
And will **remove all your alloy**.
²⁶ 'Then I will **restore** your judges as at the first,
And your counselors as at the beginning;
After that you will be called the city of righteousness, a faithful city.'
²⁷ Zion will be redeemed with justice
And her repentant ones with righteousness.
²⁸ But transgressors and sinners will be crushed together,
And those who forsake the LORD will come to an end.
²⁹ Surely you will be ashamed of the oaks which you have desired,
And you will be embarrassed at the gardens which you have chosen.
³⁰ For you will be like an oak whose leaf fades away
Or as a garden that has no water.
³¹ The strong man will become **tinder**,
His work also a **spark**.
Thus they shall **both burn together**
And there will be **none to quench them**.
(Isaiah 1:24 – 31)

^{4:3} It will come about that he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy—
everyone who is recorded for life in Jerusalem.

⁴ When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion
and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst,
by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of **burning**,

⁵ then the LORD will create over the whole area of Mount Zion
and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke,
and the brightness of a **flaming fire** by night;
for over all the glory will be a canopy.

(Isaiah 4:3 – 5; cf. pillar of fire imagery from Exodus 14:24)

^{6:1} In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. ² Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.' ⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. ⁵ Then I said, 'Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.' ⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a **burning coal** in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. ⁷ He touched my mouth with it and said, 'Behold, this has **touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.**' ⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Then I said, 'Here am I. Send me!' ⁹ He said, 'Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.' ¹⁰ Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and **be healed.**' ¹¹ Then I said, 'Lord, how long?' And He answered,

‘Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant, houses are without people and the land is utterly desolate,¹² the LORD has removed men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.¹³ Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, and it will again be subject to **burning**, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.’ (Isaiah 6:1 – 13)

Fire as Purifying	Fire as Destroying
<p>^{10:16} Therefore the Lord, the GOD of hosts, will send a wasting disease among his stout warriors; And under his glory a fire will be kindled like a burning flame.</p> <p>¹⁷ And the light of Israel will become a fire and his Holy One a flame, And it will burn and devour his thorns and his briars in a single day.</p> <p>¹⁸ And He will destroy the glory of his forest and of his fruitful garden, both soul and body, And it will be as when a sick man wastes away.</p> <p>¹⁹ And the rest of the trees of his forest will be so small in number That a child could write them down.</p> <p>²⁰ Now in that day the remnant of Israel, and those of the house of Jacob who have escaped, will never again rely on the one who struck them, but will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel.</p> <p>²¹ A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God.</p> <p>²² For though your people, O Israel, may be like the sand of the sea, Only a remnant within them will return;</p> <p>^{33:10} ‘Now I will arise,’ says the LORD, ‘Now I will be exalted, now I will be lifted up.’</p> <p>¹¹ ‘You have conceived chaff, you will give birth to stubble; My breath will consume you like a fire.</p> <p>¹² ‘The peoples will be burned to lime, Like cut thorns which are burned in the fire.</p> <p>¹³ ‘You who are far away, hear what I have done; And you who are near, acknowledge My might.’</p> <p>¹⁴ Sinners in Zion are terrified; Trembling has seized the goddess. ‘Who among us can live with the consuming fire? Who among us can live with continual burning?’</p> <p>¹⁵ He who walks righteously and speaks with sincerity, He who rejects unjust gain And shakes his hands so that they hold no bribe; He who stops his ears from hearing about bloodshed And shuts his eyes from looking upon evil;</p> <p>^{48:10} Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction...</p> <p>²⁰ Go forth from Babylon! Flee from the Chaldeans! Declare with the sound of joyful shouting,</p>	<p>^{5:24} Therefore, as a tongue of fire consumes stubble And dry grass collapses into the flame, So their root will become like rot and their blossom blow away as dust; For they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts And despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.</p> <p>²⁵ On this account the anger of the LORD has burned against His people, And He has stretched out His hand against them and struck them down. And the mountains quaked, and their corpses lay like refuse in the middle of the streets.</p> <p>For all this His anger is not spent, But His hand is still stretched out.</p> <p>²⁶ He will also lift up a standard to the distant nation, And will whistle for it from the ends of the earth; And behold, it will come with speed swiftly.</p> <p>²⁷ No one in it is weary or stumbles, None slumbers or sleeps; Nor is the belt at its waist undone, Nor its sandal strap broken.</p> <p>²⁸ Its arrows are sharp and all its bows are bent; The hoofs of its horses seem like flint and its chariot wheels like a whirlwind.</p> <p>²⁹ Its roaring is like a lioness, and it roars like young lions; It growls as it seizes the prey And carries it off with no one to deliver it.</p> <p>³⁰ And it will growl over it in that day like the roaring of the sea. If one looks to the land, behold, there is darkness and distress; Even the light is darkened by its clouds.</p> <p>^{26:11} O LORD, Your hand is lifted up yet they do not see it. They see Your zeal for the people and are put to shame; Indeed, fire will devour Your enemies.</p> <p>^{30:27} Behold, the name of the LORD comes from a remote place; Burning is His anger and dense is His smoke; His lips are filled with indignation And His tongue is like a consuming fire;</p> <p>²⁸ His breath is like an overflowing torrent, which reaches to the neck, To shake the nations back and forth in a sieve, And to put in the jaws of the peoples the bridle which leads to ruin.</p> <p>²⁹ You will have songs as in the night when you keep the festival, And gladness of heart as when one marches to the sound of the flute, To go to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel.</p> <p>³⁰ And the LORD will cause His voice of authority to be heard, And the descending of His arm to be seen in fierce anger, And in the flame of a consuming fire In cloudburst, downpour and hailstones.</p> <p>³¹ For at the voice of the LORD Assyria will be terrified, When He strikes with the rod.</p> <p>³² And every blow of the rod of punishment, Which the LORD will lay on him, Will be with the music of tambourines and lyres; And in battles, brandishing weapons, He will fight them.</p>

