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**ABSTRACT**

**THE IMPORTANCE AND RELEVANCE**

**OF PREACHING ISAIAH'S MESSAGE TODAY**

by

Bill Thompson

The prophetic books represent nearly one-third of the Old Testament, yet many pastors avoid preaching from the prophets because of the difficulty of understanding these passages or because of a perceived lack of relevance in these texts. As a result, many worshippers rarely hear a message from the prophets today. However, Paul includes the prophetic books in his statement that all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). Therefore, preachers have an obligation to preach from all areas of Scripture, not just sections with which they are comfortable.

The purpose of this research project was to measure cognitive and affective changes in the worship participants of Ross Christian Church during a seven-week sermon series from the book of Isaiah. This study utilized an explanatory, mixed-methods design to measure quantitative and qualitative changes in the participants' knowledge of and affective responses to seven major themes of Isaiah's message. The findings reflect a strong interest among participants in understanding Isaiah's message and in learning how to apply that message to their lives. Additionally, participants' knowledge of and affective responses to Isaiah's themes increased slightly as a result of hearing this sermon series. These findings suggest that pastors who learn how to demonstrate the relevance of the prophets' message will improve their preaching and strengthen their congregations.

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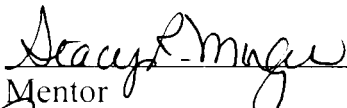
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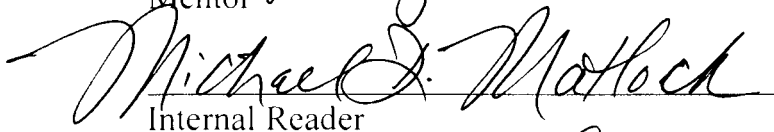
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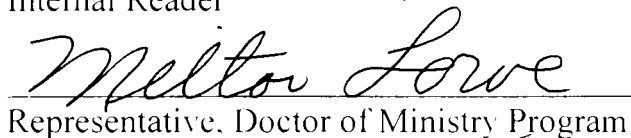
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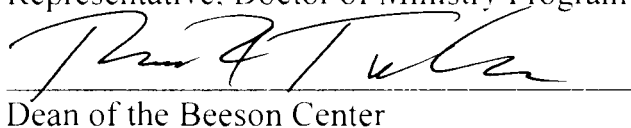
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January 23, 2014

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January 23, 2014

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THE IMPORTANCE AND RELEVANCE  
OF PREACHING ISAIAH'S MESSAGE TODAY

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
Asbury Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by

Bill Thompson

May 2014

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Bill Thompson

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

To Tina.

Thanks for always supporting me and believing in me.

And to Mom,

thanks for always praying for me and encouraging me.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **PROBLEM**

#### **Introduction**

The prophetic books represent nearly 30 percent of the Old Testament, yet Philip D. Yancey asks, “If you examine the Bibles of even the most diligent students you may find a telltale band of white on the paper edges just over halfway through,... indicating how seldom fingers touch the Old Testament prophets.... Why?” (171). He suggests that this situation exists because the prophets are “weird and confusing, and they all sound alike” (171). Michael Williams echoes Yancey’s thoughts: “We just don’t invite the prophets to church anymore” because they are strange characters whose odd behavior and bizarre visions make Christians uncomfortable (6).

I admit to feeling the same way. Unlike the Christians whom Yancey and Williams describe, though, I have long desired to correct this situation. For example, I took a course in seminary on interpreting the Old Testament prophets and another course in preaching the Old Testament. However, even with this training I still have difficulty understanding the prophets. Further, as a preacher, I find myself avoiding them because I struggle to find their relevance for today. I realize that if I am experiencing this much difficulty understanding the prophets, most of my congregation is probably ignoring them altogether.

Homileticians offer a number of reasons why preachers and lay Christians avoid the prophets. First, the last forty years have seen a movement away from preaching from the Old Testament in general. As early as 1972, Gleason Archer, Jr. noted that the average worshipper in Bible-believing churches rarely heard a message from the Old

Testament Scriptures (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 15). This situation has not improved over time. For example, Elizabeth Achtemeier states, “It is fair to say that the Old Testament is largely a lost book in many parts of the U.S. church” (*Preaching* 21). Admittedly, these comments are anecdotal statements from noted scholars who may simply be expressing their personal concerns. However, Michael Duduit, editor of *Preaching* magazine, confirms that less than 10 percent of the sermons submitted for publication each year are based on the Old Testament (10). When preachers do choose to preach from the Old Testament, they often resort to biographical preaching of its major characters, mining these stories for so-called truth that is little more than moralism or psychological theory (Clark 23-24).

A second reason why preachers avoid the prophets is the difficulty of understanding many Old Testament texts. Scott M. Gibson notes that many people have difficulty understanding the complicated genres of prophecy and poetry. Additionally, in a discussion during one of his doctor of ministry preaching courses, students offered a number of reasons for not tackling the Old Testament more often: Hebrew is harder to work with than Greek, the culture of the Old Testament is too far removed from Western culture today, and the problem of how the Old Testament should be interpreted in light of the New Testament is difficult to resolve (“Challenges” 21).

For example, historical and cultural differences make the Old Testament challenging for typical Christians in America to understand. The Old Testament is an ancient book set in a Middle Eastern culture full of animal sacrifices, different units of measure, and odd dietary laws (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 22-23). Significant theological differences between the testaments exist as well. Marcion in the second



century was the first to note that the God of the Old Testament seemed harsh and warlike compared to the gracious and forgiving God of the New Testament. Marcion judged the acceptability of biblical books based on whether they espoused a God of grace or of judgment, a practice not much different in principle from that of many preachers today (Clark 12-13).

A third reason why preachers tend to avoid the Old Testament, in general, and the prophets, in particular, has to do with how these texts have been treated by scholars. For example, Haddon W. Robinson notes that many graduate students survive courses in Old Testament studies, but their faith is badly damaged by professors who treat the text as a “scissors and paste job put together by some unknown editors” (Foreword 12). Robinson believes that the characteristic assumption of historical criticism that the biblical books are distorted historical records leads many preachers to question the authority of the Old Testament (12).

However, numerous statements in the New Testament support the reliability and the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures. For example, the New Testament often refers to God himself as the author of various Old Testament Scriptures (e.g., Matt. 15:6). Focusing on the prophets, Peter states that the Old Testament prophecies did not originate from human authors, but from God:

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Pet. 1:20-21, NIV)

Peter instructs his readers to pay close attention to what the prophets wrote, for the prophets spoke from God as they were moved by God and not by their own initiative.

Therefore, despite the conclusions of some scholars, preachers can preach Old Testament

texts with confidence.

A fourth reason why preachers avoid the prophets is a misunderstanding of prophetic preaching in general. Matt Woodley writes, “Unfortunately many preachers harbor negative attitudes towards prophetic preaching.... [P]rophetic preachers sometimes get squeezed into one, narrow personality profile: they’re angry, loud, tactless people who want their listeners to feel ashamed, defeated, or offended” (3). Other misunderstandings include the purpose of prophecy. Many Christians have misconceptions about Old Testament prophecy because of the ways that these texts have been abused for political or eschatological purposes. However, Timothy Sensing notes that the prophets were not foretellers of the future as modern Christians might imagine. Instead, they were more concerned about the future of ancient Israel than the future of America. The prophets spent most of their time talking about how God’s message and activity impacted God’s people. Sensing believes that most of the prophetic material would fit the genre of sermon better than any other classification (“Call” 139-40).

Finally, a fifth reason why many preachers avoid the prophets is because of the difficulty of finding the relevance of the prophetic books for today’s listeners. Gibson observes that many of his doctoral preaching students struggle to find the relevance and application of many Old Testament texts. One student stated, “Given our preoccupation with the pragmatic, ‘how to,’ ‘purpose driven’ approach to preaching, much of the Old Testament doesn’t seem to fit the contemporary ‘niche’ market” (“Challenges” 24). Bruce Moulton concurs, noting that many preachers avoid preaching the prophets either because they find the prophets to be irrelevant or because they prefer to focus on contemporary life issues. He blames much of the problem on megachurch pastors such as

Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, and Andy Stanley, whose preaching styles have “inundated the evangelical community with a seeker-sensitive, non-threatening and Biblically sterile approach to preaching” (3-5). Moulton finds that this trend of avoiding the prophets even extends to noted expositors such as Alistair Begg, Charles Swindoll, and John MacArthur. Moulton studied the sermon series of these men and six other well-known expositors during a two-year period between October 2008 and October 2010. During this time frame, these nine expositors preached an average of 4 percent of their sermons from the prophets (33). If some of the best-known expositors as well as some of the leaders of the biggest churches in America are avoiding the prophets, one wonders if struggling preachers of smaller churches could be expected to do better.

In fact, they can. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. notes that the Old Testament is both relevant and important for Christians today. He offers three reasons why preachers can find relevance in Old Testament texts. First, several key doctrines are introduced in the Old Testament, such as creation (Gen. 1-2), the law of God (Deut. 5), and the greatness of God (Isa. 40). Second, some areas of ethics are developed either solely or primarily within the Old Testament, such as warnings against having sex with close relatives (Lev. 18:6-18). Third, much of what Christians need for practical living can be found in the wisdom books, such as guidance for raising families, safeguarding marriages, or handling finances (*Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* 40-41). Adding to Kaiser’s comments, Fleming Rutledge urges pastors to preach on Old Testament texts so that people will know God. Much of contemporary preaching focuses on a “Jesus *kerygma*,” yet many features of God would never be known without the Old Testament (5).

For these reasons, I concur with Ellen F. Davis' assessment of the state of Old Testament preaching in many North American churches. Davis notes, "No one could claim that the current state of Old Testament preaching in the North American church is robust ..." (91). However, by ignoring the Old Testament and the prophets, preachers are robbing their hearers of a fuller understanding of the reasons for their faith. Peter states, "We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place ..." (2 Pet. 1:19, NIV). Therefore, preachers have a responsibility to teach all of God's Word, not just the parts that are easy to understand, simple to apply, or likely to bring an increase in attendance.

Pastors who are considering preaching from the prophets have a rich set of texts from which to choose. However, John N. Oswalt suggests beginning with Isaiah. He notes, "Of all the books in the OT, Isaiah is perhaps the richest. Its literary grandeur is unequalled. Its scope is unparalleled. The breadth of its view of God is unmatched ..." (*Book of Isaiah: 1-39* 3). Isaiah is the most quoted prophet in the New Testament, with citations or allusions appearing in every New Testament book (Watts 111-13). Davis concurs, noting that Isaiah is the prophet whom New Testament authors cite most often when describing Jesus (91). Oswalt also believes Isaiah has "a remarkable relevance to all times," including recognizing the uniqueness of Yahweh in a tolerant age, serving others in an individualistic age, and realizing the need for personal holiness in a grace-oriented age (*Isaiah* 55-64).

I believe God's Word has the power to change lives today. Unfortunately, whether due to a lack of knowledge of how to preach the prophets or an overemphasis on practical preaching, a large portion of the Bible is being neglected. Not only does this

oversight exacerbate growing problems of biblical illiteracy and unchanged lives, but it also hurts people's understanding of God himself. Too long have the voices of the prophets been silenced. As Oswalt says, the time has come to hear from "the prince of prophets" again (*Isaiah* 17).

### **Purpose**

This project explored the importance and relevance of preaching Isaiah's message today. The purpose of this research project was to measure the cognitive and affective changes in the worship participants of Ross Christian Church during a seven-week sermon series from the book of Isaiah.

### **Research Questions**

I chose four research questions for this project. These questions focus on changes in the participants' knowledge of and affective responses to Isaiah's message as a result of hearing the sermon series.

#### **Research Question #1**

What is the participants' knowledge of the message of Isaiah before hearing this sermon series?

#### **Research Question #2**

What is the participants' knowledge of the message of Isaiah after hearing this sermon series?

#### **Research Question #3**

What are the participants' affective responses to the message of Isaiah before hearing this sermon series?

**Research Question #4**

What are the participants' affective responses to the message of Isaiah after hearing this sermon series?

**Definition of Terms**

Two terms need to be explained for the purposes of this study. *Knowledge* refers to the participants' cognitive understanding of Isaiah's message. *Affective response* refers to the participants' acceptance of Isaiah's message.

**Ministry Intervention**

My dissertation aimed to increase the Ross congregation's knowledge of and affective response to the message of Isaiah. I preached a series of seven sermons from the book of Isaiah to approximately 120 worshippers at Ross Christian Church in Ross, Ohio, during Sunday morning worship services in the summer of 2013. These sermons focused on seven major themes in the book of Isaiah.

**Context**

Ross Christian Church is a small, moderately contemporary church located five miles northwest of Cincinnati, Ohio. While Ross Township has a population of approximately 6,500 people, the population within a ten-mile radius of the church exceeds 135,000. The median family income in Ross Township is approximately \$47,000.

Ross Christian Church is thirty-eight years old. The worship attendance for many years has hovered around 150 people, although it has occasionally reached as high as two hundred people. The congregation consists of Caucasian people of all ages with predominantly blue-collar backgrounds. Approximately half of the adults in the

congregation have completed some college education. The congregation appears to be representative of the area it serves.

Ross Christian Church is part of the Independent Christian Church wing of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement, which also includes non-instrumental Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ churches. As such, Ross holds to an Arminian, evangelical theology with a conservative view of Scripture.

The primary leaders of the congregation are the elders and the senior minister. The congregation's senior minister recently resigned after a two-year tenure to move to another church. I was hired to serve as the part-time interim minister shortly after. The congregation also has a part-time worship minister and a part-time secretary. Volunteers lead the youth and children's ministries.

The church offers Bible classes and a contemporary worship service on Sunday morning. The morning service consists of several worship songs, prayer, weekly communion and offering, a thirty-minute sermon, and an invitational hymn. Sermon styles have varied over the past ten years. For the previous two years, the senior minister tended to preach long series that focused more on content than application. His predecessor, who served the church for eight years, preached short topical series that focused on felt needs. When I met with the search committee to interview for the interim ministry position, the committee expressed strong reservations about the length and the relevance of my proposed Isaiah series but ultimately approved my proposal and hired me to preach for them as they searched for a full-time minister.

## **Methodology**

This project employed an explanatory, mixed-methods design with both quantitative and qualitative components (Creswell 560). The quantitative component consisted of a researcher-designed, pre- and post-sermon series questionnaire that measured participants' knowledge of and affective responses to the major themes of the book of Isaiah. The qualitative component of the study used focus groups and a semi-structured interview protocol to explore further the participants' acceptance of the themes of Isaiah's message.

## **Participants**

Ross Christian Church is a small congregation of approximately 120 worshippers of all ages. Due to the small size of the population, I chose to survey the entire population of worshippers age 16 and above who attend worship at least twice a month for the quantitative portion of the study. For the focus groups, I chose two purposeful samples of six to seven men and women ranging in age from 24 to 78 (Creswell 214).

