

Christ in the Prophets

Preface

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The apostle Paul writes in Philippians chapter 3, verse 10: *“I want to know Christ.”*

Despite Paul’s already considerable knowledge and experience of Christ, he always wanted to know him better, to go further in his knowledge and to pursue excellence in and through Christ.

It is our desire that this booklet might contribute to your growing knowledge of Christ. As leaders and servants in Christ’s church, we are called to know him better, we are called to be Christ-centred, Christ-glorifying, Christ-satisfied and Christ-like.

May God, through the illuminating grace of his Spirit, allow us to grow ever further and deeper into a true knowledge of his Son, the Lord Jesus.

Ian Flanders, January 2008

Chapter 1: Setting the Scene

This booklet is the second in a series looking at the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The first considered the subject of Christ in the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. Even from the very earliest parts of scriptures, there is the expectation and hope that God would send someone special to deal with the world’s most fundamental problems: sin, Satan and death.

This booklet follows on from where the last left off and will look at how the prophets of Israel, as God spoke through them, developed this hope and expectation of a coming Saviour-King.

Before we consider what the prophets actually said it is necessary to run through some history. We need to set things in their context and be aware that the prophets spoke in very different circumstances to the era of the patriarchs and of Moses. Moses probably brought Israel out of Egypt and to the frontier of the Promised Land in about 1400 years before Christ. The prophets, at least those whose words are recorded in scripture, spoke from about 750 BC to 450 BC. So, there is a gap of about six hundred and fifty years. What follows is a brief summary of what happened during that time:

First, under the leadership of Joshua and with God’s all-powerful intervention, Israel were able to enter the

Promised Land of Canaan, conquer it and establish themselves as a nation.

Then followed the period of the Judges described in the Bible book of that name. This age was marked by periods of dreadful spiritual decline. Israel refused to respect God's rule and sunk into idolatry, immorality and political chaos. God had warned Israel that if she did not respect her covenant with God, then her enemies would gain the upper hand. This actually occurred with various tribes imposing their oppressive rule over part or all of Israel at various times. However, from time to time God sent persons, called judges, who with divine help, delivered Israel from her enemies and to a certain extent restored spiritual and moral conditions. This did not tend to last very long though and Israel went through a number of cycles of decline, deliverance, restoration and then further decline. On the whole Judges is quite a pessimistic book.

The conclusion that the writer of Judges seems to want to get across is that all this happened because Israel did not have a King. It seems to have been written to justify the institution of Kingship in Israel. This is what happens next; Israel got their King.

Saul was the first King over a united Israel. He proved unsuitable and was replaced by David who was followed by Solomon. Then, because of arguments over who should succeed Solomon, the nation split into two. (See the books of 1 and 2 Samuel)

We then have one line of Kings in what was called the northern Kingdom and one line of Kings in what was called Judah.

The writer of Judges seemed to suggest that having a King would solve all Israel's problems. However, this was far from being the case. It is true that there was what could be called a Golden Age under David and Solomon and that David is traditionally viewed as the best or ideal King. Nevertheless even a superficial examination of their reigns and characters show that not all was well, even at the best of times. (See the book of 2 Samuel)

Things then got worse following this Golden Age once the nation had divided into two rival countries. In the northern Kingdom most of the Kings were quite dreadful. In Judah there was a mixture of evil Kings and others who were good and just and who sought to restore Judah's spiritual and moral state. Nevertheless the trend was downward until first the northern Kingdom succumbed to the Assyrian invader and its people taken into exile in 722 BC. They were followed by Judah. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian invader in 586 BC and its surviving population taken into exile. (See the books of 1 and 2 Kings)

So, how do the prophets fit into all this? The prophets spoke forth God's Word. They gave God's view of the events that Israel and Judah were experiencing. Their messages could be classified into three types:

Firstly, messages of rebuke and calls to repentance. The prophets denounced all that was wrong in these nations; the idolatry, the injustice, the immorality and so forth.

Secondly, warnings of judgement. The devastation, suffering and exile that befell first the north and then Judah should have come as no surprise because that is exactly what the prophets predicted.

Third, messages of hope for a brighter future. The prophets assured Israel that the national disaster of destruction and exile was not the end of the road for them as God's people. Following the exile there would be restoration.

Now where does Christ fit into all this? We haven't mentioned him yet. What is the relevance of all this to our subject "Christ in the Prophets"?

First, the books covering this history: Judges, one and two Samuel and one and two Kings prove that the hopes that Israel had put in the human Kingship were disappointed. This institution was ultimately a failure even if some Kings were better than others. However, at the same time that hopes placed in human Kingship were shattered, the expectation arose, proclaimed and developed by the prophets, that God would send a perfect King, his anointed one. He would be even better than the idealised David. He would fulfil all these disappointed expectations. Given that all human Kings had failed, the prophets hint very strongly that this would be a divine Saviour-King.

This booklet will show that this divine Saviour King, promised by the prophets, would be none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. We will examine some of the texts that speak of this new King, or Messiah. We will see what the prophets expected him to be and to do and it will become quite clear that the Lord Jesus was the fulfilment of all these hopes. God would send his anointed Messiah who would be a King surpassing in glory and achievements even the best of Israel's Kings.

Chapter 2: A Son is Given

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14)

The coming of the Lord Jesus fulfilled this prophecy, as Matthew is at pains to point out in his gospel. Jesus' mother, Mary, was a virgin, and yet by the power of the Spirit she became pregnant and gave birth.

However, according to Isaiah, the virgin's son was to be called Immanuel. What is the meaning of this word?