<p>proclaim this, Send it out to the end of the earth; Say, 'The LORD has redeemed His servant Jacob.'</p> <p>^{53:10} But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a sin/guilt offering, (the remains of which were burned in fire, in Lev.4:8 – 12; 5:10; 6:30; 7:5) He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.</p> <p>^{66:20} Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the LORD, on horses, in chariots, in litters, on mules and on camels, to My holy mountain Jerusalem,' says the LORD, 'just as the sons of Israel bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD.</p> <p>²¹ I will also take some of them for priests and for Levites,' says the LORD.</p> <p>²² 'For just as the new heavens and the new earth Which I make will endure before Me,' declares the LORD, 'So your offspring and your name will endure.</p> <p>²³ And it shall be from new moon to new moon And from sabbath to sabbath, All mankind will come to bow down before Me,' says the LORD.</p>	<p>³³ For Topheth has long been ready, Indeed, it has been prepared for the king. He has made it deep and large, A pyre of fire with plenty of wood; The breath of the LORD, like a torrent of brimstone, sets it afire.</p> <p>^{42:24} Who gave Jacob up for spoil, and Israel to plunderers? Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned, And in whose ways they were not willing to walk, And whose law they did not obey? ²⁵ So He poured out on him the heat of His anger And the fierceness of battle; And it set him aflame all around, Yet he did not recognize it; And it burned him, but he paid no attention.</p> <p>^{66:13} As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; And you will be comforted in Jerusalem.'</p> <p>¹⁴ Then you will see this, and your heart will be glad, And your bones will flourish like the new grass; And the hand of the LORD will be made known to His servants, But He will be indignant toward His enemies.</p> <p>¹⁵ For behold, the LORD will come in fire And His chariots like the whirlwind, To render His anger with fury, And His rebuke with flames of fire.</p> <p>¹⁶ For the LORD will execute judgment by fire And by His sword on all flesh, And those slain by the LORD will be many.</p> <p>¹⁷ 'Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go to the gardens, Following one in the center, Who eat swine's flesh, detestable things and mice, Will come to an end altogether,' declares the LORD.</p> <p>^{66:24} Then they will go forth and look On the corpses of the men Who have transgressed against Me. For their worm will not die And their fire will not be quenched; And they will be an abhorrence to all mankind.'</p>
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Historical and Cultural Background