## **Instrumentation**

I used a researcher-designed, Likert-scaled instrument to measure quantitative changes in worshippers' knowledge of and responses to Isaiah's message. I conducted an expert review with my dissertation mentor, who is a preaching professor, and my internal reader, who is an Old Testament professor, to validate my initial set of questions (DeVellis 99-100; Creswell 172). I then pretested the instrument for face validity by administering it first to fifteen nominal or unchurched Christians and later to twenty-five members of my previous church, all of whom are mature Christians. I also developed a set of focus group questions to explore qualitative changes in participants' attitudes



towards Isaiah's message. This semi-structured interview protocol consisted of three sets of four questions designed to explore the quantitative data further.

### **Variables**

The sermon series on Isaiah was the independent variable. The cognitive and affective changes in the worshippers were the dependent variables. My status as a new interim pastor and the participants' inconsistent worship attendance over the summer were the potential intervening variables.

### **Data Collection**

I mailed a pre-series questionnaire to each member and regular attendee of Ross Christian Church, age 16 and above, ten days prior to the start of the sermon series. I included a cover letter explaining the survey and asking participants to return the questionnaire prior to the first sermon (see Appendix A). To ensure confidentiality, I asked respondents to identify both the pre- and post-series questionnaires with the first initial of their mothers' maiden names as well as the last four digits of their social security numbers. I included a self-addressed stamped envelope as well as a token gift to thank them for their time. I also explained my project in general terms during the closing announcements on the two Sundays prior to the series, encouraging everyone to complete a survey.

I mailed a post-series questionnaire to each member and regular attendee age 16 and above during the final week of the sermon series, reminding them of the importance of the survey and asking them to complete it and mail it back the following week. I included a self-addressed stamped envelope.

I also led two focus groups through three discussions of four open-ended questions using an interview protocol that I designed (Creswell 233-34). I recorded each discussion using a digital recorder. I conducted the focus groups before, during, and after the sermon series to explore further changes in the participants' knowledge and acceptance of Isaiah's message.

### **Data Analysis**

Responses for each quantitative question were measured using a Likert scale. Both the pre- and post-series questionnaires were paired to allow for data comparison. I also used standard statistical techniques to analyze the quantitative data.

For the qualitative portion of the study, I conducted a preliminary exploratory analysis to identify potential themes during the focus group discussions. I used a coding process to make sense of the data and to narrow the data into broad themes (Creswell 251).

### **Generalizability**

I believe this study will be most helpful to pastors of evangelical and conservative, mainline Protestant congregations in America. Additionally, pastors who use an expository approach to sermon development will likely find this study more helpful than pastors who primarily use a topical style of preaching.

### **Biblical Foundation**

While some preachers neglect preaching from the prophets due to the difficulty of understanding prophetic texts or of applying them to contemporary congregations, the writers of the New Testament did not hesitate to preach from all areas of the Old Testament Scriptures. Several New Testament passages, including 2 Peter 1:19-21, refer

to the apostles' use of the Old Testament. However, Paul gives the clearest comment about the nature and usefulness of Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:14-17:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The following portion of this chapter is an exegetical study of 2 Timothy 3:14-17 as it relates to preaching the Old Testament Scriptures today. Paul believed that the Old Testament Scriptures were trustworthy and useful both to Timothy and to Timothy's hearers. By extension, preachers should acknowledge the Old Testament Scriptures are trustworthy and useful to today's hearers as well.

Scholars debate the authorship of 2 Timothy for historical, theological, and linguistic reasons (Mounce lxxxiii-lxxxiv; Ellis 659-61). Most discussion of authorship centers around two theories. The first possibility is that Paul dictated the letter to an amanuensis but allowed this person greater freedom than usual in word selection and style. The second possibility is that a later author weaved authentic Pauline fragments into a letter of his own sometime later in the first century. While the debate shows no sign of diminishing, conservative scholars believe that the amanuensis theory best fits the data (Mounce cxxix; Ellis 661; Fee 14).

If the amanuensis theory is correct, Paul would have written 2 Timothy as he sat in a Roman prison (Mounce lxii-lxiii). Paul was writing to encourage Timothy, his good friend and coworker in ministry. He encouraged Timothy to stand strong against false teachers who promoted visions and asceticism as ways to gain divine wisdom (Ellis 662-

63). In 2 Timothy 3:1-9, Paul describes these opponents as boastful scoffers who maintained an appearance of religion but who rejected the power that could make them truly godly. These false teachers opposed the truth and led many people to follow their new teachings. In 2 Timothy 4:1-5, Paul further encourages Timothy to be constantly ready to preach the word of God, whether the time is favorable or not and whether his listeners are willing to hear the truth or not.

Within this context, Paul encourages Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:10-17 to remain faithful to the spiritual teaching he had received, both as a child and as one of Paul's coworkers. Paul offers Timothy two reasons why he should "remain faithful to the things [he was] taught" (2 Tim. 3:14a; Towner 583; Moss 231). The first reason is that Timothy could trust those who taught him (2 Tim. 3:14b; Fee 278). For example, Timothy had followed Paul's lifestyle and teaching closely. He was well aware of Paul's integrity in the face of tremendously difficult circumstances. Timothy knew first-hand of Paul's love for Jesus and of his love for his followers as well (Kostenberger 589-90). Paul's personal relationship with Timothy validated Timothy's faith. Paul was not asking Timothy simply to accept unproven theories; rather, Timothy had experienced Pauline Christianity for himself (Oden 23). Timothy could also trust his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, who raised him in the Jewish faith (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15). Timothy had been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood (2 Tim. 3:15). In this setting and in the local synagogue, Timothy learned the Psalms, the Torah, and the Prophets (Oden 24; Towner 581-82; Fiore 170).

Timothy should also remain faithful because he could trust the Scriptures themselves. Second Timothy 3:16 is the Bible's strongest statement of its own

trustworthiness (Liefeld 279): “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right” (2 Tim. 3:16). *Scripture* is a translation of *graphie*, the normal New Testament term for the Old Testament Scriptures (Mounce 562, 565). In the context of 2 Timothy 3:14-17, Paul is most likely referring to the Old Testament Scriptures when he says that “all Scripture” is inspired.

Paul says that all Scripture is “inspired” (*theopneustos*) by God (2 Tim. 3:16). Since *theopneustos* appears only once in the Greek New Testament and nowhere else prior to the first century, Paul likely coined the word (Mounce 565; Towner 589). While *theopneustos* was originally translated as “inspired” in the Latin Vulgate, “God-breathed” is a better translation (Mounce 566; Cottrell 52-53). Millard J. Erickson defines inspiration as “that supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit on the Scripture writers which rendered their writings an accurate record of the revelation or which resulted in what they wrote actually being the Word of God” (225). A literal rendering of 2 Timothy 3:16 (“all Scripture is God-breathed”) means that the Holy Spirit guarded the minds of the authors of Scripture so that every word they wrote was as accurate as if it were spoken by God himself (Cottrell 53).

Paul concludes this passage by stating that the Old Testament Scriptures are useful “for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16b-17). The main focus of these verses is the usefulness of Scripture. *Teaching* refers to the act of instructing others in the content of the Christian faith. *Rebuking* means making someone aware of sin in his or her life. *Correcting* is a more positive approach to bring about

behavioral change (Towner 590-91). The ultimate goal of Scripture is to make Christians, in general, and church leaders, in particular, thoroughly prepared for every good work (Kostenberger 591).

In summary, Paul encourages Timothy to remain faithful to what he was taught for two reasons. First, Timothy can trust his teachers—Paul, Eunice, Lois, and others. Second, Timothy can trust that the Old Testament Scriptures represent the very words of God himself. Because of these two reasons, Timothy can trust that a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures will prepare both himself and his listeners to do God’s will.

Likewise, preachers today can trust that a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures will prepare both themselves and their listeners to do God’s will. Therefore, preachers should learn how to preach the Old Testament with conviction today. The Old Testament is part of the “all Scripture” to which Paul refers in 2 Timothy. It is useful for teaching, correcting, rebuking, and training in righteousness. Additionally, the sheer bulk of prophetic material in the Old Testament means that preachers who avoid preaching the prophets are ignoring a great portion of God’s Word (Sanders 73). Furthermore, the Old Testament prophets point to Christ. As Kaiser concludes, “The value of the Old Testament is immeasurable for all believers. To avoid it is to miss approximately three-fourths of what our Lord has to say to us today ...” (*Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* 28). Preachers have an obligation to preach all portions of the Bible, not just those sections that are easy to preach or which might attract a larger crowd.

Some preachers may avoid preaching prophetic texts because they are afraid these passages will scare off worshippers. Other preachers may recognize the importance of preaching the prophets but be overwhelmed because they, too, find the prophets to be weird, confusing, and repetitive (Yancey 171). However, I hope this dissertation will help struggling preachers such as myself learn to preach the Old Testament prophets with increased confidence.

### **Overview**

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature on interpreting and preaching the message of prophets and Isaiah. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used in this research study. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the data collected in the study. Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of the findings of the study and recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

As noted previously, many preachers avoid preaching from prophetic texts. This avoidance may be due to the difficulty of understanding the prophets' messages, a mistaken sense that Old Testament passages are somehow less relevant to Christians today, or a lack of understanding of how to preach from the prophets. Additionally, some preachers avoid the Old Testament because of a lack of confidence in the authority and the reliability of the Old Testament (Clark 11-14).

However, the New Testament writers believed in both the authority and the relevance of the prophets' message. Matthew states, "But this is all happening to fulfill the words of the prophets as recorded in the Scriptures" (Matt. 26:56). Peter writes that the prophets' words pointed to the day when Jesus would shine in believers' hearts (2 Pet. 1:19). Finally, the prophets are part of the Scripture that Paul states is inspired by God and useful for preparing all Christians to do God's will (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

I believe the prophets' words need to be heard again today. Therefore, the purpose of this research project was to measure the cognitive and affective changes in the worship participants of Ross Christian Church during a seven-week sermon series from the book of Isaiah. To prepare for this series, I conducted a careful review of the literature concerning the message of the prophets and of Isaiah, hermeneutical methods for understanding both the Old Testament and Isaiah's message, and homiletical methods for preaching from the prophets and Isaiah. The following discussion outlines each of these major areas before concluding with a brief description of the research design.



## The Message of the Prophets

When asked to name the Old Testament prophets, many Christians think primarily of the men whose names are on the written collections at the end of the Old Testament—Isaiah through Malachi (Overholt 1086). However, the term *prophet* is applied to a number of figures in the Old Testament, including Elijah, Elisha, Samuel, and others (Overholt 1086; Goldsworthy 106). While Abraham is the first person in the Old Testament to be called a prophet (Gen. 20:7), Moses is commonly thought to be the first true prophet because he spoke the word of God to the people of God (Goldsworthy 168).

The prophets were God's messengers to his people. The primary Hebrew term for *prophet* is *nabi*. This noun is used over three hundred times in the Old Testament (Wood 59-60; Redditt, "History" 588). Old Testament prophets were spokespeople for God who announced God's will for his people (Redditt, "History" 587; Wood 62; Overholt 1086). Achtemeier states, "If we may start with a rather general definition, an Old Testament prophet is one who illumines where and when and why God is at work in the world" (*Preaching* 110). Indeed, passages such as Deuteronomy 18:15-22, Amos 7:12-16, and Isaiah 6:9 demonstrate that prophets were spokesmen for God who were called by God and empowered by his Spirit (Wood 60-61; VanGemeren 18).

D. Brent Sandy offers a colorful description of the role of the prophet. "A prophet was a winged messenger between heaven and earth—if you will, the Mercury of the Bible" (130). Prophets carried urgent messages of judgment and wrath from God to his people in order to persuade them to obey. Accordingly, Sandy sees three prophetic functions. The prophets' first role was prosecution—to inform the people of their sin and of God's pending judgment. The prophets' second role was persuasion—to convince

God's people to return to him. The prophets' third role was prediction—announcing what God was going to do. The purpose of prediction was to make prosecution and persuasion more convincing (130-31).

Marvin A. Sweeney marvels at the beauty of the prophetic message. He states, "The prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible present some of the most profound theological literature in both the Tanak, the Jewish version of the Bible, and the Old Testament, the first portion of the Christian version of the Bible" (*Prophetic Literature* 15). Rather than simply predictors of the future, the prophets were concerned with helping the people of their time understand their circumstances from God's perspective. In Sweeney's view, the prophetic books "grapple with the foundational theological questions of evil and righteousness" as they attempt to make sense of the Babylonian captivity (15, 23).

Clearly the prophets were God's messengers, but scholars disagree about the nature of that message. Thomas G. Long writes, "Old Testament prophets are widely misunderstood figures, both inside and outside the church. The typical impressions of who the prophets were and what they did could, in many respects, hardly be farther from the truth" ("Preaching in the Prophets" 306). Willem A. VanGemeren notes that their messages are as diverse as the individual prophets themselves, depending on the personality of the prophet, the message from God, and the context of the audience (44). However, a review of the literature suggests three primary ways of understanding of the prophets' message: foretelling the future, critiquing social problems, and calling God's people back to faith and obedience.

Long notes that many evangelical Christians think of the prophets as primarily foretellers of the future ("Preaching in the Prophets" 307). Indeed, the New Testament

writers often pointed out how events in the life of Jesus fulfilled prophetic predictions (e.g., Matt. 27:9-10; John 12:12-16; Acts 2:16-21; Rom. 10:16-17). However, less than 3 percent of the prophetic books deal with either messianic promises or eschatology. The prophets did make predictions about the future, but they were primarily concerned with the immediate future of Israel, Judah, and the surrounding nations (Fee and Stuart 166).

The Gospels go to great lengths to show that Jesus fulfilled the words of the prophets. For example, Rein Bos notes that the Gospel of Matthew alone contains over sixty citations from the Pentateuch and the prophets (45). Unfortunately, preaching that focuses solely on the predictive aspects of prophecy ignores much of what the prophets have to say to Israel (46). In this hermeneutical approach, “The prophets are seen as divinely inspired ‘future-tellers....’ And even when the words of a particular prophet refer to an event in his own time,... [t]here is a real risk that Christ absorbs the Old Testament words completely” (50). The benefit to this approach of interpreting and preaching the prophets is that it shows God keeps his promises. However, a significant drawback is that contemporary listeners become spectators to what God has accomplished in the past (52).

Sidney Greidanus disagrees. He notes, “[H]orror stories abound of preachers twisting an Old Testament text in order to land miraculously at Calvary” (*Preaching Christ* 2). Unlike Bos, however, Greidanus believes preaching that demonstrates how Christ fulfilled messianic promises “places the hearers right in the dynamic flow of God’s promises and fulfillments” (248) rather than relegating them to the role of “spectator[s] at the sideline” (Bos 58). Greidanus notes that the New Testament writers learned to interpret the prophets in the way of promise-fulfillment from Jesus himself, such as when

Jesus read Isaiah 61:1-2a in the synagogue and said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). Like Bos, however, Greidanus agrees that preachers must not read Christ back into Old Testament texts, nor should they ignore how the people of Israel would have heard these texts (228).