The word Emmanuel means God with us. Isaiah came preaching a message of warning and judgement. He predicted disaster upon the nation and people may have wondered if it was all over with God. Isaiah is saying that beyond the time of disaster God would prove once again that he was with them and a sign of this would be a virgin

giving birth to a son. This was something quite unheard of and of course impossible without the miraculous intervention of an all-powerful God. Matthew, as already mentioned, quotes this verse in connection with the arrival of Jesus. Jesus was born of a virgin and as his life unfolded it became evident that through him God was with his people.

A couple of chapters later Isaiah seems to expand and develop this promise in order to explain just how God would be with his people through the gift of a son.

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal

of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.” (Isaiah 9: 2 – 7)

This is a quite remarkable prophecy. Note that Isaiah picks up on the theme of a gift of a child, of a son, as a kind of echo of what he has already promised in chapter seven. The point that he seems to be making is that the One whom the Lord would send is truly human. He would be born into the world, aside from his virgin conception, as any other baby. He would grow and develop as any other child. He is like us, truly human. And then Isaiah introduces some truly remarkable ideas.

This child, this human being, would be called: *“Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* These were names or titles that could only legitimately be applied to God himself and yet they are used to describe this child that is given. Wonderful Counsellor could be reference to divine wisdom incarnate as intimated by the Proverbs. Mighty God could not be any more explicit. Everlasting Father; who is everlasting apart from God? Prince of Peace; again, true peace can only come from God.

The staggering conclusion that Isaiah is leading us towards is that this promised person would be authentically human and yet at the same time truly divine. This really is “God with us”, in flesh and bones, the divine walking amongst his people as a true human being.

This is quite an awesome truth and a real mystery and yet it is what the New Testament writers concluded about Jesus. People at Jesus' time had real trouble taking it in, which is quite understandable, and yet any honest reading of the New Testament must reach this conclusion; Jesus, the one promised and sent, is both truly human and truly divine.

We have dwelt a little on the identity of Isaiah's promised son and now we shall see what he says that Emmanuel or "God with us" would achieve. The text adds that this person would be the hoped for perfect King in the Davidic line. As King he will ultimately establish: perfect government, perfect justice, perfect righteousness and perfect peace. However, in many ways, Isaiah portrays this King as needing to win back his Kingdom.

The first verse we read speaks of the coming King as being light in the darkness. The second verse speaks of him shattering the yoke of the oppressor. We get the picture of a people enslaved in terrible conditions that are in need of a liberator.

These verses could be interpreted as Israel oppressed by the enemy and awaiting a military and political saviour King. Obviously many in Israel were hoping for just that but I think in the context of the book of Isaiah and of the Bible as a whole we should interpret it otherwise.

Darkness in the Bible represents all that is opposed to God. It represents sin, it represents error and ignorance, it

represents all that is demonic and it represents death. All men lie under the oppression of sin, Satan and death and these are our real enemies and that which we need to be liberated from.

Jesus says according to John's gospel: "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*" Jesus is the liberator King who smashes the powers of darkness, delivering us and then governing us with true justice and grace. The text says that all this would bring great rejoicing to the nations and we can understand why.

Chapter 3: The Stump of Jesse Part 1

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD - and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash round his waist. (Isaiah 11: 1 – 10)

Jesse was the father of David. David became Israel's second and most illustrious King. In David, Israel saw an ideal for Kingship and hoped that someone like him would one day reign in order to restore their fortunes. By Isaiah's time the institution of Kingship had shown itself to be a failure and Isaiah predicts that the nation would be destroyed and led into exile, a bit like hacking a tree down and just leaving a burnt stump. Hence Jesse's stump refers to Israel's line of Kings that had come to an end.

However, Isaiah also offers hope, for this stump is not entirely lifeless, but from it, in the line of David, would come a new King.

Isaiah underlines that the Spirit of the Lord would be upon this new King. The failures in royalty had shown that a King could accomplish little unless aided by God's Spirit and it is clear that some of the better Kings, such as David, were helped in this way. In Isaiah chapter eleven the prophet is once again predicting that the hoped for King would excel above all other Kings. Why? Because he would be fully rather than partially possessed of the Spirit of God. This full possession of the Spirit is really another way of saying that which was learnt in the last chapter. The promised messiah, or Saviour-King, would be both authentically human and truly divine. This Saviour King would perfectly display those qualities that were expected of an ideal King and which were never seen throughout the history of Israel's royalty, at least not in the same measure.

So, what are the qualities of Kingship that were to be displayed by Isaiah's promised messiah?

The text speaks of a knowledge and fear of God, that is, respect and submissiveness to the divine will. Similarly the text speaks of delighting in God, that is an enjoyment of him and a desire to see him glorified. Isaiah goes on to describe the wisdom, spiritual and divine, that the King would be able to apply in the form of counsel and advice appropriate to every situation. Then the ideas of perfect justice, righteousness and faithfulness are expressed. This King would be a judge, neither corrupt nor concerned for self-advancement, but rather exercising justice, in particular for those who have been unfairly treated.

The New Testament shows that Jesus fulfilled this ideal of a Spirit filled man. All four gospels record the occasion of Jesus' baptism and all four mention that on this occasion the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove and that God declared from heaven: "*This is my Son whom I love, with him I am well pleased.*" A large crowd witnessed this event. God was saying publicly that this Jesus is the Spirit filled promised King of whom the prophets spoke. Then, as Jesus' ministry unfolds, we see him accomplishing acts and miracles that no man could achieve without the possession of the Spirit of God. Jesus' miracles and teaching demonstrate that despite his modest human upbringing and situation, he is in reality the Saviour King possessed of divine wisdom, power, righteousness

and authority. Jesus demonstrates his Kingship over men and nature, over sin and Satan and death.