- *Isaiah*: A poetic preacher who lived in around 800 BC, in the Southern Kingdom of Judah (after the nation Israel split into two kingdoms). He is among the 'Hebrew prophets' who put their hope in God to bring about a worldwide change through the Jewish Messiah (final king).
- *Isaiah's References to Israel's History*: Isaiah uses the imagery of fire because God appeared as a pillar of fire when He led Israel out of Egypt (Ex.14:24 quoted in Isa.4:5), and now God is promising to deliver Israel again, but from sinfulness itself. In Genesis through Deuteronomy, fire begins as a positive sign:
 - *God Will Purify His People to Return Them to the Garden*: After Adam and Eve corrupt their human nature, God prevented them from making their sinfulness immortal. He sent them out of Eden. He then stationed an angel with a fiery sword as a motif of what must happen in order for people to return to Eden (Gen.3:24): God will burn away and cut away something from within us. Fire is therefore associated with purification, both in the Pentateuch and in Isaiah.
 - *God Purifies Israel by Dwelling Among Them*: Then the fire of the burning bush was a sign to Moses that God wants to dwell among His people as a refining fire (Ex.3:2). Then on Mount Sinai, God called Israel up to meet with Him face to face (Ex.19:13; Dt.5:4 – 5). But Israel refused out of fear. Moses, however, did go up, and his face shone with light because God purified Moses in some sense (Ex.34:29 – 35).

- *God Protects His People from Enemies:* Only when people keep resisting God does fire become a sign of destruction. God rains fire on Sodom and Gomorrah because they are hostile to the family of faith, as shown by their use of rape as a tool of conquest (Gen.19:23 – 28; Dt.29:23).
- *God Purifies His People through Exile:* Moses warns Israel that the exile from the garden land will function like a refining fire (Dt.32:22) before they return (Dt.32:40 – 43). That is what happens when a person tries to hold on to the thing God wants to purify away.

Outline of the *Book of Isaiah*¹

Introduction (Isaiah 1 – 6): The Reign of God

The Messiah as King (Isaiah 7 – 35)

8:14 – 9:7	11:1 – 16	32:1 – 8	33:17 – 24
Biography	Biography	Biography	Biography
The king's reign	The king's reign	The king's reign	The king's reign
	He is endowed with the Spirit and the word	He is endowed with the Spirit	He is endowed with the word
The King will be a new sanctuary (8:14 – 18); he will bring new creation (light out of darkness) and rule the world	He will rule the world and bring about a new creation	He will reign righteously, undo the great curse, and pour out the Spirit	He will secure Jerusalem and forgive inhabitants
Tailpiece (9:8 – 10:34)	Tailpiece (12:1 – 6)	Tailpiece (32:9 – 20)	Tailpiece (33:1 – 35:10)

The Messiah as Servant (Isaiah 36 – 55)

42:1 – 4	49:1 – 6	50:4 – 9	52:13 – 53:12
Biography	Autobiography	Autobiography	Biography
The Servant's task	The Servant's task	The Servant's commitment	The Servant's completion of his task
He is endowed with the Spirit and the word	He is endowed with the word	He is endowed with the word	
	He experiences despondency	He experiences suffering	He experiences suffering
Tailpiece (42:5 – 9)	Tailpiece (49:7 – 13)	Tailpiece (50:10 – 11)	Tailpiece (54:1 – 55:13)

The Messiah as Anointed Conqueror (Isaiah 56 – 66)

59:15 – 21	61:1 – 3	61:10 – 62:7	63:1 – 6
Biography	Autobiography	Autobiography	Autobiography
The Conqueror's task	The Conqueror's task	The Conqueror's commitment	The Conqueror's completion of his task
He is endowed with the Spirit and the word	He is endowed with the Spirit and the word	He is endowed with the word	
He effects vengeance and salvation	He effects vengeance and salvation	He effects vengeance and salvation	He effects vengeance and salvation
Tailpiece (60:1 – 22)	Tailpiece (61:4 – 9)	Tailpiece (62:8 – 12)	Tailpiece (63:7 – 66:24)

¹ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers' Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993) assembled the tables on the Servant (Isa.36 – 55) and Conqueror (Isa.56 – 66); I added the one for the King (Isa.7 – 35)