A second common method of viewing the prophets sees their messages as primarily aimed at denouncing social injustice. Through the covenant requirements in Exodus through Deuteronomy, God required Israel and its leaders to treat both fellow Israelites and foreigners living within Israel with fairness and justice. Specifically, Israelites were to treat each other with justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*seduqa*), two terms that appear consistently within the Law and the prophets. The Pentateuch contains numerous requirements along these lines, especially concerning widows, orphans, and the poor (e.g., Exod. 23:3, 6; Lev. 19:5; 25:35-38). The Sinai covenant ensured that not only did the Israelites treat God as they should, but that they reflected his nature to the surrounding nations as well (Irwin 719-22).

During the twentieth century, liberal and mainline Christians led the way in promoting social justice in America, although conservative Christians are beginning to get involved (Irwin 723). Sensing notes that mainline denominations have been quick to see the prophets as examples of preaching a social gospel against institutions and traditions (“Call” 140-41). Marvin A. McMickle concurs, noting that preachers must preach from the prophets at least occasionally to help their congregations engage the problems of society. Instead of being concerned about a comfortable life for themselves, prophetic preaching encourages congregants to care about the problems of the poor and the marginalized (7-8). As McMickle notes, while prophetic preaching is important for

encouraging inner-city Christians, it is urgently needed for Christians who “live and worship in exurbia and who never get close enough to the grimy side of America for anything to rub off on them ...” (8). Unless people with resources are challenged to use those resources to help the poor, change is unlikely to come soon to the poor and the marginalized (8).

Chang-Hoon Kim acknowledges a deep misunderstanding of prophetic preaching as primarily social preaching. He notes that many people see the Old Testament prophets as social reformers and accordingly assume that prophetic preaching is a means of rebuking society for injustices. However, based upon a comparison of passages in Deuteronomy and Isaiah, Kim concludes that prophetic preaching is indeed social preaching, albeit with an emphasis on the Mosaic Law and upon Israel’s responsibility as God’s people. In his view, prophetic preaching should acknowledge the context of the prophet’s original audience while challenging the church to take its social role responsibly (141-42, 151). Additionally, Kim emphasizes that while prophetic preaching may reach outside the church to social institutions, authentic prophetic preaching is based upon calling God’s covenant people to live properly and to fulfill their social responsibility as God’s chosen people (145). In other words, prophetic preaching should address proper Christian behavior today as well as social injustice in the world at large, all from a context of God’s covenant people.

Walter Brueggemann concurs with McMickle and Kim. He notes, “Both traditional conservatives and conventional liberals misunderstand the prophetic dimension of Israel’s faith” (*Social Reading* 221-22). Brueggemann believes that the best way to see the prophets is as a “destabilizing presence” in society so that social systems

and ills can be duly criticized. The prophets understood society to exist in an organization of power that depended upon the control of social symbols to order and value life (222). He notes, “The prophetic task in such a social world is to maintain a destabilizing presence ... so that the absolute claims of the system can be criticized” (223). By giving voice both to the truth of God’s rule and to the plight of the marginalized, the prophets proclaimed “the alternate truth” about God’s standard in a world gone wrong (224).

The third primary approach to interpreting the prophets sees the role of the prophets as calling the people of God back to obedience. For example, Graeme Goldsworthy notes that in the Old Testament, humans were given a choice of two ways to live. Obeying the covenant would lead to life and blessing, while disobeying it would lead to death. This covenantal choice was established in Deuteronomy 28-30. Sadly, the consequences for disobedience played out in the rise and fall of Israel and Judah, as seen in that portion of the Hebrew canon known as the Former Prophets (Joshua to Kings). The Latter, or writing, Prophets emerged as Israel and Judah continued to decline. While the prophets’ messages differed in the particulars, they shared common themes of covenantal disobedience as well as restoration and comfort. Thus, the primary role of the prophet was to call people back to obedience and faith in God (106-08).

Achtemeier agrees with Goldsworthy’s conclusion but not with his premise. She believes that the prophets were “not primarily preachers of the covenant law. Only twice in the prophetic writings do these men of God quote portions of Israel’s basic law, the Decalogue ...” (*Preaching* 117). However, Achtemeier does believe that the prophets’ primary role was to call Israel to live in obedience to God, which is why a good portion of the prophetic writings deal with subjects such as treatment of the poor, justice in

business and political dealings, and proper forms of worship. She writes, “At the heart of the covenant relationship were the requirements of love and trust, and that which the prophets ask from Israel, above all else, is the devotion of her heart to God” (117). Thus, the prophets showed the people how to live in ways that pleased God (111).

Perhaps J. Carl Laney summarizes the message of the prophets best as he searches for a balance between traditional conservative and liberal approaches to interpreting the prophets. He notes that while the prophets were concerned with political and social situations of their day, they were theological reformers rather than social ones. Their concern for the poor, the widows, and the aliens arose from their understanding of God’s nature, as described in passages such as Deuteronomy 15:11 and Exodus 22:21-27. The prophets condemned exploitation of the poor, corrupt religious practices, idolatry, injustice, unethical business practices, and blatant immorality. In response to these and other sins, the prophets offered four solutions—repent and turn back to God (Hos. 6:1-3), demonstrate justice (Mic. 6:8), look for spiritual power in the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), and await the coming Messiah who will establish justice and righteousness (Isa. 42:1-4). Therefore, Laney believes that Christian preachers, like the prophets, should condemn sin, point people to the gospel for power to overcome sin, exhort them to live justly, and encourage them to anticipate the return of Christ (32-43).

The writing prophets were spokesmen for God who called the people of Israel and Judah back to obedience and faith in God by offering both stern warnings and promises of blessings. While prophetic texts include eschatological predictions and social concerns, the prophets were primarily “covenant enforcement mediators” (Fee and Stuart

167) whose primary tasks included warning their current generation and bringing comfort to future readers through an exposition of the Law (Sailhammer 120-21).

### **The Message of Isaiah**

Scholars offer many excellent reasons to preach from Isaiah. Achtemeier calls Isaiah one of the greatest theologians of the Old Testament (“Isaiah” 23). Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, III add, “For sheer grandeur and majesty probably no book in the Hebrew Bible can be compared with Isaiah” (267). Brueggemann notes that the book of Isaiah “is like a mighty oratorio whereby Israel sings its story of faith” (*Isaiah 1-39* 1). Davis suggests that preachers begin their foray into the prophets with Isaiah, as Isaiah is the Old Testament book that the New Testament authors cite most frequently when describing Jesus (91).

### **The Prophet Isaiah**

Until the eighteenth century, Isaiah ben Amoz of Jerusalem was considered to be the author of the book that bears his name (Beuken 67). However, Bernhard Duhm’s landmark study in 1892 has convinced many Old Testament scholars that at least three *Isaiahs* who lived in the eighth, sixth, and fifth centuries BC wrote most of the prophecies found in Isaiah 1-39, 40-55, and 56-66, respectively (Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39* 2; Williamson, “Isaiah” 364). Other scholars, such as J. Alec Motyer and Oswalt, present convincing evidence for the traditional position of a single author for the entire book.

This question of authorship is a significant part of Isaianic study. At stake are issues such as the ability to understand the historical context of Isaiah’s oracles and the predictive nature of the prophetic texts (Seitz, “Isaiah 1-66” 18-20). Conservative opinion is based primarily on the convictions that God did inspire prophetic revelation and that



the New Testament citations of Isaiah require the integrity of Scripture. Critical opinion is based primarily on the argument that chapters 40-66 require a historical setting in the sixth and fifth centuries BC (Dillard and Longman 274). While scholars are reaching a consensus on the unity of Isaiah, they are doing so for different reasons (Williamson, "Preaching from Isaiah" 144-47). This section of the literature review briefly discusses the various approaches to the authorship of Isaiah's message before describing the historical context of the book.

**Issues of authorship.** Isaiah 1:1 attributes the book of Isaiah to Isaiah ben Amoz, a prophet who ministered in Judah during the last half of the eighth century BC (Clements 118). While some scholars maintain that this man wrote the entire book, most scholars today believe that he penned only the first thirty-nine chapters. The rest of the book was written by one or more prophets or by disciples of the original Isaiah (Williamson, "Isaiah" 364).

As noted previously, Duhm argued this theory of authorship extensively in 1892. Duhm noted that the style and historical context for chapters 40-66 were markedly different than those of chapters 1-39. He also noted that the historical situation for chapters 56-66 seemed to be different from the context of chapters 40-55. Based on these observations, he attributed chapters 40-55 to an unknown prophet in the sixth century whom he titled "Deutero-Isaiah," while the final chapters were attributed to a "Trito-Isaiah" writing in the fifth century BC (Clements 119). An alternate version of this theory proposes that disciples of the original Isaiah wrote the last half of the book of Isaiah (cf., Isa. 8:16). However, as Ronald E. Clements notes, the existence of a group of unknown

disciples for nearly two centuries after the death of the prophet renders the concept of disciple “virtually meaningless” (119).

The primary benefit of this theory is that it treats seriously the historical context of the last twenty-seven chapters of the book. As scholars have noted, sections such as Isaiah 40-55, which offer comfort to the remnant who have experienced judgment in Babylonian exile, seem meaningless to an eighth-century audience facing an Assyrian threat (Williamson, “Isaiah” 366-70). However, this theory poses a number of problems of its own. Tracing arguments originally raised by J. A. Alexander in 1865, Robert Prince offers the following evidence for a single author. First, he doubts that a figure as great as the author of chapters 40-66 could have disappeared from history without a trace. Second, two millennia of history accept the unity of Isaiah, with no serious suggestion being made otherwise until modern times. Third, if a significant difference in theme and literary style does exist between the two halves of the book, scholars such as Prince have difficulty seeing how both halves could have ever been attributed to Isaiah ben Amoz. Fourth, when the New Testament authors cited various portions of Isaiah, they made no distinction between chapters 1-39 and 40-66. Finally, Prince points out that portions of chapters 56-66 could easily fit within an eighth-century context (10). In addition to these reasons, no manuscript evidence exists for two or three separate Isaiahs (Briley 16; Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah: 40-66* 5).

Speaking for the majority of contemporary scholars, Christopher Seitz disagrees. He states, “It appears that with the Book of Isaiah we have at last found one of those cases where ‘the assured results of critical scholarship’ are in fact assured” (“Isaiah 1-66” 14). According to Seitz, reasons for accepting a Three-Isaiah approach to authorship

include the breadth of the book's historical coverage (Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires), the lack of a stated presence of Isaiah in chapters 40-66, and the noticeable change in style and tone at chapter 40. Perhaps the biggest benefit to dropping the single-author argument is that scholars can focus on the historical background of the oracles in chapters 40-66 (14-20).

Shalom M. Paul believes that the book of Isaiah consists of two sections written by two different authors at different times. The first section, chapters 1-39 (with the possible exception of chapters 34-35), was written by Isaiah ben Amoz in the eighth century BC. The remaining chapters were written by an anonymous prophet generally referred to as "Second Isaiah" (1). While acknowledging arguments for a so-called "Third Isaiah," Paul believes that based on clear linguistic and thematic ties, the division between chapters 55 and 56 is "artificial" (11).

John E. Goldingay suggests that the book of Isaiah reveals at least four voices. Isaiah 1-39 was penned by Isaiah ben Amoz, the "Ambassador" of Yahweh who is commissioned in chapter six. However, Isaiah's is not the only human voice in the book, as noted by someone speaking about Isaiah in the third person in 1:1. Referring to Isaiah 8:6, Goldingay describes this person as the "Disciple." The third author of the book is a "Poet" who speaks more "lyrically than any of the other voices" about a time 150 years after that of Isaiah ben Amoz (*Isaiah* 4). This author wrote chapters 40-55. Finally, a "Preacher" whose ministry addressed the community remaining in exile wrote the last chapters of the book. The Ambassador, the Poet, and the Preacher wrote the major sections of chapters 1-39, 40-55, and 56-66 respectively, which were edited and assembled by the Disciple(s) (2-5).

Clements concurs. He believes that to attribute the entire book to Isaiah ben Amoz can only be accomplished by “doing violence to a reasoned and meaningful interpretation of many passages” (118). Clements states that the book of Isaiah was assembled over a long period with an intent to gather the prophecies thematically, with very few of prophecies originating with the eighth-century Isaiah (119-20). Rather than ascribing the different portions of Isaiah to a group of *disciples* who somehow existed over two centuries, however, he believes that scribal redactors joined different prophecies together for religious reasons (119, 128).

A. Joseph Everson agrees as well. He has “little doubt” that the final redaction of Isaiah occurred during the postexilic era, with chapters 40-55 showing evidence of being written during the exile. He agrees that certain texts from chapters 1-39 appear to have been written by the eighth-century prophet but believes that these chapters have been so heavily redacted as to make belief in an earlier edition problematic (649).

Joseph Blenkinsopp believes that the internal evidence for Isaiah ben Amoz as the author is weak even for just the first thirty-nine chapters. He notes that claims for authorship rest on only three superscriptions (1:1; 2:1; 13:1), which he believes to be of late date. He also believes that the prose narratives of chapters 7, 20, and 36-39 portray a prophetic figure different from the author of the sayings (*Isaiah 1-39* 73-74).

Brueggemann believes that the following characteristics both dividing and uniting chapters 1-39 and 40-66 have resulted in what he terms a “near consensus among critical scholars” (*Isaiah 40-66* 10). First, chapters 40-66 represent a very different set of historical circumstances than do chapters 1-39. Chapters 1-39 describe an Assyrian threat to an eighth-century Judah, while chapters 40-55 focus on references to Babylon and the

coming of Cyrus (10). Second, the changing historical horizons of the two sections are accompanied by a change in literary styles. While the first thirty-nine chapters are filled with terse warnings and woe oracles, the second half of the book is filled with salvation oracles of promise and hope (10). Finally, chapter 40 signifies a noticeable change in theological message as the emphasis seems to shift from repentance to forgiveness, from Yahweh as judge to Yahweh's power as creator of the universe (10-11).

Against these critics, historian K. A. Kitchen believes that both the internal and external evidence point to a single author. He complains, "Almost nobody has bothered to look for tangible evidence" (378). For example, in the intact scroll of Isaiah found among the Dead Sea scrolls, which is commonly dated to the first century BC, the only indication of a possible break in the scroll occurs at the end of chapter 33 near the center of the scroll. Kitchen adds that while chapters 1-39 include numerous historical and geographical details about eighth-century Israel, chapters 40-55 show little knowledge of Babylon itself (378-79).

Terry Briley also questions the so-called assured results of higher criticism. He writes, "That the 'truth' about Isaiah's disunity did not emerge until the eighteenth century should arouse some suspicion. No manuscript evidence for this theory exists" (16). Instead, he supports the historic view found in John 12:38-41, in which Jesus cites from both Isaiah 6:9-10 and 53:1 yet attributes both passages to a single Isaiah (16).

Motyer addresses the apparent literary differences in the two halves of the book, namely that Isaiah 40-55 appears to be written in a highly poetic style while the first thirty-nine chapters are written in a more workmanlike manner. Motyer believes the difference in styles may be due to the nature of the prophecy. Perhaps chapters 1-39

represent more of an oral style because these sections were originally preached while the remaining chapters were written for the eye. He notes that the book evidences a beautiful structure that is hard to imagine if chapters 40-66 were left to a later group of disciples who were so committed to Isaiah's message that they ensured the book and its theology were beautifully written (23-25).