It was mentioned earlier that the promised King would fulfil the role of judge and yet we do not really see that happening through Jesus' ministry, at least not in any formal or institutional way. On this question it is necessary to highlight the principal that in prophecy concerning the coming King we need to separate what with hindsight we can understand to be two different arrivals of the King. In his first coming Jesus, the righteous and innocent one, took upon himself the place of the accused and allowed himself to be judged and punished in order to obtain the forgiveness of all who trust in him.

However, the New Testament makes it clear that this Jesus will return, and that when he does he will fulfil his office of Judge. Those who have trusted him, he will judge and declare not guilty on the basis of his own sacrifice upon the cross. All who have not trusted him will be judged and declared guilty and punished appropriately, that is they will be eternally conscious of being under God's wrath.

So the promised King is both Saviour and Judge and whether we are welcomed by him or condemned by him will depend on whether we have trusted him or not, whether we have accepted his Lordship over our lives or not. Remember also that in his judgements Jesus is perfectly just. There will be no room for complaints or

appeals. We need to encourage all to make peace with God, now, before it is too late.

The Stump of Jesse - Part 2

“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.”
(Isaiah 11: 6-10)

We learnt in the last chapter that the prophets do not necessarily distinguish clearly between the first and second comings of the messiah. It is only with hindsight that we can say that certain elements of the prophecy were evidently accomplished with the coming of Jesus whilst others will be fulfilled upon his awaited return. This is equally true of the above text. We need to understand which parts apply to which age. However, to summarise, if in the last chapter we saw something of the person, nature and character of the messiah, this text looks more at what role he will perform or what he will achieve.

It is first necessary to explain what all this business of animals, which would normally be eating each other, actually laying together in peace means. This almost certainly refers to the age to come, following the return of the messiah, that is Jesus. There are two possible interpretations, the literalist and the figurative:

The literalist interpretation would say that in the life to come God will recreate the heavens and the earth, and that under the rule of messiah the whole natural order will be changed in such a way that every animal will live at peace with every other animal. In other words peace harmony and safety will be restored to every part of creation.

The figurative interpretation is very similar. These verses paint a picture of absolute security. Once Jesus establishes his eternal reign, upon his return, every danger that represents a threat for us now will disappear. There will be absolutely nothing to fear, we will be safe from all harm because of messiah's rule and protection. The most vivid picture is that of a child putting his hand into a viper's nest. Normally a child who did that would die, but he comes to no harm. This is a picture of the disappearance of death. It will no longer hang over us. Just as the apostle Paul declared to the church at Corinth; "death has lost its sting!"

Whichever of these two interpretations we trust, the lesson is essentially the same. Isaiah provides us with a picture of the eternal security of those who trust the promised Saviour King. Many things can threaten our safety. We do suffer

from all kinds of difficulties but when the Lord Jesus returns to take his own, we will be safe forever.

Let us move on to consider what Isaiah says about the promised King being a "banner for the nations". This is very interesting and of great importance for us. We have already learnt that the promised King would be a descendant of Jesse, the father of King David. The line of Kings had been virtually wiped out but from the root that appears dead God would send a new King, the Lord Jesus. Here we learn that this King would be a banner not only for Israel but also for every nation and people, for the whole world! This is another way in which the glory of the promised King would surpass that of David.

Now we learnt in a previous programme that God had promised to Abraham that through one of his descendants all nations would be blessed. Isaiah is reaffirming that the promise made to Abraham would be fulfilled. God keeps his word. Jesse and David were descendants of Abraham, so obviously if Jesus is in David's line, he also is a descendant of Abraham, just as the two genealogies that feature in the gospels prove. Isaiah announces that the coming King would be a banner to the nations and that all peoples would flock to him. The verse seems to suggest that under the King's banner the peoples would find a glorious place of rest and the idea of rest is one picture of salvation. These verses have already spoken of safety and security and the idea of rest goes with that. Those who flock to the messiah, who place their faith in the coming

King will be assured of eternal and perfect rest and respite from every threat and danger, including those of sin, judgement and death. In the knowledge that we will enter an eternal rest we can already feel a relative peace or rest today, even in the midst of dangers, threats and anxieties.

We must not think that this rest or peace is just for a privileged few nations. No, it is available for all peoples. This is very important to remember. It is clear from Jesus' ministry that the benefits of his Kingship and salvation would extend beyond the racial and political borders of Israel. The disciples were to proclaim the coming of the Saviour King to all nations, without exception. It took time for the early church to assimilate this lesson. We too need to think if we are proclaiming the message to all in our communities. We must be careful not to exclude anyone on the basis of race or nationality. To do so would be to disobey King Jesus and to deprive others of the possibility of entering his rest.

Chapter 4: The Suffering Servant

In this chapter I want to introduce you to a person who features in the second half of the book of Isaiah, popping up at various times in chapters 40 to 66. Many Bible commentators have called him: "the Suffering Servant". He first appears in Isaiah 42: 1-7.

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will

bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope. This is what God the LORD says- he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

There are some similarities between this text and those we have dealt with over the last few chapters. This should not surprise us. For example, notice in verse two that this servant would be endowed with the Spirit of God and then in verse six that he would be a light for the Gentiles. These are both themes that we have already seen and we must conclude that Isaiah is speaking of the same expected Messiah or Saviour King as he spoke of in the early chapters of his prophecy.

However, in this text the expected and hoped for King is not described as such; he is referred to as a servant. This is an unexpected twist to the story. Nobody really thinks of

Kings as servants do they? We are used to thinking that Kings expect people to serve them. God is really showing that men have turned things upside down. Kings should really be concerned to serve the interests of their people but all too often they exploit and oppress them in order to serve their own interests. So, in revealing that the promised messiah would be a servant King, Isaiah is really saying that this will be a King who can be trusted, an ideal or perfect King, a King who really does have the interests of his people at heart.