Questions

1. In Isaiah 1 and 4, how does Isaiah use the imagery of fire?
 - a. God is like a smith who wants to refine Israel which is like a precious metal mixed in with impurities (Isa.1:25 – 31).
 - b. What did God want to purify Israel from?
 - c. God will be like a pillar of fire again to His people, protecting them despite the coming of their enemies (Isa.4:3 – 5)
 - d. Read Exodus 14:24, ‘the Lord looked down on the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud and brought the army of the Egyptians into confusion.’
2. In Isaiah 6, how would you connect ‘fire’ with God’s goal that Israel would ‘turn and be healed’ (Isa.6:10)?
 - a. Assuming Isaiah’s vision had physical sensations involved, too, like a dream, what do you think it was like for Isaiah? Have you ever been burned? What did that feel like?
 - b. God purifies the lips of the prophet Isaiah with a burning coal so he can speak God’s words (Isa.6:6 – 7). This suggests that God will purify Israel with fire, too, not just Isaiah.
 - c. God will purify Israel, whittling Israel down from a tree down to a stump (Isa.6:13). That is probably numerical, to restart the community of Israel. And it relates to people who believe, not to people in general (it’s not genocide).
 - i. The words that God gives to Isaiah to speak, which required Isaiah to be purified, will be what God uses to purify Israel. God gave Isaiah words about partnering with Him to reach the Gentile nations. But it would be emotionally hard!
 - ii. Practically speaking, Israel will feel like a minority people in a majority Babylonian world. Then, God will call them to reach the nations at the time when they will want to huddle up and protect their culture and way of life.
 - iii. That’s why Jesus quoted so often from Isaiah. Matthew and Luke are virtually structured around Isaiah. See my notes at nagasawafamily.org under ‘Matthew’ and ‘Luke.’
 - d. Illus: This is a good exemplary quote from Ambrose (337 – 394 AD), bishop of Milan, teacher of Augustine of Hippo. Early Christian teachers and leaders regularly spoke this way:

‘And Isaiah shows that the Holy Spirit is not only Light but also Fire, saying: And the light of Israel shall be for a fire. [Isaiah 10:17] So the prophets called Him a burning Fire, because in those three points we see more intensely the majesty of the Godhead; since to sanctify is of the Godhead, to illuminate is the property of fire and light, and the Godhead is wont to be pointed out or seen in the appearance of fire: For our God is a consuming Fire, as Moses said. [Deuteronomy 4:24] For he himself saw the fire in the bush, and had heard God when the voice from the flame of fire came to him saying: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. [Exodus 3:6] The voice came from the fire, and the voice was in the bush, and the fire did no harm. For the bush was burning but was not consumed, because in that mystery the Lord was showing that He would come to illuminate the thorns of our body, and not to consume those who were in misery, but to alleviate their misery; Who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that He might give grace and destroy sin. [Matthew 3:11] So in the symbol of fire God keeps His intention... What, then, is that fire? Not certainly one made up of common twigs, or roaring with the burning of the reeds of the woods, but that fire which improves good deeds like gold, and consumes sins like stubble. This is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, Who is called both the fire and light of the countenance of God... And as there is a light of the divine countenance, so, too, does fire shine forth from the countenance of God, for it is written: “A fire shall burn in His sight.” For the grace of the day of judgment shines beforehand, that forgiveness may follow to reward the service of the saints. (Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit*, book 1, chapter 14, paragraphs 164 – 165, 169 – 170)

- e. Illus: The early Christians made a connection between Isaiah’s fiery coal and Jesus’ practice of communion! They saw communion as purifying, because Jesus is purifying.²

² Patrick Henry Reardon, *Reclaiming the Atonement: An Orthodox Theology of Redemption, Volume One: The Incarnation* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2015), p.51 – 55