The primary reason for dividing Isaiah into two or three books appears to be the detailed prophecy concerning Cyrus in Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1 (Kitchen 380). However, this assumption not only lies at the center of the debate but potentially contains the answer as well. Speaking for conservative scholars, Oswalt notes, "The great flaw in this scheme, besides the fact that no extrabiblical evidence supports it, is that 'II Isaiah' makes such strenuous efforts to deny it" (*Book of Isaiah: 40-66* 5). This theory is based on the preconception that Isaiah of Jerusalem could not have predicted the future in a detailed way, yet this scenario is the very argument that "II Isaiah" makes in these passages. Oswalt continues, "This conviction then involves the unknown Babylonian prophet in an irreconcilable contradiction. His God Yahweh cannot tell the future any more than the gods can, but he wishes his hearers to believe that Yahweh can" (6). Oswalt concludes that rather than the traditional view of authorship, perhaps the current scholarly opinion concerning prophecy itself should be amended (6).

Fortunately, scholars of both persuasions have been increasingly accepting the unity of Isaiah, albeit for different reasons. H. G. M. Williamson notes that preachers should take comfort in the greater acknowledgment among scholars today of the unity of Isaiah ("Preaching from Isaiah" 144-47). Sweeney agrees, noting that certain literary, exegetical, and thematic links among various parts of the book demonstrate that while the

message of Isaiah may have initially been composed over several centuries, it should now be considered as a single literary unity (*Isaiah* 1-39 41). Brevard S. Childs, the scholar most noted for advancing the canonical study of Isaiah, rejects both the traditional position of single authorship, which results in a “flattening” of the prophetic witness, and modern literary proposals, which are “theologically inert at best, and avowedly agnostic at worst” (3-4). While difficult to determine the exact historical or social contexts behind Isaiah 1-39, 40-55, and 56-66, the entire work should be read as a literary and historical unity (Briggs 322). Finally, Dillard and Longman note that critics are accepting conservative scholars’ observations about the unity of the book but believe the unity to come from one or more editors’ redactions than from a single author able to prophesy the future (274).

While critical scholars make some excellent points, the sermons in this dissertation assume a single author for the book of Isaiah for the following reasons. First, external evidence for the existence of two or three different Isaianic scrolls is nonexistent. Second, while an unknown “Second Isaiah” could have predicted the coming of Cyrus in Isaiah 44:28-45:13, the nature of predictive prophecy and of Isaiah’s argument in Isaiah 44:6-20 make the odds just as likely that the original Isaiah penned these words. Third, some significance should be given to Jesus’ attribution of both Isaiah 6:9-10 and 53:1 in John 12:38-41 to a single Isaiah.

The change of subject matter in chapters 40-66 from pre-exilic warning to exilic/post-exilic comfort is the greatest issue confronting the single author theory. As numerous scholars have pointed out, having Isaiah ben Amoz preach these passages to an eighth-century audience would result in a great deal of useless confusion for the hearers.

For the single-author theory to work best, I propose that Isaiah ben Amoz did not preach chapters 40-66 to his contemporaries but rather wrote them for future Jews living in captivity. In this scenario, Isaiah could have written these prophecies at the end of his preaching ministry. This option would also account for why chapters 40-66 are more lyrical in style than chapters 1-39, in that written poetry is often more polished than oral discourse.

The question of unity does not necessarily involve the subject of the inspiration of Scripture nor should it be a test of faith (Prince 10). Theoretically, a later editor could have seen what Cyrus was going to do during the exile just as Isaiah saw what Assyria would do through Tiglath-Pileser III. Although the anonymity of this great prophet would be a problem, this challenge would be no greater than the anonymity of the author of Hebrews (Dillard and Longman 275). As Robert Prince notes, scholars can affirm the authority of Scripture while questioning the individual authors (10).

**The historical context.** Isaiah ben Amoz was likely born in Jerusalem around 760 BC. Biblical sources about his life include references in the book of Isaiah itself, particularly chapters 36-39 and 2 Kings 18:13-20:21. Jewish tradition indicates that Isaiah may have been a part of Judean royalty, and the prophet seemed to have ready access to the king (Prince 5).

According to Isaiah 1:1, Isaiah's ministry occurred in Jerusalem during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. During this time period, Judah came under increasingly heavy political pressure from the Assyrians (Goldingay, "Isaiah" 1). Between the tenth and seventh centuries BC, Assyria was the greatest power in the Middle East (Oswalt, *Isaiah* 19). Both Ahaz in 732 BC and Hezekiah in 701 BC faced the



“juggernaut” of Assyrian expansion (21). Ahaz chose to align himself with Assyria, while Hezekiah chose to depend on God. Isaiah 37:36-37 states that the Assyrian army left Judah after most of it was destroyed by an angel of the Lord (24). Chapters 1-39 reflect the temptation of the people and their leaders to look to other nations for political support rather than to trust the Lord (Goldingay, “Isaiah” 1).

The second half of the book begins with a tone of comfort and presupposes that the people of Judah are in exile. The setting of these chapters is the Babylonian exile nearly two centuries later, which encourages the majority of contemporary scholars to call for an unknown prophet ministering during the time of Ezekiel (Goldingay, “Isaiah” 1). Although the people living in exile knew economic freedom, they did not have political freedom (Hanson 1). Thus, when Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BC and announced that captured nations could return home, nearly fifty thousand Jews made the journey (Ezra 2:64-65; Oswalt, *Isaiah* 29). If this setting is correct, then chapters 56-66 of Isaiah would address the context of the books of Haggai and Zechariah (Goldingay, “Isaiah” 1).

Isaiah has been described as a statesman, a theologian, a poet, and a prophet. His statesmanlike qualities are seen primarily in chapters 36-39 as he boldly confronts both Ahaz and Hezekiah. His theology is some of the grandest in the entire Bible, strongly emphasizing God’s sovereignty and holiness as well as pointing the way to a Messiah. Additionally, scholars consider his poetry to be some of the most nuanced in the Old Testament (Prince 8). No wonder Isaiah’s book has been called “a giant among the Old Testament prophecies” (5) and that Isaiah himself has been called “the prince of the prophets” (Oswalt, *Isaiah* 17).

## Isaiah's Themes

The book of Isaiah has been called the “Romans of the Old Testament,” both for its sweeping theology and for its portrait of the gospel (Webb 37-38). It is quoted sixty-six times in the New Testament and, counting allusions, shows up in every major section from Matthew to Revelation (38; Watts 111-13). It has been described as “a beautiful symphony or a breathtaking landscape” that needs to be experienced and not described (Fasol 91). It has also been likened to a Bible in miniature, consisting of two uneven parts with all of the Bible’s main themes represented (Oswalt, *Isaiah* 17).

Given the breadth and majesty of Isaiah, scholars easily identify themes for preaching but disagree as to which themes are the most important (Bryson 53-54). A review of commentaries and articles that identify the major themes in Isaiah displays a wide variety of results. For example, Davis identifies the following themes: God as the Holy One of Israel, the justice and righteousness of God, the judgment of God, Zion, Israel’s vocation as the suffering servant, the remnant, trusting in God, and Israel’s fulfillment in the Eschaton (93-98). Dillard and Longman find six major ideas, including God as the Holy One of Israel, God as savior and redeemer, the remnant, the servant of the Lord, the Spirit of the Lord, and God’s rule over history (276-80). Paul R. House sees the following themes in Isaiah’s message: God’s holiness, God as creator, God as judge, and the coming Davidic Savior (274). Oswalt believes the key themes of Isaiah to be judgment and hope, servanthood and kingdom, trust and rebellion, arrogance and humiliation, the uniqueness of God, the nations, and righteousness (*Isaiah* 41-64). Goldingay names revelation, the holiness of God, the remnant. Israel and Judah, the nations and their kings, divine sovereignty and human responsibility, and the future

(“Theology” 168-88). Motyer identifies the Messianic hope, the motif of the city, God as the Holy One of Israel, and the need for faith (13-19). In his magisterial commentary, Blenkinsopp identifies nine major themes in the book of Isaiah: critiques of the foreign nations, critiques of worship, the remnant, coping with disaster, the God of Israel and the Babylonian gods, Jerusalem as Zion, salvation for all who believe, servants of God, and the names of God (*Isaiah 1-39* 105-11; *Isaiah 40-55* 104-20; *Isaiah 56-66* 90-91). Brueggemann notes the following eight themes: judgment and hope, Yahweh’s rule over the nations, Yahweh’s judgment over evil, “The King in His Beauty,” God’s vengeance and vindication, “The God of All Comfort,” “former things and latter things,” and the future of Israel (*Isaiah 1-39* 10-11, 112, 188, 217, 268; *Isaiah 40-66* 166-67). Hans Wildberger finds the themes of God and the gods, the Holy One of Israel, repentance, salvation for the remnant, Yahweh as Lord over the nations, faith, worship, and eschatology (*Isaiah 28-39* 617-19, 624-26, 634-39, 645-46). Finally, Williamson identifies the major themes of God’s holiness, justice and righteousness, and the Messiah (“Isaiah” 372-76).

At least twenty themes can be identified from these scholars’ works. The most commonly cited themes include God as the Holy One of Israel, the suffering servant, and God’s sovereign rule over history and the nations (each mentioned seven times), God’s judgment on sin and the remnant (both mentioned five times), and trusting in God and eschatology (both mentioned four times). The remainder of this section provides an overview of each of these seven themes.

**The holiness of God.** God’s holiness is one of the most noticeable themes in Isaiah (Davis 93; Dillard and Longman 276-77; House 274; Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah: 1-39*

33; Goldingay, “Theology” 171; Motyer 17; Williamson, “Isaiah” 372-74; Wildberger 619). God is “the holy One of Israel” (Isa. 17:7). Isaiah may have coined this phrase himself, as it occurs at least twenty-five times in the book of Isaiah but only five times in the Old Testament outside of Isaiah (Wildberger 619; Williamson, “Isaiah” 374; Goldingay, “Isaiah”). This phrase also occurs throughout all three sections of Isaiah (e.g., 1:4; 41:14; 60:9), thus being one of the few themes to hint at the book’s unity (Goldingay, “Theology” 171).

Israel’s call is to demonstrate God’s holiness, especially in comparison to the gods of the nations (Davis 93). However, while God called his people to be holy, Isaiah recognized that most of the people did not care about holiness (Dillard and Longman 276). Isaiah seemed to believe that if people could ever catch a true vision of God’s holiness, many of their problems could be solved (Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah: 1-39* 32). Unfortunately, the people of Judah too often preferred idols to Yahweh, which Isaiah considered to be stupid folly (Goldingay, “Theology” 171-72; Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah: 1-39* 34).

Isaiah 6 is a good example of this theme of God’s holiness. When Isaiah received his call to ministry, he was overwhelmed by God’s holiness. This vision of God would remain with him forever and the Holy One of Israel would become Isaiah’s favorite designation for God (Dillard and Longman 276). Isaiah’s vision of God’s holiness in chapter six is breathtaking (Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah: 1-39* 32). God is portrayed as majestic, holy, exalted, and sovereign (Williamson, “Isaiah” 327). Isaiah used language and images to describe God’s majesty (“throne”), transcendence (“exalted”), and holiness (“Holy, holy, holy”; Oswalt, *Isaiah* 126). God’s holiness is seen in his transcendence

(6:1, 5), his judgment of Isaiah's sin (6:4-5), and his offer of salvation (6:6; Motyer 17). God "massively occupies and dominates the heavenly throne room..." (Brueggemann *Isaiah 1-39* 58). The train of God's robe filled the temple, he was surrounded by mighty seraphim whose voices shook the temple, and the temple was filled with smoke.

Isaiah was so overcome by this vision that he cried out, "Woe to me!... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isa. 6:5). Isaiah knew that his own character was so unholy that he could never stand in the presence of God's holiness. In fact, Isaiah was so despairing that he did not even ask for mercy. However, he underestimated the grace of God, and soon a seraph touched a burning coal to his lips and pronounced his sins forgiven (Oswalt, *Isaiah* 127).

Isaiah answered God's call for someone to speak for him. Surprisingly, however, God gave Isaiah an ironic warning. Isaiah was to tell God's people to become hard-hearted so that they would not repent. He was to continue this mission until the land lay in ruins. Oswalt asks, "Does God truly not want his people to be healed? Has he predestined them for destruction?" (*Isaiah* 127). Oswalt believes this conclusion to be a misreading of the text in comparison to the rest of the book of Isaiah. He thinks that while most of Isaiah's audience will surely harden their hearts, a remnant of true believers will preserve Isaiah's words until a generation comes along that is willing to listen (127-28). Goldingay disagrees. He thinks that Isaiah preached these words but did not believe them. Goldingay believes Isaiah's preaching was like that of Jonah, designed to wake the people up and bring them to their senses (*Isaiah* 61).

**The Servant.** Perhaps the most discussed theme in Isaiah is that of the servant of the Lord. As early as 1948, over 250 books and articles had been written on this subject. The pace of publication has not slowed since (Dillard and Longman 278). In this literature review, the following scholars propose the theme of the servant of the Lord: Davis (96), Dillard and Longman (278), Goldingay (“Theology” 187-88), Williamson (“Isaiah” 375-76), Oswalt (“Book of Isaiah: Short Course” 64), Briley (23), and Motyer (13).

The book of Isaiah contains four servant songs (42:1-7; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). These passages describe an anonymous ideal servant who obeys Yahweh and who fulfills his calling despite severe suffering. The servant perseveres despite discouragement and extreme punishment in order to bring redemption to the nations. The servant suffers vicariously as a sin offering for others but is eventually exalted for his suffering (Bateman, Bock, and Johnston 154-61).

Prior to the advent of historical criticism, Christian readers generally followed the lead of the New Testament writers in seeing Jesus as the servant of the Lord in passages such as Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (Dillard and Longman 279). However, Williamson warns that to make this jump to Jesus raises a number of exegetical problems: “[T]here is a tendency to stress so emphatically that Jesus has fulfilled these prophecies that they are emptied of any other content, including matters that should be prominent in our exegesis” (“Isaiah” 375-76). As an example, Williamson notes that an eighth-century audience would believe that the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 applied to a child born in the immediate future, yet because Matthew 1:22 cites this prophecy in relation to Jesus, many readers neglect to search for any immediate meaning to the original hearers (376).

The servant of the Lord in Isaiah 40-66 has been variously identified as either the faithful remnant of Israel, someone contemporary with the author (such as Ezekiel or the prophet himself), or an eschatological figure such as the Messiah (Dillard and Longman 278). Goldingay sees four possibilities: the Messiah, a contemporary figure such as Zerubbabel, the prophet himself, or the nation Israel. Goldingay believes the servant of the Lord to be the prophet who brings Israel out of exile, while the New Testament application of this prophecy to Jesus is a typological fulfillment ("Servant" 704-06). Oswalt disagrees, noting that unlike the nation Israel, the person identified as *Israel* in Isaiah 49:3 is clearly an obedient and submissive character who is able to restore the nation to the Lord ("Book of Isaiah: Short Course" 65).