He is also described as one who would not shout in the street and as one who would not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smouldering wick. Isaiah is showing us how the servant King would conduct himself. Here I see a picture of gentleness. The servant King would not come to ignite civil strife or violent social revolution. He would not come to oppress, exploit, or tyrannise. Rather he would come to take that which is weak, broken and hurting, and with compassion and mercy, to strengthen and restore.

Then we see the servant King's desire for justice. Again something that Kings should be concerned about but an area in which many disappoint. The servant King would bring forth justice, as the text says, and not just for Israel but to the ends of the earth. This echoes what Isaiah has already mentioned. The saviour King would be a universal King, that is his reign is of relevance to all peoples. This, as I have already mentioned, is in fulfilment of the blessing

made to Abraham that through his descendant all peoples would be blessed.

However, the idea of justice needs to be thought about a bit further. Is it not strange that in verse seven Isaiah speaks of this just King freeing people from prison? Normally people are shut up in prison for a good reason. They are usually being rightly punished for a crime and so it would seem maybe unjust to let them out of prison.

It is possible that this verse refers to God bringing back the Jews from their exile in Babylon. However, even should this be the case, do remember that the prophets were at pains to point out that the Jews deserved their exile because of their sin against God. The exile was the justice of God working itself out.

The point I am trying to make is that the servant King would be at one and the same time a just judge and a judge who would find a just way to release sinners from their condemnation. That is, one way of expressing his justice would be to forgive and to pardon, releasing people from the sentence that hangs over them.

We can detect here the first signs of the doctrine of justification. Everyone is a sinner and everyone deserves to be sentenced to eternal separation from God. However, in Jesus we can be freed from this imprisonment, from this condemnation, from this death sentence. We can be forgiven and reconciled to God. This is how the servant

King best serves our interests. He releases us, liberates us from all the curses that befell humanity the day our first ancestor, Adam, disobeyed God. He saves us from the consequences of our personal sins. The gospels show that Jesus did not come as a political or military leader. He served a broken and oppressed people by bringing liberation from more sinister enemies than the Roman Empire. He came to save us from sin, Satan and death.

Up to now I have not explained how a just King could pardon people who deserved condemnation. Nor have I said why commentators have called this servant King the suffering servant. The answers to these two questions will become clear when we read what is probably the most important of Isaiah's prophecies; chapter 52: 13 to 53: 12. It would be good if you could read this whole passage in your Bible, if you have one. Otherwise some important extracts are quoted below:

“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53: 4-6.)

First of all we need to see what is going on here in the context of Israel's worship, or at least how they should have worshipped, according to all that God revealed through Moses, which is recorded in the Pentateuch.

The Pentateuch shows us that man has become estranged or separated from God because of his sin. Isaiah reminds us of this with the image *“We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned his own way.”* Secondly, the Pentateuch teaches that the only way for fellowship with God to be restored and maintained is through the sacrifice of animals that are without blemish. The whole sacrificial system is quite complex but behind it all there is one basic idea that needs to be understood. It is this: that the animal being sacrificed takes the place of the person or the community offering the sacrifice. The animal is a substitute. The sacrifice is a picture of our sin being taken off ourselves and put upon an innocent victim. This victim or sacrifice is then burnt as a picture of sin being dealt with, a picture of punishment or purification. As this has happened God is satisfied, the sinner is forgiven and he can have fellowship with God.

Isaiah's prophecy uses a lot of sacrificial language but the important lesson that comes through is that the promised King, the servant King, would be himself a sacrifice for sin. This is why he would be a suffering servant. He would suffer as the innocent victim. He would suffer at the hands of unjust, violent men, but more importantly he would suffer the wrath of God against sin and all of this so

that his people might be forgiven and delivered from condemnation and death.

This is exactly how the New Testament writers interpret the death of the Lord Jesus upon the cross. The gospel writers show the extent to which the servant King, the Lord Jesus, suffered. He was led away, humiliated and brutalised upon the cross. There are aspects of Isaiah's prophecy that fit well with all that happened on that dreadful day and that show us that Jesus truly is the fulfilment of these words. He is the suffering servant. He is our sacrifice for sin.

Think of the gospel accounts of Jesus' arrest and trial. Jesus did not resist his arrest, although he could have called upon legions of angels. Then, during his trial, he did not speak in his own defence, which again he could have done and probably would have succeeded. Now, read to Isaiah 53:7: "*He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*"

It is almost as if Isaiah was present at the scene and yet he was speaking some seven hundred years before these events. It's quite remarkable! This could only be revealed by God who gave Isaiah great insight and foresight. There are many details like this in this prophecy but I shall give just one more. In verse five Isaiah says the suffering servant would be "*pierced for our transgressions*". Now

Israel did not practise crucifixion and I do not think that Isaiah would have been aware that such a punishment existed. Yet God revealed to him that the suffering servant would be pierced and what better way to describe the trauma of crucifixion. As he was nailed to a cross Jesus' hands and feet were pierced and we could add that once he was dead, just to make sure that he really was, a Roman soldier pierced his side with a spear.