- i. John of Damascus (676 – 749 AD) says, ‘Let us draw near to Him with burning desire and... let us take hold of the divine coal, so that the fire of our longing, fed by the flame of the coal, may purge away our sins and enlighten our hearts. Let us be enkindled by touching this great divine fire, and so come forth as gods.’ (John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith* 4.13)
 - ii. *The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* has the priest pronounce, ‘Lo, this has touched your lips and has taken away your iniquity.’ This liturgy was written by John Chrysostom (349 – 407 AD), archbishop of Constantinople from 397 – 407 AD, and has been used ever since in Eastern Orthodox Churches. In fact, it is the most celebrated Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite, a group of liturgies used by Eastern Orthodox, Eastern Catholics, Anglican, and Lutheran communities. It is second only to the Roman Rite used in Catholic Churches.
 - iii. *The Divine Liturgy of St. James* refers to ‘receiving the fiery coal’ of communion. This liturgy is the oldest complete form of Eastern liturgies. It comes from the early Christian church in Jerusalem, and is ascribed to James the brother of Jesus, who was the leader, or one of the leaders, of the Jerusalem Christian community. Possibly, the Liturgy was refined and organized by Cyril of Jerusalem (313 – 386 AD), bishop of Jerusalem from 350 AD. But it is probable that Cyril was working with liturgies that he simply passed on, even if he did modify it.
 - iv. In any case, the early Christian association of Isaiah’s burning coal with the communion bread established by Jesus is ancient.
3. How does Isaiah use the imagery of fire for an enemy army and the exile into Babylon?
 - a. The enemy army will be like a fire that sweeps in (Isaiah 5:24 – 30). Israel made alliances with foreign rulers because they didn’t want to trust God. But this made Israel vulnerable. The foreign rulers came in and pillaged Israel.
 - b. The exile in Babylon will be like a refiner’s fire in which Israel is refined (Isaiah 48:10 – 20)
 - c. So is the fire always literal? No. It’s primarily a literary motif. It can *become* literal, like when an enemy army swoops into Jerusalem and sets it on fire. But that doesn’t mean that ‘fire’ as a literary motif becomes ‘fire’ in a literal sense. Certainly the exile to Babylon was not ‘literally’ a fire. But it was ‘literarily’ a fire.
 - d. And Isaiah doesn’t always mean that God IS that fire. The point Isaiah seems to be making is that your sins can burn you, too. But that doesn’t mean that the fire of sin and the fire of God are the same thing – **THEY ARE DIFFERENT!**
 - e. In Romans 1:24, 26, 28, God ‘gives people over’ to their sin. God’s hope in doing so is that the sins themselves, and the bitter consequences of the sins, like breakdown of healthy relationships, will teach people.
 - f. Application: If you have an addiction to alcohol, attention, spending, sugar, sex, or whatever, how are the consequences of your addiction a kind of ‘fire’ that kind of ‘burns’ you?
4. The figure of Moses lies in the background of Isaiah, which comes to the forefront when Isaiah speaks of ‘the Servant of the Lord.’
 - a. God purified Moses in some sense, when Moses went up Mount Sinai and made his face shine with light. Jesus is the new Moses, whose face shines with light (Mt.17:1 – 13; Mk.9:1 – 8; Lk.9:28 – 36)
 - b. Moses was a mediator between God and Israel. God made the Sinai covenant with Moses, and Israel benefited. Isaiah sees a coming Servant which would be a second Moses-figure (Isa.42:1 – 4; 49:5 – 8; 50:4 – 11; 52:13 – 53:12; 59:1 – 21; 61:1 – 2; 63:1 – 6). The Servant embodies Israel, represents Israel, and bears the covenant on behalf of Israel. The Servant can even be said to *be the covenant itself* (Isa.49:6; 55:3 – 5). Jesus is that Servant. Jesus mediates between God and people in a deeper and more profound way: by being both God and human in himself.
 - c. Illus: Here’s an illustration of that. Walter Wangerin draws up a simple, powerful picture of Jesus as healer in his story ‘The Ragman.’ You need to know that in American towns and cities, there used to be men who pushed carts offering to exchange dirty cloths for clean ones.

‘I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the darkened, dirty alleys of the city. He was pulling an old cart, filled with clothes, bright and new, and he was calling in a clear, tenor voice, ‘Rags! New rags for old!’ I wondered about this and so I followed him. The Ragman came to a woman sobbing on

her back porch, with her elbows on her knees, wiping her face with a handkerchief. Her shoulders shook with each sob.

'Give me your rag,' said the Ragman, 'and I will give you mine.'

She looked up and he took her old handkerchief and laid a new, clean, white linen one in her hand. Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman put her handkerchief to his face and began to weep, to sob with grief as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear.

'Rags! Rags! New rags for old!'

In a little while, the Ragman found a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage. Blood soaked her bandage. Blood ran down in a line down her cheek.

'Give me your rag, and I will give you mine.'

The child stared back helplessly. So he untied the bandage and tied it to his own head. Then he put a brand new bonnet on hers. I gasped at what I saw, for the wound went with the bandage! Against his brow it ran with fresh blood, his own!

'Rags! New rags for old!' cried the sobbing, bleeding Ragman.

The Ragman met a man slumped against a telephone pole.