This dissertation takes the New Testament position that the servant of the Lord is the coming Messiah. As such, Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is a key passage for developing this theme. The prophet begins this passage by questioning whether anyone has believed the message about a coming Messiah. The servant of the Lord would not fit any normal description of greatness but would instead suffer for the sins and weaknesses of God's people. He would be unjustly treated, condemned, and killed, not for his own sins but for the sins of others. However, all of this maltreatment was the plan of Yahweh who would glorify and honor this servant who "bore the sins of many and interceded for rebels" (Isa. 53:12).

**God's sovereign rule over history and the nations.** Almost all of the prophetic books include oracles against the nations (P. Cook 565-66). In the Old Testament, the term *nation* refers to a related group of people living in its own geographical boundaries with its own government and its own set of gods (Redditt, "Nations" 949; Cook 563).

Several foreign nations are described in the prophetic books, but Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt are the most prominent (Cook 564). For example, Isaiah warns Babylon, Assyria, and Egypt of future punishment in Isaiah 13, 14, and 19 (Redditt, "Nations" 949). Chapters 13-27 include diatribes against the Assyrian Empire and its successors, beginning with the Babylonian Empire and concluding with a critique against the exercise of arbitrary power by the nations (Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39* 105-06). Isaiah understood that Jerusalem's fate could not be separated from the fate of the geopolitical forces surrounding the nation. Chapters 13-27 warn of impending punishment for those nations that resist Yahweh's sovereign rule (Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* 112).

Oracles against the nations demonstrate the sovereignty of Yahweh, who is not just the national god of Israel and Judah but the sovereign Lord of all the nations. This concept of a universal God shows up in texts such as Isaiah 2:2-4 but especially in Isaiah 40-55 (P. Cook 566-67). In the Old Testament, the primary criterion for distinguishing between true and false prophets is whether God brings their predictions to pass. This theme that the Lord rules over history in order to make his plans succeed shows up most clearly in Isaiah 40-66. Isaiah believed that if the people of God could see how God took care of them in the Assyrian crisis, surely they could trust him in exile. Isaiah's description of God's faithfulness differed sharply from the Mesopotamian gods of the surrounding nations whom he decried as useless idols (Dillard and Longman 280).

Isaiah 40:12-31 demonstrates God's sovereignty over the nations and their gods. Verses 12-14 describe the Lord's majesty and wisdom. Verses 15-17 state that the nations are worthless in God's eyes. Verses 18-20 compare God to poorly made idols. Verses 21-26 return to the description of God's power and majesty. In a stirring conclusion, verses



27-31 remind readers that since God is more powerful than the nations or their idols, he can be trusted to strengthen and protect his people.

**God's judgment of sin.** Instead of predicting the future, perhaps the prophets should be known best for castigating sin. Indeed, most of the oracles of Isaiah 1-39 are aimed at the sinfulness of humanity, whether that of Judah and Israel (1-12), the foreign nations (13-23), the world (24-27), or the kings of Judah (36-39; Fasol 92-93). While chapters 40-66 focus on such notable themes as comfort (40-48), the servant of the Lord (49-55), and Judah's glorious future (60-66), chapters 56-59 return to the issue of sin (Bryson 54).

Isaiah sees sin as rebellion against God, as illustrated by the book's beginning and ending (1:2; 66:24). God is utterly holy and has created everything in the world for his purpose, yet humanity has the gall to ignore him (Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah: 1-39* 38). This attitude results from the belief that humanity, rather than God, is at the center of creation: "Isaiah presents two extremes. One is of humanity thinking of itself as the center or measure of all things. At the other end, humanity is nothing ... more than a complex of forces operating at random ..." (36). Oswalt adds that Isaiah considers sin and rebellion to be "stupid," as any rational view of the world can see that humanity is not the center of the universe (39). By refusing to learn, Yahweh's people think that they are wise when they will ultimately be exiled for their stubbornness (Goldingay, *Isaiah* 22).

Isaiah 1:1-20 provides a good example of this theme of the sinfulness of humanity. In verse 2, Isaiah calls the heavens and earth to serve as his witness in the lawsuit that God is bringing against his people for their rebellion (Brueggemann *Isaiah 1-39* 13). Verse 4 states, "Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of

evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.” Verses 5-9 describe the pain and trouble that will continue to impact those who rebel against the Lord. God rejects Israel’s worship as well because it is meaningless (1:10-17). However, this punishment is not the end of the message for Judah because the Lord offers forgiveness to those who will return to him (1:18-20).

**The remnant.** Isaiah and the prophets question how “the Holy One of Israel” could save his people when they refuse to obey. This conflict is addressed in the Old Testament through the theme of a remnant of people who have survived some catastrophe brought on by their sin and who start over again with God’s promises for their future. This remnant theme balances God’s judgment and his grace (Dillard and Longman 277-78).

For example, neither Israel nor Judah turned from their sinful ways to obey God. As a result, the Assyrians destroyed Israel in 722 BC and the Babylonians carried off Judah into captivity in 586 BC (Dillard and Longman 277-78). Fortunately, however, God provided for a remnant of Judah to survive in exile (Morgan 658-59; Davis 97). The remnant was a group of people who survived the destruction brought on by God as punishment for their sins and who sought to start over fresh in Babylon (Morgan 658; Dillard and Longman 278). Goldingay notes, “Thus one way of resolving the tension between the demands of faithfulness and of righteousness means bringing calamity on the people ...” (*Isaiah* 179). He adds that the “remains” (i.e., remnant) are like “leftovers” preserved out of mercy (179).

David M. Morgan notes that the concept of a remnant varies between Isaiah 1-39 and 40-66 due to different historical contexts. In the first thirty-nine chapters, the remnant is warned of a continuing threat of attack by Assyria. They are referred to as “holy seed” that will “repopulate the land” (Isa. 6:13). The idea of a remnant does not show up as clearly nor as often in Isaiah 40-66, however. When it does occur, it is usually in the context of a return from exile (e.g., Isa. 48:17-22; Morgan 66).

Hope for the future is one of the primary themes of Isaiah 40-66 (Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* 9). This theme shows up in a number of chapters, but Isaiah 40 is one of the best known: “‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God. ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for...’” (Isa. 40:1-2a). In verses 1-11, Isaiah tells of a messenger who would proclaim the coming of the Lord, which is truly good news. The hope of a better future for the exiles in Judah will preach to those who feel exiled by their troubles today (Davis 97).

**Trusting God.** Judah’s greatest obligation was to trust God completely (Davis 97). However, like many people today, this obligation was also one of their greatest challenges. This challenge was made even greater by the timeframe in which Isaiah ministered. Isaiah’s ministry took place during a critical time in Israel’s history. Isaiah served from the year Uzziah died (740 BC) into the reign of Hezekiah (715-686 BC). The peace that Uzziah enjoyed was rapidly destroyed as Assyria began a westward expansion under Tiglath-Pileser III. Israel and Aram joined together against Assyria and demanded that King Ahaz of Judah join them as well. Isaiah encouraged Ahaz to trust in God, but Ahaz turned down all three parties, choosing instead to align himself with Assyria.

Several decades later, Sennacherib returned to Judah to put down a rebellion led by King Hezekiah (Motyer 19-20; Briley 16-17).

Clearly, Yahweh expected his people to obey him. Faith and trust are seemingly synonymous, but Wildberger believes that Isaiah could not call Israel to trust God because the people were not living obediently. He writes, “Believing does not merely mean considering the promises ... to be true” (645-46). Instead, faith is demonstrated by obedience.

Isaiah 36-37 tells the inspiring story of how Hezekiah chose to trust in God against the Assyrian army. Sennacherib sent his chief of staff with a huge army to taunt Hezekiah. The chief of staff shouted to the people in Hebrew, “Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, ‘The LORD will deliver us.’ Have the gods of any nations ever delivered their lands from the hand of the king of Assyria?” (Isa. 36:18). With these words, the Assyrian commander struck fear into all of the leaders of Judah. However, instead of seeking a truce with the Assyrians or help from the Egyptians, Hezekiah chose instead to trust God. Although Sennacherib claimed to have Hezekiah trapped “like a bird in a cage,” Isaiah 37:36-37 attributes Sennacherib’s retreat to an angel of the Lord (Briley 17). According to both Isaiah 37:38 and extrabiblical sources, Sennacherib was assassinated later by two of his sons (Oswalt, *Isaiah* 417).

**Eschatology.** Eschatology, from the Greek word *eschatos* (meaning *last*), refers to the end times, whether of the present age or of the world itself. It includes the study of the end of history, judgment, and eternity (Martens 178; Carroll 420). Eschatology focuses on a future that culminates in God’s sovereign purposes (Martens 178).

The prophets are full of prophecies concerning the doom or the salvation of Israel and Judah. For example, Jeremiah contains over two hundred verses concerning Israel's future state, while Isaiah 1-5 portrays fearful retribution for the nation's sinfulness. Many of these predictions were fulfilled when Assyria destroyed Israel in 722 BC and when Babylon conquered Judah in 586 BC (Carroll 420; Martens 179). Fortunately, the prophets also predicted a future when God would restore Judah (Isa. 2:1-4; Carroll 420). However, scholars disagree as to whether these predictions still have a future fulfillment at the end of time. For example, classic dispensationalists believe they do, claiming that a Davidic king is not on the throne (Jer. 23:5-6) nor are the nations bringing tribute to Israel (Isa. 61:4-11). Reformed theologians disagree, believing the promises to Israel are spiritual promises that have been fulfilled in the New Testament church (Rom. 9:5-8; Martens 179).

Isaiah includes a number of eschatological passages. Isaiah 19:16-24 speaks of a terrible day of judgment (Martens 178-79). Isaiah 60 describes the nations as streaming to Jerusalem (Carroll 420), while Isaiah 51:16 and 66:22 describe a new cosmos (Davis 98). Isaiah 32:1-8 tells of a time when a king will rule righteously (Goldingay, *Isaiah* 187-88). Brueggemann believes this "king of beauty" will restore Yahweh's glorious rule (*Isaiah* 1-39 217). Kaiser notes that no Old Testament survey of eschatology texts would be complete without discussing the promise of a new heavens and a new earth found in Isaiah 65:17-25 and 66:18-24 (*Preaching and Teaching the Last Things* 144, 155).

Isaiah 65:17-25 is an excellent passage for preaching Isaiah's eschatological vision. In Isaiah 65:1-16, Yahweh says that his people have made a choice. Most have chosen to mix their belief in Yahweh with idol worship or other vulgar practices, thus

resulting in a hypocritical lifestyle that repels God (Isa. 65:1-5; Goldingay, *Isaiah* 366).

While Yahweh plans to destroy the false believers, those true believers who worship him in obedience will be blessed (Isa. 65:6-16). One day Yahweh will create new heavens and a new earth where the power of death will be destroyed and injustice will be banished (Isa. 65:17-25; Rev. 21:1-4). One day those who believe and obey God's word will be blessed beyond measure, so humans must make their choices now in light of eternity (Oswalt, *Isaiah* 687-90).

### **Preaching Isaiah's Message Today**

As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, scholars offer a number of reasons to preach from Isaiah: its literary majesty (Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah: 1-39* 3; Dillard and Longman 267), its significance to the New Testament writers (Davis 9; Watts 111-13), and its theology (Achtemeier, "Isaiah" 23). Sensing adds that other than the Psalms, no other book in the Old Testament has been the source of more sermons ("Wearing Trifocals" 43). These observations would lead one to believe that a significant amount of scholarship exists on the subject of preaching from Isaiah.

Surprisingly, however, the literature does not support this conclusion. While a great deal has been written about how to interpret Isaiah and about how to preach from the prophets, little information exists about how to preach from Isaiah. In fact, only 7 percent of the nearly two hundred books, journal articles, and monographs researched for this dissertation discuss how to preach Isaiah's message.

The purpose of this portion of the literature review is to highlight insights on preaching from both the prophets in general and from Isaiah in particular. This section will be divided into two subsections. *Hermeneutical issues* discusses general principles

for interpreting the Old Testament prophets, including interpreting the Old Testament in light of the New Testament and understanding the various sub-genres of prophetic literature. *Homiletical issues* focuses on three areas—preaching from the prophets (moving from the text to the sermon), applying the prophets, and preaching like the prophets.

### **Hermeneutical Issues**

Fortunately, a significant amount of literature exists on interpreting the prophets, some of which has already been discussed in the section on the message of the prophets. However, the question of how to interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament has a strong bearing on how one interprets and preaches from the prophets. Therefore, the following section of the literature review explores this question.

**Interpreting the Old Testament in light of the New.** One of the most challenging issues in preaching from the Old Testament is determining how the Old Testament should be interpreted in relation to the New Testament. Greidanus reports that over five hundred works have been published on this issue in the past 150 years (*Preaching Christ* 46). This hermeneutical problem is rarely covered in homiletical textbooks, yet it touches on nearly every area of Christianity. Bos notes, “Every theologian and preacher discovers sooner or later that the relation between the Old and New Testaments is not just one of the problems of interpretation, but [one] that touches the kernel of the enterprise of theology and proclamation” (9-10). Indeed, biblical scholars have struggled with this question for nearly two thousand years (9).

Karl N. and Rolf A. Jacobson provide an intriguing introduction to the issue of how the Old Testament prophets should be interpreted in light of the New Testament. In

an article titled “The One Who Will Be Born: Preaching Isaiah’s Promises in a Harry Potter Culture,” the authors note that the plot of the series begins when a character named Sybill Trelawney “prophesies” that a child will be born “with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord” (i.e., Voldemort; 427). Although Harry Potter is not mentioned by name in the prophecy, the plot is set in motion when Voldemort assumes that the Potter child is his most likely nemesis. The authors point out the similarity between Voldemort’s reaction to Potter and Herod’s reaction to the account of a child born “king of the Jews” (Matt. 2:1-2). Both men mistakenly equate *prophecy* with *prediction* (427).

Because of this tendency to equate prophecy with prediction, the Jacobsons note two common mistakes when preaching from prophetic texts: “These two common missteps may be described as placing one’s foot either in the prophecy-as-prediction ditch on the right or in the prophecy as ancient-historical-accident ditch on the left” (427). When preachers use the *prophecy as prediction* approach, they sometimes give the impression that the prophets’ messages were devoid of any historical context or that the prophet was addressing only a future situation of which even he may have been unaware. Alternatively, preachers who employ the *prophecy as historical accident* approach may plant their sermons firmly in the eighth century BC but risk leaving the congregation with the impression that the prophet’s words have little relevance for current times (427-28).

The *prophecy as prediction* method is more commonly called “promise and fulfillment” (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 207; Bos 44). This method finds its basis in the New Testament itself, in which the Gospel writers claim that something happened to fulfill the words of a particular prophet (Bos 44-45). For example, Matthew often concludes passages with statements such as, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord



had said through the prophet” (e.g., Matt. 1:22; 8:17; 21:4). Jesus appears to have done the same thing when he concluded his reading from Isaiah 61:1-2 (Luke 4:21; Holladay 3).