This was brutal and dreadful, but time and time again throughout this prophecy it is said that this occurred because of our sins. The crucifixion was no accident. As Isaiah states in verse ten: "*it was the Lord's will*"; and as Jesus says, recorded in John's gospel: "*I lay down my life.*" Our sin needed to be dealt with and as there is nothing we could do to deal with it ourselves, God in his fathomless love and mercy provided an innocent victim, a guilt offering, a sacrifice for sin that would satisfy his wrath and allow us to be forgiven. The New Testament writers are all agreed, this was the purpose and accomplishment of Christ's death upon the cross. Christ was the suffering servant predicted in Isaiah. Christ is our sin offering. The writer to the Hebrews argues that because he offered himself in our place there is no longer any need to offer any other animal sacrifice. Israel's sacrificial system was just a signpost pointing to a destination, helping us to understand that destination and how to find it. Now that we have Christ, there is no need for any further sacrifices except that of offering our lives as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

Now, Isaiah also gives a further twist to this apparently tragic tale. The prophet seems to indicate that the death of this innocent victim, the suffering servant, would not be the end of the story.

“Though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great and he will divide the spoils with the strong.” (Isaiah 53: 10-12)

Everything in this prophecy that precedes these verses points to tragedy and death. Now normally we think of death as being the end of the story and yet Isaiah goes on and seems to say that beyond these tragic events there would be a happy ending. Consider the text again; having suffered and died it is said that the servant King would: see his offspring, his days would be prolonged, he would prosper, he would see the light of life, he would be satisfied, he would be given a portion with the great. Now, normally, these things just do not happen to dead people.

This text must have puzzled the people living in Isaiah’s time but the only conclusion we can really come to, is that the one who died as a sacrifice for sin would come back to life again. Now, you know as well as I do that there’s only one person in history who fits the picture, who fulfils all

the details of this prophecy. On the third day after the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, he was raised to life again. There can be no doubt that Isaiah is referring to the resurrection seven hundred years before it happened. This proves to us again that the events surrounding the cross of Christ were no accident. If God was able to reveal them in advance it is because he had determined, even from eternity past, that things would work out like this. There is a pattern in scripture: God promises what he will do, he reveals what he will accomplish, and then he does it.

We will now look at some of the detail in these verses: what does Isaiah mean, for instance, when he says that the suffering servant will see his offspring?

This relates to the purpose of Jesus’ death upon the cross and the reason why the servant King had to suffer. Of course, Jesus did not have any physical offspring. His resurrection does not mean that he would spend time with physical children and grandchildren. It must refer to spiritual offspring. The New Testament makes it very clear that all who trust in the cross of Christ for forgiveness of sins become sons of God. They enter the family of God. This is only possible because of the suffering of the servant, the Lord Jesus, but similarly fellowship with Jesus and the loving family ties that we enjoy with him, are only possible because he has been raised to life. You cannot have fellowship with a dead person.

In verse eleven Isaiah declares: “*by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many.*” What does it mean to be justified?

The concept of justification is a very important one in the Bible. It means to be declared in a right relationship with God. Now, in order to be found in a relationship with a holy and righteous God, we who are sinners need to be acquitted of our wrongdoing and declared innocent. To our minds, this might seem to be an impossibility; how can God reconcile sinners to himself? Isaiah indicates that through the suffering of the servant, as a sin offering in our place, this becomes possible. The New Testament writers develop and explain this in greater detail. What Isaiah is underlining is that for fellowship with God to be restored we must trust in the sufficiency of all that the suffering servant has achieved on our behalf.

What does it mean for the suffering servant to be satisfied? The idea is that of the satisfaction of a job well done. The servant King would accomplish that which he set out to achieve and although that involved death and suffering he would be raised to life again to witness and enjoy the wonderful fruits of his sacrifice. He will delight in the praise and thanksgiving and service of all the multitudes that will be reconciled to God through his sacrifice. It will give him tremendous pleasure and satisfaction to fellowship with his redeemed people.

Finally, in verse twelve it is said that the suffering servant will be given a portion with the great and that he will divide the spoils with the strong.

This is probably referring to the fact that it is through the suffering and resurrection that the servant, God’s anointed one, would achieve the ultimate victory. It is after all the conqueror, the victor who divides the spoils after battle. Also, to be given a portion among the great is probably referring to the fact that following these events the servant would be publicly declared to be the sovereign ruler. Certainly the New Testament writers interpret the events in this way. Through his death and resurrection Christ was victorious over Satan, over sin and over death. He was also declared to be the sovereign Lord of the universe.

Chapter 5: Good News for the Poor

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” (Isaiah 61: 1-3)

Now the prophet Isaiah is speaking in the first person singular. He is saying 'I' and 'me'. He is speaking as if he himself is the one whom the Lord has anointed to accomplish these wonderful things. Is this really the case?

No! We have to be careful when reading the prophets because often, under the Spirit's inspiration they throw themselves into the future and speak as if they were another. This is a way of emphasising that what they announce will really come to pass. It is so certain that they speak as if it had already happened. Of course, if God has purposed it, we know it will take place.

Remember that in Luke chapter four, the Lord Jesus stood up in his local synagogue to publicly read the scriptures. He picked up the scroll of Isaiah and the reading for the day was the verses quoted above. When he had finished reading these verses he declared: "*Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*" In other words, Jesus is announcing – "I am the one of whom the prophet writes."

As we read the gospel accounts of the life of Christ we can appreciate that these were neither empty words, nor vain promises. People could see with their own eyes and they could experience for themselves, that Christ accomplished that which the prophet speaks of.

We will now examine what Isaiah promised the coming servant-King would do for his people:

Firstly, in a world where there was and where there remains so much bad news, the servant-King would bring good news. People in Israel had a bad time of life: most were poor, that was bad news; they were under enemy occupation, oppressed and heavily taxed, that was bad news; many were sick or demon possessed, bad news again; many thought that God had deserted them or felt unable to achieve the high standard of religious legalism set by the Pharisees. Once again, bad news.