'Do you have a job?' the Ragman asked.

'Are you crazy?' said the man, showing that the right sleeve of his jacket had no arm in it.

'Give me your jacket and I will give you mine.' He took off his jacket, and I trembled because the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve. When the other man put it on, he had two good arms, but the Ragman had only one.

I wept to see the change in the Ragman. He stumbled, weeping, bleeding, exhausted to the garbage pits of the city. He climbed a hill. With clumsy labor he cleared away a little space on that hill. Then he sighed. He laid down. And then he died.

I slipped into a junked car and cried because I had come to love the Ragman. The wonder of this man remained in my mind, and I sobbed myself to sleep. I slept through until Sunday morning when I was awakened by a light. Light slammed against my sour face and I saw him. The Ragman stood there, folding the bandage carefully, a scar on his forehead, but healthy! And all his rags were clean and shined. I lowered my head, trembling, and walked to him.

'Please dress me,' I said. And he put his new rags on me, and I am alive beside him: the Ragman, the Christ. (paraphrased from Walter Wangerin's *The Ragman*)

- d. Application: What area of your life do you think Jesus is wanting you to make an exchange with him?
5. What is the last fire, the eternal fire? Is Isaiah talking about hell in chapter 66?
 - a. Yes, he seems to be. God will come as a fire in 66:15 – 16.
 - b. Some will respond by being 'those who sanctify and purify themselves.' They will 'go to the gardens' in 66:17. Notice that in a
 - c. Those who resist the purification of God 'will come to an end altogether,' in 66:17.
 - d. God will become a fiery presence again in the holy city of Jerusalem, in some sense, in 66:20 – 23.
 - e. But outside the city, those who are repelled by God are defeated. This seems to be eternal defeat, as Isaiah uses the motif of a grave, with worms eating the dead corpses. Those worms will not die, in 66:24.
 - f. Note: Jesus quotes Isaiah 66:24 – about the fire and the worm – at least once, and maybe three times (manuscript question), in Mark 9:42 – 50.
6. (optional) How does the overall structure of Isaiah tell us something about this 'Servant of the Lord,' and the purifying work he will accomplish?
 - a. The similarities between these sections are fairly straightforward: acknowledged leadership, endowment of Spirit and word that enables him to reign, defeat of enemies, and ultimately, the establishment of a new world order that is put in the language of a 'new creation.' The major question that emerges from this overview is: In what ways does the presentation of this Messianic figure change between sections? And why? What accounts for the changes between the sections? One could simply say that it represents the development of the text of Isaiah over time, whether there was, in effect, one or more 'Isaiahs'. But I wish to suggest a reason for the changes that are literary and theological, without assuming anything about the formation of the entire text of Isaiah. I believe that each portrayal of the Messiah corresponds with the historical crises brought on by Ahaz and Hezekiah and their diplomatic compromises with Assyria and Babylon, respectively. That is, the Messiah as the faithful, ideal Davidic king serves as a contrast to the other, very fallible kings from David's line.