Despite some scholars’ objections that literary criticism has trumped traditional interpretations of Old Testament messianism, Greidanus suggests that promise and fulfillment is one of several interpretive methods preachers should employ (*Preaching Christ* 240-41). Greidanus believes that the New Testament writers often used promise and fulfillment to preach Christ from the Old Testament, demonstrating the fulfillment of specific Old Testament predictions in the New Testament and especially in Jesus (207-09). He adds, “In fact, as far as the Gospel writers are concerned, Jesus fulfilled the promises of all the prophets” (209). Greidanus suggests that preachers who employ the promise and fulfillment approach to preaching the prophets should remember two rules. First, God usually fulfilled Old Testament promises progressively. In other words, prophecy is not simply filled once and for all but is open to progressive fulfillment. This idea explains how Isaiah 7:13-16 could apply both to Isaiah’s audience and to Matthew’s. Second, preachers should begin by interpreting the Old Testament passage in its original context before moving on to interpret it in light of a New Testament passage to avoid reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament (242).

As noted previously, the promise and fulfillment approach to interpreting the prophets is not without its critics. For example, William L. Holladay sums up the argument for this approach as follows: “[I]f the New Testament understands the Old Testament texts this way,... then this is the way God intends *us* to understand them. The rationale is elegant, tight, and much too simple” (original emphasis; 3). Holladay raises

several questions about this approach before summarily dismissing it. For example, he questions what the word *fulfilled* really means, specifically concerning the time frame of the prophecies. If certain prophecies were meant to apply to generations several millennia later, then this method leaves the prophets speaking words they did not understand to audiences who were even more confused (3-5).

Bos also acknowledges that the promise and fulfillment approach to interpreting the prophets finds its basis in the New Testament. However, he notes that one of the challenges with this type of preaching is that *promise* is often exchanged for *prediction*, in which Old Testament texts are “trotted out” to support claims concerning the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (46-47). This type of preaching relegates congregations to spectators who merely observe how God has been faithful in the past, ignores promises that were fulfilled in the Old Testament, and misinterprets some Old Testament allusions that are not prophecies at all (52-56).

If the *prophecy as prediction* approach is related to promise and fulfillment theology, then the *prophecy as ancient-historical-accident ditch* philosophy is related to both historical criticism and the salvation history method to preaching the Old Testament (Holladay 7; Bos 59; Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 203). In this approach to interpreting the Old Testament, prophetic texts are considered to be *time-bound* (i.e., the prophetic texts were proclaimed in a particular historical and social context that made sense both to the prophet and to his original audience; Holladay 7). According to this method, “One learns, for example, that the Old Testament prophets were not primarily in the business of predicting the far future but rather understood themselves to be called by God to diagnose the predicaments of their own generation...” (8). Holladay notes that one benefit of the

historical-critical method is that it interprets the prophets with tools that any critic would apply to ancient texts, such as an historical understanding of the prophet's circumstances, an expertise in Hebrew literary forms, and a proper understanding of the prophet's role as a spokesperson for God (9). However, one of the biggest problems with this approach is that modern hearers have difficulty finding any message in the prophets for today (11). Bos adds, "The way salvation-historical sermons treat the Old Testament looks like a visit to a museum" (65). The Jacobsons agree, noting that sermons that use this approach are often dry and tedious, leaving Isaiah's messages "stranded in ancient Jerusalem, divorced from the advent of the savior Jesus and divorced from us and our world" (427-28). As Holladay suggests, this approach leaves both preachers and hearers wondering whether the prophets' messages are relevant for today or only for long ago (12).

Greidanus refers to this interpretative method as "redemptive-historical progression" (*Preaching Christ* 203). Unlike Holladay and the Jacobsons, however, Greidanus believes redemptive history is an appropriate method for interpreting and preaching Old Testament texts. He states, "Redemptive history is not only a New Testament presupposition for interpreting the Old Testament, it is also one of the major ways of preaching Christ from the Old Testament" (203-04). One benefit to using this approach to interpreting the prophets is that it attempts to understand Old Testament texts in their original contexts before seeking to hear them within the canon and within the grand scope of salvation history. Greidanus states, "A preacher's first responsibility is to seek to understand the message of the selected passage in its own historical context" (228). He suggests that preachers seeking to use this method should follow three interpretive strands—literary, historical, and theocentric. Literary interpretation deals

with genre and forms to determine the written meaning. Historical interpretation digs into questions such as who wrote the text and for whom was it written. Finally, theocentric interpretation asks what the passage teaches about God (228-30).

Although he uses different terms, Bos also believes that redemptive history can be an appropriate method for preaching Old Testament texts as long as the sermons neither remain in the past nor jump too quickly to Christ. Bos offers four lenses for interpreting and preaching Old Testament texts. The first lens, *sensus Israeliticus*, focuses on God's message to the original hearers. Bos notes, "Preachers must themselves be aware and make the congregation aware of the fact that Israel was not only the first addressee of God's message of merciful love from a historical point of view, but Israel is still the first addressee" (170). The second lens focuses on the christological focus and theology of the text. As Bos asks, "In what way can we connect Old Testament texts with the testimony about Jesus Christ in a correct and legitimate way?" (173-74). Bos' third lens is ecclesiology. He notes that the New Testament authors often traced Old Testament texts not to Christ but to the church. Bos' final lens is eschatology. This lens remembers that Israel is still the promised recipient of a better future (177-78).

Scholars disagree over the usefulness and appropriateness of both the *prophecy as prediction* (prophecy and fulfillment) and the *prophecy as ancient history* (historical critical or redemptive-historical) approaches to interpreting the prophets. Perhaps the Jacobsons state the situation best: "A better alternative would be to approach Isaiah's ancient oracles as words that continue to speak to our time and ... as words that help to proclaim the reconciliation of all that God has made in Jesus Christ" (428). The Jacobsons propose that preachers recognize that prophecies had an original context, that

they were often reinterpreted in the New Testament, and that they remain Scripture for modern readers as well (429).

**Interpreting prophetic texts.** In addition to understanding how to interpret prophetic texts in light of the New Testament, preachers must also understand how to interpret the prophetic genre itself. Prophetic literature consists of three main genres—poetry, prose, and prophetic forms (J. Cook 307). The book of Isaiah consists primarily of prophetic forms set in poetry and includes some of the most beautiful poetry in the prophetic books, although significant prose sections also occur occasionally (Isa. 6; 36-39; Cook 308). Since many preachers and students claim that prophetic literature is difficult to understand (Gibson 21; Yancey 171), this section of the literature review briefly explores Hebrew poetry, figurative language, and prophetic speech forms.

Hebrew poetry communicates through terse lines, parallelism, and vivid imagery. Unlike Western poetry, however, rhyme is not an intentional portion of Hebrew poetry, and scholars debate whether or not meter is present as well (Futato 24-25). The basic unit of Hebrew poetry is a line that consists of two, three, or four “half lines” or *cola* (27). For example, Isaiah 1:5a represents a typical line of Hebrew poetry known as a bicolon: “Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion?” While this passage consists of two sentences, a line of Hebrew poetry should not be confused with an English sentence as lines can consist of more than one sentence (27).

Prose sentences are grouped together in paragraphs, but related lines of Hebrew poetry are formed into strophes and stanzas. A strophe is the equivalent of a paragraph in poetry (Futato 29). Strophes group lines together based on a common theme or sense. Most modern translations indicate the presence of strophes by placing an extra space in

between them (29). Longer sections of poetry consist of several strophes grouped together in stanzas (31). Thus, when reading prophetic literature, preachers should bear in mind that strophes may indicate key ideas or thoughts, while stanzas may set off an oracle or other speech form.

Hebrew poetry is marked by parallelism and imagery. Parallelism is simply a correspondence between the halves, or cola, of a poetic line (Futato 33; Longman, *How to Read the Psalms* 95). Traditional definitions for parallelism include synonymous (repetition between lines using similar ideas), antithetic (repetition between lines using contrasting ideas), and synthetic (repetition between lines using supplemental ideas; Longman, *How to Read the Psalms* 99-100). Mark D. Futato simplifies these definitions by noting that parallelism repeats an idea but adds something different in the second colon (38).

When readers begin to understand Hebrew poetry and parallelism, the prophets' flair for description becomes more noticeable. For example, Isaiah 1:5-9 asks:

Why should you be beaten anymore?  
 Why do you persist in rebellion?  
 Your whole head is injured,  
 your whole heart afflicted.  
 From the sole of your foot to the top of your head  
 there is no soundness—  
 only wounds and welts  
 and open sores,  
 not cleansed or bandaged  
 or soothed with olive oil.  
 Your country is desolate,  
 your cities burned with fire;  
 your fields are being stripped by foreigners  
 right before you,  
 laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.  
 Daughter Zion is left  
 like a shelter in a vineyard,  
 like a hut in a cucumber field,

like a city under siege.  
 Unless the LORD Almighty  
 had left us some survivors,  
 we would have become like Sodom,  
 we would have been like Gomorrah.

Readers immediately note that Isaiah 1:5-9 is set off as a separate strophe focusing on the theme of the painful results of rebellion against God. Verses 5a, 5b, 6, 7a, 7b, 8, and 9 are lines consisting of two, three, or four cola. Verses 5b-6, 7-8, and 9 indicate three separate instances of parallelism or restatement. With a bit of understanding of Hebrew poetry, preachers can now see the poetic—yet painful—way that Isaiah describes Judah's problems.

Terse lines and repeating parallelism set Hebrew poetry apart from prose, yet it is figurative language that makes Hebrew poetry and prophecy both powerful and problematic. Sandy states, "If figures of speech were sequoias on the landscape of prophecy, prophecy would be densely forested, and the most common tree in these woods is metaphor" (59). Sandy notes that *metaphor* can be defined in two ways—a restrictive sense that limits the meaning to two nouns not normally associated together linked by a verb (i.e., "Surely the people are grass." Isa. 40:7) and a less restrictive sense in which *metaphor* is interchangeable with *figurative language* (73-74). In this second sense, metaphors are words used outside their normal context to bring meaning and experience to another context (74). Given this definition, current scholarship avoids becoming entangled in nuances such as whether a comparison is explicit or implicit (Sandy 74; Longman, *How to Read the Psalms* 114-15).

Hebrew poetry and prophecy is filled with vivid imagery. Longman notes that "an image compares two things which are similar in some ways but dissimilar in other ways.

The dissimilarity is what surprises us and causes us to take notice” (*How to Read the Psalms* 115). Futato adds, “Images often grab our emotions before they engage our minds” (42). Because of the poetic nature of images, both the prophets and Jesus used imagery to make unforgettable points (e.g., Isa. 49:15-16; Luke 15).

Part of the challenge of understanding the prophets lies in their extensive use of metaphor. Sandy notes, “Metaphors begin with something nonfigurative and make it figurative by using it to describe something beyond the scope of its normal meaning” (62). The challenge lies in the historical and cultural gap that makes understanding the metaphorical referents difficult for modern Western interpreters (63-65). Additionally, interpreters must wrestle with the prophets’ difficulty in describing fully God’s wrath or God’s love. Perhaps the very difficulty of the task has led preachers to struggle with passages such as Isaiah 49:26 (“I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh...”) and Isaiah 49:23 (“Kings ... and their queens ... will ... lick the dust at your feet”; Sandy 79).

Knowledge of metaphor and figurative language will help preachers understand the extreme language of the prophets better. For example, preachers will understand that writers and leaders in the ancient Near East often warned violators with the worst imaginable consequences. The prophets frequently used stereotypical language to describe God’s anger toward his people. The difficulty of describing God’s love required poetic imagery as well. Preachers must keep in mind that the primary purpose for metaphor in the prophets was to help the hearers understand God’s perspective on sin and obedience (Sandy 102).

While poetry and figurative language fill the prophetic books, the prophets are best known for their specialized literary genres (Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 668-69).



Scholars differ over the various types of prophetic speech forms or sub-genres. For example, Kaiser identifies five different prophetic forms: judgment, salvation, woe, lawsuit, and judgment against the nations (*Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* 102-11). Long sees three main types of materials in the prophetic literature—accounts or reports, speeches, and prayers (“Preaching in the Prophets” 310). Sensing also notes three main forms (reports, speeches, and prayers) but further divides these categories into judgment speeches, prophecies of blessing and deliverance, woe oracles, symbolic actions, legal oracles, disputation speeches, poetry, wisdom, and apocalyptic (“Call” 145-46). Achtemeier identifies judgment speeches, woe oracles, oracles of salvation, legal proceedings, and prophetic torahs or teaching (“Isaiah” 47-49). Ronald L. Giese, Jr, identifies three main genres of prophecy: oracles of salvation, announcements of judgment, and apocalyptic (20-22). Finally, Sweeney identifies two main forms: (1) narrative, which includes vision reports, reports of a prophetic word, reports of symbolic actions, vocational accounts or autobiographical reports of a prophet’s commissioning, and third-person stories about the prophets; and, (2) speech, which includes prophetic announcements of judgment or salvation, sign announcements to validate the prophet’s word, trial genres, woe oracles, and prophetic torah (*Isaiah 1-39* 16-29).

As evident from this brief overview, the literature contains a number of different approaches to interpreting prophetic forms. However, the primary forms appear to be judgment oracles against the people of God, judgment oracles against the foreign nations, woe oracles, promises of salvation and hope, and apocalyptic literature. This section of the literature review discusses how to interpret each of these forms of prophetic texts.

In judgment oracles against Israel and Judah, the prophet often served as God's ambassador or messenger. In accordance with common speech patterns of the day, judgment oracles included the name and commission of the prophet, the prophet's warning, and the phrase, "Thus says the Lord." This announcement warned the people that they had sinned by violating God's law and would be punished if they did not repent (Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* 105; Pierce 84). Examples of judgment oracles include Isaiah 7:10-25, in which Isaiah proclaims, "Hear now, you house of David!... The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria." Much of Isaiah 1-12 consists of judgment oracles against Judah.

The prophetic lawsuit is a highly stylized form of the judgment oracle. In the lawsuit, God summoned Israel and Judah to appear before him to defend themselves. The basic form of the lawsuit includes an appeal to the heavens and the earth as jury, a statement of the crime, a reminder of God's goodness, and a call to repentance (Kaiser 110; Pierce 84). Isaiah 1:2-20 is a classic example of the prophetic lawsuit, in which God proclaims through Isaiah, "'Come now, let us settle the matter,' says the LORD. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.'" Micah 6:1-8 is another well-known example of a prophetic lawsuit.

A major part of the prophetic literature is devoted to judgment oracles against foreign nations. In fact, twenty-five chapters of the major prophets, the first two chapters of Amos, and the entire books of Nahum and Obadiah are judgment oracles against the nations. Kaiser notes that this corpus represents more Scripture than Paul's prison epistles

(*Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* 111). Chapters 13-24 of Isaiah represent a large grouping of judgment oracles against Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Ethiopia, Egypt, Edom, Shebna, and Tyre.

Woe oracles begin with an exclamation of sadness, typically employing the Hebrew word *hoy*. Woe oracles describe rebellious actions that offended God, especially violations of covenantal loyalty (Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* 110; Sensing, “Call” 147). Isaiah is particularly full of woe oracles (Kaiser 110). Isaiah 5 is a colorful example: “Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit, and wickedness as with cart ropes...” (Isa. 5:18). Other examples from Isaiah include 10:1-11, 20:1-4, 28:1-4, 30:1-3, and 31:1-4 (Kaiser 110).