In our day and age most people can identify with one or more of these things, but what is the good news that the servant-King, the Lord Jesus would bring?

The good news, according to Jesus, is that despite all the bad things that can weigh us down, there is a way back to God. God, in Jesus, was providing a way whereby the sinner could be forgiven. He was providing, in Jesus, access to spiritual riches that should satisfy even the poorest amongst us. God, in a hopeless world, was offering, in Jesus, a hopeful future, resurrection to eternal life.

Isaiah's words speak on the one hand of mourning, grieving and despair. These are such common experiences, and yet through the arrival of the servant-King it is possible to receive comfort and hope and to be joyful and glad. When we receive the good news outlined above it can and should really change our attitude, the way we feel about life, even in the midst of suffering. We really can rejoice

that Jesus came as King, not to make things worse for us, but to make them better. That really is good news.

Secondly, Isaiah speaks of the Spirit anointed one, which is Jesus, setting captives free and releasing prisoners. Are we to take this literally or figuratively? That is, are these real prisoners being released from jail or are we to take this as an image or metaphor for something else?

A captive is someone who is being held or enslaved by a person or a power. A prisoner is someone who has been condemned to a punishment for his wrongdoing. There is a sense that we are all captives of sin and for that reason stand condemned before God, facing the penalty of death. We can also say that we can all be captives to many different, but equally destructive powers. We can be captives in various ways to Satan, to demonic powers, to idolatry and superstitious or occult practices. We can equally be captive to ignorance, to false teaching, to false religion. We can be captive to addictive behaviours that we cannot break: drugs, alcohol or sex, amongst others.

Isaiah is saying that Jesus would be able to break the hold of all these destructive powers over our lives. Isaiah is also saying that Jesus would release us from our condemnation. In Isaiah fifty-three the prophet makes it clear that the suffering servant would take our sin upon himself, he would pay the penalty. If he has paid this penalty in our place then we can go free, the condemnation and sentence is lifted. We are declared not guilty by the judge of all.

This is a little sketch in these verses of the doctrine that the New Testament fleshes out as justification.

Chapter 6: The Good Shepherd

In the last few chapters we have concentrated on some of Isaiah's prophecies, especially those that speak about the coming of a suffering servant King. In this chapter we are going to consider what another prophet had to say about God's promised Saviour King; the prophet Ezekiel. The book named after him is quite long but probably one of the most neglected in the Old Testament. Unfortunately, we are only able to dip into it briefly.

Ezekiel was a prophet who ministered to the Israelites in exile in Babylon, shortly before and following the fall of Jerusalem into the hands of the Babylonian empire. He prophesied roughly during the years from about 595 to 570 B.C.

Ezekiel had a lot to say about shepherds. He compared the political and spiritual leaders in Israel at his time to bad shepherds and he compared the special one whom God would send to a good shepherd. This occurs in chapter thirty-four of his book. I would encourage you to read the whole chapter but for any who do not have a Bible some extracts are given below. First, this is what Ezekiel had to say about Israel's leaders at the time of the fall of Jerusalem and the exile:

“This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals.” (Ezekiel 34: 2-6)

This shows that Israel’s leaders really did not look after the interests of the people. This applied at all levels, spiritual and political and material. The disaster that befell the nation was largely due to failed leadership. We, as Christian leaders need to take to heart what Ezekiel has to say. Are we in Christian leadership for what we can get out of it? To fulfil vain ambition? To gain recognition and status? To get rich or have power over people? All these reasons would be wrong and the Lord holds us accountable. Rather than look after our own interests Christian leaders are to serve the church. Yes, we are servants of the church and should with genuine love seek the well being, spiritual or otherwise, of those entrusted into our care.

Having denounced the bad shepherds of his day (and ours), Ezekiel goes on to say what God intended to do about it.

“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.” (Ezekiel 34: 11-16)

God announces that where Israel’s leaders had failed, he would succeed. God is and would be a good shepherd, the most excellent of shepherds. He would care for his flock in every sense of the word.

It is very clear that God says he would be a shepherd to Israel, and to all believers, but how does the Lord Jesus fit into all this?

Later, in verse twenty-three, the prophet announces that this divine shepherd would take on human form and enter

history. Ezekiel declares: *“I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them, he will tend them and be their shepherd.”* The “servant David” refers to the new, most excellent and ideal King promised by many of the other prophets. However, notice the continuity between God saying “I will be their shepherd” and him saying that the servant King would be the shepherd. I believe that Ezekiel was in effect hinting that God would come in person, incarnate as a man to exercise the role of Shepherd-King.

We will now seek to understand how the image of the shepherd can be helpful in describing the promised Saviour-King. In the context of Ezekiel this divine shepherd is depicted first and foremost as a Saviour. The sheep were lost and in great danger and the shepherd would go out and find them, to save them and restore them. Because of sin, men and women have become separated from God, they are lost and sin brings them into many dangers, most notably death. Our shepherd King has taken the initiative to save us from sin and death.

Then, we can say that a shepherd looks after his sheep once they are found. He protects them from wild beasts, he feeds them with what they need, he shows them the way they should go, leading and guiding. All of this speaks of what God does for the believer.

Now in Luke 15 Jesus tells the story of a shepherd who goes out to find a lost sheep and brings him home on his

shoulders and I believe that in fact Jesus is using this parable to say: “Look! Here, I am! I am the shepherd King that God promised to send and I am accomplishing this ministry of looking for and saving the lost.” Then Jesus speaks even more clearly in John chapter ten where he declares without ambiguity: “I am the good shepherd.” There is no doubt about it. Jesus demonstrates in word and deeds that he is the fulfilment of Ezekiel’s prophesy. He is the good shepherd, the Shepherd King, who saves us and can be fully trusted.