- b. *In Isaiah 7 – 35*, the Messiah is a King who stands in contrast to Ahaz. Isaiah comes to warn Ahaz, the last reigning Judean king in a fully sovereign house of David. Because of Ahaz, the house of David ceased to be a sovereign, independent dynasty. It became subjected to foreign powers and became a puppet throne of the Gentile empires around Israel: first Assyria, then Babylon, Persia, Greece, and then Rome. In contrast to this, the Messiah not only restores the independent sovereignty of the house of David, he reverses the subjection. He will rule among the Gentiles. This is the clear emphasis of the four Messianic portraits of the Messiah as king (9:1 – 7; 11:1 – 6; 32:1 – 8; 33:17 – 24).
- c. *In Isaiah 36 – 55*, the Messiah is a Servant in contrast to King Hezekiah. There is a double sense in which Hezekiah is not a ‘servant.’ The first is in relation to God, the second in relation to Israel. Hezekiah became the ‘servant’ of Babylon as opposed to the servant of God. Hezekiah feared for his security and listened to Merodoch-Baladan of Babylon. The Servant, however, listens only to YHWH (Isa.50:4 – 9). He says, ‘The Lord GOD has opened My ear; and I was not disobedient; nor did I turn back’ (Isa.50:5). Neither was Hezekiah a ‘servant’ in relation to the people of Israel. He had a strangely self-centered reaction to God’s declaration of exile, caring only about himself and his times, not for his people’s future (Isa.39:6 – 8).³
- d. *In Isaiah 56 – 66*, the Messiah is an Anointed Conqueror superior to both King Cyrus of Persia who defeated the Babylonian Empire, and King Hezekiah of Judah.
- i. Although Cyrus the Persian plays a major role in the release of the Israelite captives from Babylon, he is not ultimately the one for whom Jerusalem waits. Jerusalem waits for a king from the Davidic house who will possess the Spirit of God, something already stated in Isa.11:1. The first of the four portraits in this section of Isaiah begins with the LORD as a warrior, seeing the social injustice rampant in Israel (Isa.58), and therefore girding Himself in His armor to personally appear (Isa.59, repeating motifs of armor gear from 11:5). Isaiah gives a profound word of hope to Jerusalem (Isa.60) and then, repeating mention of Spirit-anointing as in 11:1 (‘the Spirit of the LORD is on me’), describes this warrior’s purpose as ‘to bring good news to the afflicted, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners’ (Isa.61:1).
 - ii. In these passages, the Messiah does the opposite of Hezekiah, who opened the treasury of the Temple and permitted the Babylonians to peer inside. Hezekiah therefore set the stage for the Babylonians to plunder Jerusalem and the Temple (Isa.39:2). The Messiah, by contrast, would provide for Jerusalem by drawing the Gentile nations to bring gifts of all kinds: precious metals and stones, ornaments used during peacetime, flocks, trees, spices, etc. (Isa.60:3 – 22). This is another dramatic way the Messiah will be quite unlike Hezekiah.
 - iii. Also in this section, Isaiah portrays Israel as recounting their history from the Exodus and offering a beautiful and repentant prayer for God to deliver them one more time, this time from Exile (63:7 – 64:12). In response to this plea that God would ‘rend the heavens and come down’ (64:1), the Messianic deliverer apparently does, and does something that provokes two widely different responses within Israel. Throughout Isaiah 65, Isaiah mentions, on the one hand, ‘a rebellious people,’ ‘a people who continually provoke Me to My face,’ who are unclean and yet maintain a ‘holier than thou’ attitude (65:2 – 4). God promises anger and wrath upon them. On the other hand, there are those who God calls ‘new wine in the cluster,’ ‘My servants,’ ‘offspring from Jacob,’ ‘an heir of My mountains from Judah,’ ‘My chosen ones,’ ‘flocks,’ ‘herds,’ and ‘My people who seek Me’ (65:8 – 10). The result will be the promised ‘new creation’:

³ After Isaiah declares to Hezekiah that as a result of his folly, his offspring and all Israel will be carried off into captivity in Babylon, Hezekiah’s response is puzzling. Hezekiah gave not a whit for those who came after him, caring only that there was ‘peace’ in his own day – such shortsightedness! Throughout Scripture, the most negatively evaluated people are those who do not think about the future and their progeny but only for themselves: Esau in Genesis 25 (who sells his future birthright for stew in the present); Judah in Genesis 38 (who does not give his son to be married to Tamar for the future continuation of that lineage); Elkanah in 1 Samuel 1 (who neglects Hannah’s future by saying to her, ‘Am I not better to you than ten sons?’). Hezekiah’s decision to side with the rising Babylonian power against Assyria shows a lack of faith in God, but his self-centered response to Isaiah’s rebuke reveals utter disdain, stupidity, and spiritual failure. The true Servant, by contrast, gives himself to others for their ultimate good and restoration.

^{65:17} For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth;
And the former things will not be remembered or come to mind.
¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create;
For behold, I create Jerusalem for rejoicing
And her people for gladness.
¹⁹ I will also rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in My people;
And there will no longer be heard in her
The voice of weeping and the sound of crying.

- iv. The surprising division within Israel is apparently explained in the last chapter of Isaiah. It is caused by the Messianic conqueror downplaying the Temple itself, along with its sacrifices, and turning to dwell with the one 'who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word' (Isa.66:1 – 3). The result of the Messiah's action is a division of people into either new creation or wrath, apparently based on their responses to him. This reference to the Temple in 66:1 – 2 means that Isaiah once again picks up the motif from Isa.8:14 – 15 of the Messiah being involved in being and/or building a 'new Temple.'