The presence of so many judgment and woe oracles makes many preachers avoid preaching the prophets. John Ortberg asks, “Don’t the prophets strike you as kind of cranky?... [Yet c]an you really be a biblical preacher and not address what the prophets have to say?” (48-49). Fortunately, judgment is never the prophet’s final word. The themes of salvation and hope run throughout the prophetic books. Salvation oracles included a reassurance that God’s promises were still true, a reason for believing the promises, and the future promise of a blessing (Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* 107-09; Pierce 85). Isaiah 40:1-11 (“‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God...”) may be the most recognizable example of a salvation oracle in Isaiah.

Finally, the apocalyptic genre focuses on visions or prophecies of the end times or of an age to come (Crawford, “Apocalypse” 72). Apocalyptic literature is a distinct form of prophecy. Prophecy focuses on immediate judgment and presents God’s warning in bold terms. Apocalyptic literature uses vivid imagery to paint a graphic picture of distant

judgment and restoration (Giese 22). Apocalyptic material is typically associated with a sense of powerlessness and impending doom (Crawford, "Apocalyptic" 72-73). The purpose of apocalyptic literature is to encourage God's people to persevere in dark circumstances (Giese 22).

In summary, the best way to interpret any prophetic text is to understand first the historical context in which the prophet delivered his message. Understanding poetry, figurative language, and the various forms of prophetic speech is also critical to interpreting prophetic texts properly. When these two principles are followed, preachers can feel confident that they are sharing the same message with contemporary audiences that the prophets intended for their audiences (Stein 98-99).

### **Homiletical Issues**

So far, this literature review has highlighted various authors' insights into interpreting the message of Isaiah and the prophets. However, as any preacher knows, hermeneutics can only provide a framework for understanding the text. Preachers must also be confident in their homiletical skills for writing and delivering sermons from prophetic texts. Therefore, this section of the literature review focuses on three areas: preaching from the prophets, applying the message of the prophets, and preaching like the prophets today.

**Preaching from the prophets.** As mentioned previously, numerous scholars have written about preaching from the Old Testament and preaching from the prophets. However, most of these authors focus primarily on interpreting the prophets' message and very little on methods for preaching from prophetic texts. Examples of these authors

include James and Christine Ward, Cecil P. Staton, Jr., John H. Sailhamer, Christopher Seitz, and David Fleer and Dave Bland.

Fortunately, however, several homileticians do provide insights on how to move from the prophetic text to the pulpit. For example, Longman, Greidanus, Achtemeier, Long, and Edward Franklin Sanders, IV all offer excellent information for preachers struggling to preach from the prophets. This section of the literature review compares the methods of these authors before offering a suggested method for exegeting prophetic passages.

Longman suggests eight principles for preparing to preach from Old Testament passages. First, he suggests reading the passage in its context. Longman believes many readers do not take the time necessary to accomplish this step, yet he considers it one of the simpler hermeneutical tools to use and thus well worth a preacher's time. *Reading a passage in context* is best understood as a series of concentric circles that begins with the immediate context of the previous and succeeding verses before proceeding outward to include the section of the book, the book itself, the Old Testament context, and the canonical setting (*Making Sense* 32-34). Longman's second step is to identify the genre of the passage. The Bible is a collection of various genres, including history, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, and apocalyptic literature (39-40). Third, one should consider the historical and cultural backgrounds of the Bible as well. God wrote to specific people in specific settings through specific languages, none of which are common to Western Christians today (47-48). Fourth, Longman recommends studying the grammar and the structure of the passage. For preachers who can use the original languages, this step can help them grasp nuances not immediately observed in English translations (48-50). Fifth,

Longman warns readers to interpret personal experience in light of the Scriptures and not the other way around. Too many people discount the clear teachings of Scripture because these passages do not conform to their preconceptions (50-51). Sixth, he suggests comparing the passage to the full counsel of Scripture. Whatever the Bible intends for all people will be said in many times in many places (51-52). The seventh step is to demonstrate how the Old Testament passage points to Christ. Longman believes preaching an Old Testament passage with no reference to the gospel is insufficient (52-53). Finally, interpreters should remember to be tolerant of other people's interpretations because these alternate positions may actually be correct (53-54).

Greidanus provides a similarly helpful ten-step procedure for making the move from an Old Testament text to what he calls a "Christocentric" sermon. First, he suggests selecting a passage with an eye to the congregation's needs. This step can be done based upon a review of the congregation's spiritual health, a theme of Scripture, or the next literary unit in a series from a book of the Bible (*Preaching Christ* 280-82). Second, he recommends reading the passage several times within its literary context in several translations before delving into the details (282-83). Third, preachers should outline the structure of the text in order to understand the text better as well as possibly provide a preaching outline (283-84). Fourth, preachers should interpret the text within its historical setting by using literary, historical, and theocentric analysis. This step includes considering how the genre and form of a passage affect its meaning as well as asking basic questions about the authorship, intended audience, and date of the passage (284-86). Fifth, Greidanus suggests formulating the passage's theme and goal. The theme succinctly restates the author's main idea of the text while the goal attempts to answer

why he wrote the text (286-87). Sixth, he recommends understanding the passage in light of both the rest of the canon and of redemptive history (287-88). Greidanus' seventh step is to develop the sermon's theme and goal. The sermon's theme, or main idea, should be as close as possible to the theme of the passage. The goal of the sermon, however, should meet the needs of the congregation (288-89). Eighth, Greidanus recommends selecting a suitable form based on the literary genre of the passage. For example, narrative passages and prophetic passages should not be forced into the same three-point structure often used for preaching from the New Testament letters (289-90). The ninth step is to prepare the sermon outline (290). Finally, Greidanus recommends writing the sermon in an oral style that matches the preacher's normal (292).

Achtemeier provides more of a nonlinear approach to preparing sermons. First, she begins with a rhetorical analysis of the text. The first step of rhetorical analysis is to translate the text from the original Hebrew if possible. If not, preachers should read the passage in several different translations, including a Hebrew-English interlinear Bible (*Preaching from the Old Testament* 39). Second, she suggests writing out an English translation of the text, preserving as much as possible the Hebrew word order and other features of the Hebrew text. Achtemeier recommends writing out a translation even when working from strictly English translations as this practice helps the preacher internalize the passage (39). Third, preachers should do a rhetorical analysis of the passage by studying the speech patterns in the text, such as looking for the imperative verbs, noting parallelisms, and marking poetry by strophes (39-43). For the second major part of preparing to preach, Achtemeier suggests employing form criticism to discover the genre of the literature. When preaching from prophetic literature, she emphasizes establishing

the boundaries of the text, understanding the prophetic speech form being used in the passage, and understanding the original life setting behind the particular passage (44-46). After these two steps are completed, Achtemeier's third step of preparing to preach is to have two conversations with the text. The first conversation deals with how the text fits into the canonical context, while the second conversation focuses on how the passage fits the congregation (52-56). Fourth, Achtemeier suggests that Old Testament passages be paired with New Testament passages to introduce the gospel into the sermon. She believes that the Old Testament does not belong to the Church *per se*. She writes, "The Old Testament is the word of God to Israel, and unless we Christians have some connection with Israel, the Old Testament is not spoken to us. But of course we have do have such a connection" as shown in Romans 11:17-24 (56). Finally, she recommends outlining the sermon before writing it out in full (59).

Long provides perhaps the most extensive discussion of preparing to preach from the prophets. First, he suggests choosing a text to preach. While this statement may sound obvious, Long notes that different preachers vary between preaching through books of the Bible, using lectionaries, and choosing individual texts on a weekly basis. For pastors preaching from the prophets, he suggests preaching a series of sermons from the Major Prophets or perhaps entire books of the Minor Prophets (*Witness* 71). Second, preachers should reconsider where the text begins and ends. Long uses *reconsider* to encourage preachers not only to see beyond their own prejudices of a text but also beyond the paragraphing of any particular translation. The goal at this step is to preach from a coherent unit of thought (73-75). Third, Long recommends establishing a reliable translation of the passage, whether by translating from the original Hebrew or by



comparing several English translations for significant differences in wording and grammar. Noticing these differences will help preachers move “behind the scenes” in the translation process (75-76). Fourth, one should read the text several times in several translations to gain a basic understanding of the passage. This step includes asking questions of any part of the passage of which the congregation (or perhaps the preacher) is uncertain (77-78). The fifth step is placing the passage into the larger context of the book itself, which helps ensure consistent interpretation with the author’s message (78-79). Sixth, Long suggests listening attentively to the text by asking fruitful, challenging exegetical questions. Preachers should allow their imaginations free reign as they brainstorm the text. Suggested questions include looking for details that appear out of place, viewing the passage from the point of view of each character, and determining whether the passage has a center of gravity (83-87). Seventh, Long encourages preachers to explore the passage historically, which includes considering not only the apparent historical context of the passage but also the evidence for the date of the passage itself. The preacher’s goal at this point is to discover as much about the historical circumstances behind the passage as possible (89-90). Eighth, Long suggests exploring the literary nature of the passage by determining its genre (91-93). Ninth, he does the same from a theological perspective. What does the passage have to say about God? (94-95). Tenth, the preacher is finally ready to consult the commentaries. At this stage of the process, the preacher should be able to follow the commentators’ reasoning comfortably as well as to check when the commentators seem to go in a different direction (96-97). Eleventh, the preacher should state the passage’s claim upon the hearers. At this stage, the preacher deals with questions concerning the main significance of the passage as well as its

relevance for modern audiences (97-98). Twelfth, the preacher is now ready to state both the focus and the function of the sermon. The focus is a concise statement of the sermon topic. The function is the goal of the sermon, what the preacher hopes to accomplish (107-09). Thirteenth, the preacher should choose a form that fits the genre of the passage. The closer the sermon's structure fits the sermon's passage, the less noticeable it will be to the hearers (117-18). Fourteenth, the preacher is ready to outline and write the sermon (119-24).

Finally, in a recent dissertation on increasing the amount and effectiveness of prophetic preaching, Edward Sanders offers the following eleven steps to preaching from the prophets. First, Sanders believes that preachers must learn to adjust their paradigm for prophecy. As discussed previously in this dissertation, preachers must understand the role and message of the prophets, as well as the distinction between *foretelling* and *forthtelling* (278-85). Second, Sanders recommends selecting a natural or proper unit of Scripture to preach. Preachers can accomplish this step by reading through the prophetic book (or extensive sections of it) in one sitting, outlining the book or section based on major transitions, and focusing on preaching entire oracles and stories (285-93). The third step is to analyze the text in its historical and literary contexts. If preachers have maintained their Hebrew skills, this step includes reading the passage in Hebrew and translating the passage into English. If not, preachers can use interlinear Hebrew-English Bibles to accomplish this step. This portion of the process also includes determining the prophetic speech form or sub-genre of the text (295-301). Fourth, Sanders suggests determining the exegetical idea of the passage to discover the primary idea the prophet was trying to communicate. Pastors can determine the exegetical idea by asking and

answering the major question of the text. For example, preachers may ask what happened in Isaiah 7:1-25 when Ahaz was considering aligning himself with Syria and Israel against the Assyrians. In that situation, Isaiah reminded Ahaz to trust the Lord and gave Ahaz a prophetic sign of the Lord's ability to keep his promises (327-29). Fifth, pastors should pray about the exegetical idea of the passage. This step not only helps preachers understand God's Word but it allows God's Word to shape the preacher as well (329-30). Sixth, Sanders recommends determining the homiletical idea of the passage. The homiletical idea is the exegetical idea stated in present tense language for a modern audience. For example, the homiletical idea for Isaiah 7:1-25 might be, "If we do not trust God to keep his promises, he may allow even worse circumstances into our lives" (334-35). Seventh, preachers should identify the contemporary relevance of the passage. Determining how the prophetic text applies to the original audience and to today's hearers, what analogies can be drawn between the ancient audience's circumstances and those of today's listeners, and what believers today have in common with the original hearers are helpful steps for discovering relevance (338-41). Eighth, Sanders encourages preachers to choose a form for the sermon that harnesses the genre of the text. Simply communicating the exegetical idea correctly is insufficient. Sermons are more powerful when they communicate the exegetical idea in a manner that fits the original proclamation (341-43). Ninth, Sanders suggest writing out the sermon in manuscript form. Writing the sermon forces the preacher to clarify his or her ideas as well as to develop them in a logical, coherent manner (345-46). Surprisingly, the tenth step in Sanders' process is to state the sermon's preaching idea in a memorable and concise phrase. The preaching idea is a short statement that listeners can easily remember

throughout the following week. Sanders recommends delaying this step until after writing the first draft of the sermon in order to allow sufficient time for the preaching idea to become clear to the preacher (347-48). Sanders' final step is to deliver the sermon. He encourages preachers to make a commitment to preach without notes or at least without a manuscript. By doing so, preachers can better recreate the orality of the original prophetic message (353-54).

The homileticians considered for this portion of the literature review represent a range of scholarship from conservative evangelicalism to moderate mainline. However, they offer similar steps for moving from the text to the sermon. For example, each of these homileticians agree on the importance of identifying the genre of the passage, reading the passage in its literary and historical contexts, and comparing the passage to the rest of the canon for theological purposes. Additionally, Greidanus (*Preaching Christ*), Achtemeier (*Preaching*), and Long (*Witness*) agree on selecting a passage based on the needs of the congregation and outlining the sermon before writing a manuscript. On the other hand, only Longman and Greidanus emphasize showing how the Old Testament points to Christ. Additionally, only Achtemeier, Long, and Sanders suggest rereading the passage to establish the boundaries of the text and translating the text. Finally, each scholar offers at least one unique insight to preaching from the Old Testament. For example, Longman suggests allowing Scripture to trump personal experience. Greidanus suggests outlining the structure of the text. Achtemeier insists on pairing Old Testament texts with New Testament texts to allow for preaching the gospel from an Old Testament setting. Long suggests brainstorming exegetical questions during the interpretation stage. Sanders recommends identifying a preaching idea.

Preachers who combine the best insights from these exegetical procedures with a healthy understanding of prophetic speech forms will increase their confidence in preaching from the prophets (Sanders 273). One possible combination is offered here. First, preachers should begin by reading the passage in its context (Longman, *Making Sense* 32-34; Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 282-83; Long, *Witness* 78-79; Sanders 285-93). The second step includes writing out a translation of the passage either from the Hebrew or from multiple translations (Achtemeier, *Preaching* 39; Long, *Witness* 75-76). Third, preachers should determine the historical context of the passage (Longman, *Making Sense* 47-48; Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 284-86; Long, *Witness* 89-90; Sanders 295-301). The fourth step is to determine the genre of the passage (Longman, *Making Sense* 39-40; Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 284-86; Long, *Witness* 91-93; Sanders 295-301). Fifth, preachers should exegete the passage by considering key words, grammar, and structure (Longman, *Making Sense* 48-50; Achtemeier, *Preaching* 39-43; Long, *Witness* 75-76). The sixth step is to determine the theme or focus of the text (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 288-89; Long, *Witness* 107-09; Sanders 327-35). Seventh, preachers should look for the gospel in the passage (Longman, *Making Sense* 52-53; Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 284-86). The eighth step is looking for the application in the passage for contemporary audiences (Achtemeier, *Preaching* 134; Sanders 338-41). Ninth, pastors should choose a form for the sermon that fits the genre of the passage (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 289-90; Long, *Witness* 117-18; Sanders 341-43). Finally, preachers should consider writing the sermon draft in manuscript form, but deliver it without the manuscript (Sanders 353-54; Long, *Witness* 119-24).