Chapter 7: The Son of Man

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (Daniel 7: 13-14)

Before we go on to discuss the meaning of these verses we must set them in the context of a rather fuller vision that Daniel had received, of which these verses form just one part.

In the first part of the vision we are introduced to a number of wild beasts. These mythological animals represent the

evil that is sadly so present and active in human institutions and governments throughout history. They represent the oppression, suffering and warfare caused by so many tyrannical rulers and dictators. In the second part of the vision we are introduced to someone called the Ancient of Days who sits in judgement over these beasts and over all humanity. This clearly represents the Eternal God who is sovereign over history and who brings tyrants to eternal judgement and an end to their wicked rule and empires. It is only then that we come to the verses that we read earlier which describe the Ancient of Days giving power and authority to one likened to a son of man.

We see a picture of the inevitable weakness and failure of human institutions and authority, at whatever level, local, national, international. Human government will always be imperfect because of the sinful nature of our hearts and the temptation to abuse power. Daniel does foresee though that an extraordinary person would issue from the human race and who would be worthy and perfectly able to govern all things. God would give this extraordinary person the right to do so and this person's reign and Kingdom would be everlasting. As ever, we see the fulfilment of this prophecy in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. First of all, it is interesting to note that when Jesus spoke of himself the most common title he used was "son of man". That should have made his listeners prick up their ears with interest, as it would have echoed this text in Daniel.

Then, when Jesus had been arrested and was being interrogated by the High Priest, we read this in Mark's gospel:

"Again the High Priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." The High Priest tore his clothes and said, "You have heard the blasphemy.""

So Jesus seems to explicitly claim that he would receive the honour and the sovereign rule that Daniel spoke of. There are so many clear parallels between Jesus' words and Daniel's prophecy.

However, we need to be sure that Jesus was not blaspheming in the way he was accused of. We need to be sure that he has indeed been given all authority as he claimed he would. So, on what basis can we be sure? How can we know?

The resurrection is the deciding factor. After all, Jesus was crucified. How could he reign as King if he was dead. Secondly, if this King was to reign forever, eternally, he himself would need to be eternal. All Kings and rulers die one day but in being raised from the dead Jesus entered into his everlasting resurrection body which would fit him to rule forever. Finally the resurrection is proof of God's approval, proof that Jesus was who he claimed to be and

worthy to receive the sovereign power that God would grant him. God, the perfect judge would never raise from the dead someone who had blasphemed him and led others astray. The resurrection is sufficient proof of Jesus' authenticity.

Now, consider Matthew 28: 16 & 20 in the light of Daniel's prophecy. *"Then Jesus came to his disciples and said "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me... And surely I am with you always to the end of the age."* Similarly, the apostle Peter concluded when he preached on the day of Pentecost: *"be assured of this, God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."* The heart of apostolic preaching was this: "Jesus is Lord." They had been convinced that Daniel's prophecy had been fulfilled; that sovereign power had been granted to the Son of Man.

Christians generally agree that Jesus has been given authority to reign but how does his Kingdom fit in with the fact that we still live in a world where there is so much misgovernment and tyranny?

It is necessary to go back to Daniel's vision and realise that there are, as with so many prophecies, stages of fulfilment. At present Jesus' reign, and human governments with all their imperfections and abuses, co-exist or overlap. When God gives Daniel an interpretation of his vision he does explain that there will be conflict between the reign of the beasts and divine government. This would be seen in

opposition to the saints and even persecution. This has occurred throughout all of history. However, God gives Daniel, and us, the assurance that this state of affairs will be brought to an end one day. Earthly Kingdoms will cease; the Kingdom of the Son of Man will last forever. This will occur when the heavenly court sits to judge all rulers, indeed all men, and their power will finally be taken from them. It will be at that time that one age will pass into another and when those who today acknowledge Jesus' Kingship will experience the full peace and justice of his reign. Many of the prophets call this climatic day "the Day of the Lord." This will be the subject of our next chapter.

Chapter 8: The Day of the Lord

There are many references to the Day of the Lord, particularly in the prophets of the Old Testament. It is a Day when, according to the prophets, God will intervene in human affairs in an unprecedented way, in a way that he has never done so before. Some references have a double meaning. They can refer to a historical event that was in the near future, such as the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. However, there is always the sense that the prophets are looking beyond the immediate historical context to something far more important.

There are two main aspects that will characterize God's intervention on this Day. To illustrate them we shall quote extracts from the scriptures. As I have mentioned, many of

the prophets, especially those we call the Minor Prophets, refer to this day. The Minor Prophets are certainly no less important than the other prophets but they are called minor because in the Bible their writings are shorter. Their writings form the last twelve books of the Old Testament running from Hosea through to Malachi.

The Day of the Lord is characterized by judgement against God's enemies and deliverance or salvation for the remnant of God's people, the true believers. Read first a quotation typical of those that speak of God's judgement on the Day of the Lord.

“The great day of the LORD is near- near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD.... In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth.” (Zephaniah 1: 14-18).

Now read some verses that speak more of salvation for God's faithful people.

“The LORD has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing... At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you; I will rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered... I will bring you home. I will give you honour and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes, says the LORD.” (Zephaniah 3: 15-20)

We see so clearly judgement and punishment on the one hand, for those who have opposed God and his people. We see on the other hand an assurance of salvation, safety and rejoicing for God's people.

However, how does all this fit in with Jesus-Christ?

The New Testament speaks of the return of the Lord Jesus in much the same way as the Old Testament speaks of the Day of the Lord. We can only conclude that these are one and the same event. This special day fixed for final judgement and final salvation will be presided over by none other than Jesus, the Lord. So whenever the Old Testament speaks of the great Day of the Lord, we should always think of it in terms of the return of Jesus. The Old

Testament prophets were giving signposts pointing towards a greater reality. It is important to remember that the prophets spoke often in terms of the salvation of Israel or Jerusalem. However, the New Testament broadens our understanding and we need to see these promises as applying to the church rather than to a country or political entity. The church is the New Israel; the church is God's covenant people.

So Jesus, when he returns, will prove to be both a judge and a Saviour. This can only reinforce our conviction that Jesus is divine. Judgement on this scale belongs to God alone but the New Testament takes up many of the judgement images used by the prophets and applies them to Jesus. Jesus himself even speaks of his own return in these terms.

Nevertheless he will also be a Saviour for those who trust in him. Do not forget that Jesus brought salvation during his first coming, whilst his judgement is reserved for the final Day of the Lord, his return. God's great intervention in salvation has already appeared, although in a sense it is a two stage process, and many refer to the now and the not yet of salvation.

It means that those who trust in Jesus are already saved in the sense that we have been forgiven and reconciled to God. We walk in fellowship with God. This is tremendous but there is so much that God holds in reserve that we have not yet entered into. These things are guaranteed and represent a secure hope, but they are not yet our

experience. Our salvation will be perfected when Jesus returns, on that great Day of the Lord. On that Day we will be perfectly delivered from sin and its unhappy impact on our lives. On that Day our bodies will be perfectly freed from the effects of sickness, decay and death. On that Day we will know perfect peace, security and prosperity, and best of all we will know and enjoy Christ perfectly and forever.

So, for the believer there is much to look forward to from the Day of the Lord, but for those who do not believe there is much to be feared.

Chapter 9: Preaching on Christ from the Prophets

The question of interpreting the prophets and preaching from them is not an easy one. The prophets are probably the part of the Bible where we need to exercise the most care in our approach to teaching.

There are two areas I want to highlight: firstly we need to be careful about whether what a prophet says actually applies to Jesus, to what extent a verse is a signpost pointing towards him; and secondly we need to be careful to distinguish between metaphorical language and literal language.

First we need to recognise that not everything a prophet says actually points to Jesus. A lot of what they said refers to their own situation, to what God thinks of what is going

on and to what God is going to do about it in the immediate future. Obviously these things do not directly point to Christ and can only be applied to our own day in a very indirect way.

How can we know if a verse is speaking of Christ or not?

The clearest way of knowing is when the New Testament makes a direct reference to the verse and explains clearly how it applies to Christ. There are many references to be found in this way in both the gospels and the letters of the apostles. We can use these with great confidence to show how Christ fulfilled the prophets.

Secondly, when the prophets refer to God sending a future special person who is described in such glowing and exalted terms that it could never refer to an ordinary man, then again, we can have some confidence that the verse or passage is referring to Christ.

Then there is a third type of passage that really needs a lot of care. Sometimes what the prophets said can have a double or a triple meaning and this can get quite complex. It is really best to have the help of commentaries to make sure that you are on the right track. What a prophet said might have at one and the same time a direct reference to the historical realities that he faces in his own time. The prophecy might be fulfilled in one way in the prophet's own day but point to a higher and better fulfilment in terms of the Lord Jesus Christ. Once again, when speaking of the Lord Jesus there may be one meaning concerning his first

coming and a second fuller application that refers to his Second Coming.

Having advised readers to consult commentaries on these matters it is nevertheless necessary to face up to the fact that many of you will not have many books and will not have access to the type of commentaries that are needed. In this situation I would give the following advice. I know we should not deliberately neglect parts of the Bible. However, if a prophecy seems obscure and you do not know how to work out its relevance to Christ then it might be best not to preach from that text. There are plenty of passages in the Bible that are very clear. It is best to stick to those that we are confident to get right rather than get something wrong because we do not fully understand it.

Now, the second area of care I wanted to highlight was about whether we should interpret the language of the prophets as being literal or not. We must remember that most of the writings found in the prophets are in the form of poetry. We should not read poetry in the same way that we read a story or a letter. Poetry usually contains a lot of imagery. These are pictures or illustrations that help us to understand a truth but should not necessarily be taken literally.

Here are couple of examples to help you understand what I mean:

Isaiah chapter 42: 2-3, a prophecy concerning the Lord Jesus, states: *“He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.”*

Now, are we to take this to mean that Jesus never damaged a plant and never blew out a candle? Of course not! So we need to think about what it does mean. For me this verse points to the gentleness of Jesus. He was not a violent man. It also speaks of the fact that when he deals with people whose lives have been broken and messed up, he does so with compassion and in a way that does not bring further damage but rather a process of restoration. So, if you were to preach on this verse you could show how the gospel accounts bear this out and remind your congregations that the resurrected Lord is approachable and caring and not judgemental or tyrannical.

Here is a further example that is a little more complex: Isaiah 42: 7: which says of Jesus that he will: *“open the eyes of the blind.”* Here of course the gospels demonstrate that Jesus actually did heal some blind people. Think of Bartimeus and others. However, there is also a metaphorical meaning as well. The healing of the blind physically is a picture of what Christ came to do spiritually. All men and women are blind in the sense that they are unable to see God or understand the truth about him. However, according to the prophets, Jesus is the one who will heal this spiritual blindness. That is, it is through Jesus that we receive spiritual illumination; it is through

Jesus that we are able to behold God, to understand the truth about ourselves, salvation and all the rest. We gain this understanding of the use of blindness as a picture or illustration from a reading of the whole Bible.

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