**Applying the prophets' message.** As mentioned in chapter one of this dissertation, a concern for relevancy prevents many preachers from tackling the prophets. Robinson states, "Indeed, misapplication of the Old Testament has had an embarrassing history" (*Biblical Preaching* 87). However, rather than a question of the perceived irrelevance of prophetic texts, perhaps a better way of approaching the problem is to start with the preacher. Many preachers struggle to find the relevance in prophetic texts because their seminary training was more concentrated in determining the original meaning of the text than in applying it to today's hearers (158). As Calvin Miller notes, however, the difference between a dry historical lecture and a life-changing sermon from the prophets is application (50).

Numerous homiletic textbooks address the issues of application and relevancy. This literature review focuses on the work of Greidanus, Daniel Overdorf, Michael Pasquarello, III, James C. Howell, Andrew C. Thompson, and Achtemeier. As will be seen, relevancy deals both with determining how a biblical passage applies to individual hearers as well as demonstrating what the passage has to say about God. This section of the literature review outlines challenges to applying prophetic texts, suggestions for making appropriate applications of prophetic texts, and methods for balancing anthropological application with theological application.

Greidanus notes that the biggest problem many preachers face with Old Testament texts is crossing the historical-cultural gap that separates the original recipients of the prophets' message from today's congregations. Preachers throughout the centuries have attempted many ways of crossing the historical-cultural gap with varying degrees of success (*Modern Preacher* 158-59). For example, *allegorizing* searches beneath the

literal meaning of a text for the supposed real meaning of the passage. While generally discredited, preachers occasionally use this approach today when they turn the Cana wedding narrative in John 2:1-11 into a lesson of how Jesus manifests his glory when his servants run out of resources (159-60). *Spiritualizing* a text is closely related to allegory. Spiritualizing occurs when preachers overlook the historical facts of a text with a spiritual analogy. For example, a sermon on Genesis 37:24 might spiritualize Joseph's time in the pit by saying that people often feel like they are in a pit as well (160). Overdorf adds that when preachers spiritualize a text, they unwittingly "snatch the authority from the inspired pen of the biblical writer ... [and] inadvertently put words in God's mouth that He never spoke" (74). *Patternizing* by imitating Bible characters is a third improper way of crossing the historical-cultural gap. In this method, preachers emphasize the good or bad traits of biblical characters while simultaneously calling congregants to imitate or avoid the behavior of these characters (Greidanus, *Modern Preacher* 161). For example, preachers may emphasize Isaiah's courage to address Ahaz and Hezekiah by encouraging listeners to be willing to confront their superiors. Greidanus notes that among other things, this approach to preaching Old Testament texts ignores both the differences between biblical characters and today's listeners and the biblical author's intent in describing the character's actions (162-63). Overdorf adds that imitating biblical characters and practices can turn descriptions of behavior into normative prescriptions or mandates. Using the example of Barnabas selling property to give money to the poor in Acts 4:37, Overdorf asks if this example is meant to teach selfless giving or to prescribe behavior for all future Christian property owners (80). Finally, Overdorf states that some preachers ignore the historical-cultural gap by *promising* outcomes that the Bible does

not promise for today (97). For example, Howell notes that many Christians claim Jeremiah 29:11 as their favorite verse: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" However, this practice ignores that God spoke this word through Jeremiah to the nation of Judah during one of the most difficult times of its history. Preachers do their listeners a great disservice by "promising the unpromised" to their hearers today (43; Overdorf 97).

Instead of allegorizing, spiritualizing, patternizing, or promising, Greidanus suggests that preachers focus on the biblical author's message to the original hearers. He notes, "Concentration on the original message is the only way toward valid application. Before one can determine the meaning of a text today, one must know what the writer intended to convey to his original hearers/readers" (*Modern Preacher* 166). Once the preacher has established the original meaning, he or she should then focus on two truths that remain constant today—the nature of God and the nature of his covenant people. Despite discontinuities in culture or recipients, God's nature does not change. Despite the same discontinuities, God's demand for obedience from his covenant people does not change, either. Therefore, preachers should approach biblical texts by asking what the text teaches about God and how the original hearers would have responded to that message. Application can then be made between the original hearers of the message and contemporary hearers (169-71, 261-62).

Continuing in this vein, Overdorf offers ten steps for uncovering the relevance of a biblical text for modern audiences. First, like Greidanus, he recommends determining the central truth of the sermon text. Overdorf calls this step, "What did God originally



teach through this text?” (102-03). While applications may change from culture to culture, the central truths in God’s Word do not change. This step emphasizes proper exegesis of the passage (103). Second, he asks, “How did God intend this text to affect its original readers?” (107). Citing an article by Duane Litfin, Overdorf notes that student preachers sometimes struggle to find the application in miracle stories when the most likely point of the text may be to worship Jesus (108). Third, Overdorf suggests asking how today’s listeners compare with the original hearers/readers of the biblical text. Focusing on the commonalities and differences between today’s congregants and the original audience helps determine how precisely the sermon application can mirror the original purpose of the text. For example, while few listeners today struggle with meat offered to idols as Paul warned in 1 Corinthians 8-10, they probably wrestle with contemporary issues that might cause a brother or sister to sin (110-11). Fourth, Overdorf notes that preachers are now ready to focus on the listeners’ needs. Preachers do not create needs as much as help listeners discover those needs within themselves and within the biblical text. For example, if the biblical text addresses God’s guidance, preachers can discuss listeners’ potential need for direction in life (114-16). Fifth, Overdorf recommends preachers ask themselves, “So what?” (116). This question encourages listeners to think, feel, or act differently after hearing the sermon. He notes that effective sermon application must demonstrate how the biblical text impacts contemporary lives today. To do so, preachers should focus on the sermon’s purpose as they ask how the text should impact their hearers (117-19). Sixth, Overdorf recommends developing concrete, specific examples of life application. In other words, if the sermon does accomplish its purpose, how might the lessons of the text look in the lives of listeners today? To

accomplish this step, Overdorf suggests thinking about individual congregants and the problems they are facing. As he concludes, the power of application lies largely in how clearly individual hearers can imagine the truth of the text impacting their own situations (123-28). Seventh, Overdorf reminds preachers to ask, “Does this application exalt God?” (131). Preachers inadvertently weaken the power of their sermons when they caricature God by overemphasizing or downplaying one of God’s traits at the expense of a more well-rounded portrayal, such as imagining God as a fishing buddy who loves to be with his children (132). Eighth, at this point Overdorf believes preachers are ready to double-check their applications to make sure the points of the sermon accurately reflect the purpose and teaching of the text. For example, he imagines the biblical writer sitting in the audience. Overdorf asks, “Would the author say ‘Amen!’ or run to the front with arms waving, shouting, ‘No, no—that’s not at all what I meant!’?” Ninth, Overdorf suggests that sermon application should motivate and equip listeners to respond to the biblical text. If preachers suggest that hearing a certain text should result in certain changes in the lives of those who hear it, then she or he should provide the hearers practical steps for making those changes (134-35). Finally, Overdorf reminds preachers to ensure that the sermon does not guarantee listeners what the Bible never promised them. Since unbiblical promises make for disillusioned believers, wise preachers should ask whether or not a biblical text makes a legitimate promise to believers today (137-38).

Greidanus and Overdorf offer balanced approaches for crossing the historical-cultural gap between the prophet’s original hearers and today’s listeners. These approaches emphasize paying attention to the original author’s intended message, finding appropriate analogies between the life situation of God’s covenant people then and now,

and ensuring that sermon applications properly focus on God as well as humanity.

However, according to Pasquarello, some preachers have fallen into a more unbalanced approach to finding relevance by focusing primarily on hearers' felt needs. Driven by relentless pressure to grow a church or to generate enthusiasm among members, many preachers retreat to popular, pragmatic approaches to preaching that inadvertently place human needs at the center of the world instead of the Triune God (Pasquarello 7-9). This approach to preaching results in an unhealthy attention to the preacher's communication style as well as the felt needs of listeners while often drawing large crowds (14). Instead, Pasquarello believes preaching should turn the church and its leaders away from this unhealthy modern idolatry back to worship of God (15). Pasquarello shows how the rise of audience-centered preaching from Charles Finney to Rick Warren has resulted in the rise of what he calls "practical atheism," preaching that leads to numerical results but minimizes the glory of God (22-25). He recommends instead that preachers emphasize the glory of the Triune God and trust the Lord to work through his Word (58-59).

In a similar way, Howell notes that the most popular television and megachurch preachers seem to speak more about humanity than God. In his opinion, *felt needs* become a golden idol for both listeners and preachers. Instead of worrying about the sermon's effectiveness in dealing with human needs, Howell suggests preachers remember "sermons aren't always about us" (38). Instead, the sermon should be about God (38). To accomplish this reversal, Howell suggests that preachers learn to rank the subjects of the sermon properly. Preachers should remember that the "heart of every sermon is about God, not you or me" (40). The secondary focus for sermons should be on the body of Christ, the church (42-43). By changing the ranking from human needs first

to God, community, and then individual needs, preachers can ensure they are preaching truly significant sermons (40).

Recognizing that the prophets' main concern was to draw God's people back to covenantal faithfulness, Thompson suggests preachers draw natural connections to the New Covenant community by focusing on the covenantal context of the prophets' message. Thompson suggests five possible contact points between the original audience and modern worshippers. First, "[t]heir LORD is our Lord" (45). God's character never changes. Believers today serve the same God as did the ancient people of Israel and Judah (45). Second, "[t]heir history may be our history" (45). In some cases, such as the story of creation in Genesis, Christians today can have faith that God is sovereign over nature. In other cases, such as with the exodus, preachers may have to use a more indirect approach to highlight God's deliverance today (45-46). Third, "[t]heir demands may be our demands" (47). Much of the prophets' message focuses on themes that are as common today as they were 2,500 years ago, such as injustice and spiritual adultery. Other messages, such as Haggai's call to rebuild the temple, require preachers to derive general principles from specific demands (47). Fourth, "[t]heir promises may be our history" (48). In some cases, the prophets' warnings and predictions have already been fulfilled. For example, when preachers read about God's threat to destroy Jerusalem in Amos 3, they should recognize that this prediction came true in 586 BC (48). Last, "[t]heir promises may be our promises" (49). Events prophesied for the original audience may still be in the future for today's hearers. Daniel's description of the coming of the Son of Man is an example of this type of prophecy (49). Thompson suggests that learning

to preach with these five perspectives in mind will help preachers become more consistent in applying ancient biblical truth to modern biblical communities (51).

Finally, Achtemeier notes that preachers can find the relevance of a text by remembering that they are called to read the biblical texts on behalf of their hearers. She writes, “The preacher is the point at which text and congregation meet, and so the preacher must ask, ‘How will my people hear this text?’” (*Preaching* 54). To help preachers find the relevance of a passage, Achtemeier suggests asking four basic questions of both the text and the congregation. First, “What would my people doubt to be true in this text?” (54). Rather than focusing on what she terms “facticity” (30), this question considers the congregation’s emotional or affective doubts about God or the promises of the text. If the congregation harbors such doubts, the preacher must deal with them during the sermon to assure a more willing reception (54-55). Second, “What do my people need to know or to be reminded of from this text?” (55). Some congregations need to be reminded of God’s love while others need a reminder of his calls to obedience (55). Third, “With what inner feelings, longings, thoughts, and desires of my people does this text connect?” (55). This question of inner longings is similar to the concept of felt needs. Fourth, “If this text is true, what kind of world do we live in?” (55). This question helps hearers picture the benefits of living according to the biblical insights of the text. By following these and similar questions, preachers can ensure that their sermons account for both the biblical intent of the passage and the modern world of their audiences.

In summary, preachers can learn to apply prophetic texts by first ensuring that they understand the prophets’ original message to their original audience. Once the preacher understands the original intent of the author, he or she can look for similar

points of contact with today's hearers by focusing on the God who calls all people to covenantal obedience. If preachers can successfully cross the historical-cultural gap without falling into the ravines of allegory, spiritualization, patternizing or overpromising, they should be able to find relevance in the biblical text.

**Preaching like the prophets.** Many preachers are not content simply to learn how to preach from the prophets. They wonder if they can learn to preach like the prophets today. As discussed earlier in this literature review, Christians seem to have polar views as to what constitutes prophetic preaching. For example, some preachers either seek to demonstrate how the prophets' predictions were fulfilled in Jesus or to make their own highly literal and sometimes bizarrely allegorical predictions about America's future (Willimon 15; Sensing, "Call" 149). Other preachers think of the prophets as social activists who rail against injustice. While prophetic preaching may sometimes include aspects of both of these approaches, homileticians and influential pastors offer an expanded understanding of preaching like the prophets today. The remainder of this section highlights some of these emphases.

Woodley compares prophetic preaching to a visit to the doctor: "Nobody likes to hear those dreaded words from the doctor: 'You need surgery.' It always comes as a shock.... It's no different in our spiritual lives. We need honest, trustworthy doctors of the soul who will speak uncomfortable truths into our lives" (1). Woodley offers five guidelines for prophetic preaching today. First, prophetic preaching must begin with what he calls a "high view of Scripture" (3). In his opinion, someone with a high view of Scripture not only believes that the Bible is God's Word, but that it is God's Word for today. In other words, a high view of Scripture means that the Bible is not only

trustworthy but that God has something to say right now to people around the world. As Woodley points out, Hebrews 4:12 states that God's Word is sharper than any two-edged sword and can cut clean through the deepest issues of the human heart (3). Second, although prophetic preaching begins with a high view of God's Word, that prophetic message must be shaped within the preacher's heart: "It begins with a pastor who feels burdened with the things that break the heart of God.... As John Ortberg writes, 'To us, the world is not so bad' ... [b]ut the prophets act like the world is falling apart'" (4). Third, because prophetic preachers possess this sense of holy discontentment between the world's sin and God's vision of holiness, they preach with a sense of urgency. This urgency does not mean that they are deadly serious all the time. However, prophetic preachers know that "during each sermon human souls hang on a precipice between good and evil, God and idols, obedience and rebellion, heaven and hell" (4). Prophetic preachers do not ignore the importance of rhetoric or connecting with their audience, but they also know that the message is more than providing information or entertainment. Fourth, prophetic preaching is motivated by a deep love and concern for people. Prophetic preaching must be more than an angry Jonah-like assault on the world's evils. Instead, prophetic preachers are gripped with Christ's love for others. Finally, although prophetic preaching exposes the damage of sin, it also offers hope to transform both individuals and society. Prophetic preaching leads people to hope in the power of Christ (5-6).

Francis Chan agrees that prophetic preaching must begin with a high view of Scripture. He writes, "Prophetic preaching begins with something we've largely lost in the American church—a high view of God's Word. Very few of us tremble when we hear

or read God's Word" (12). Chan believes that pastors who wish to preach prophetically must believe in the power of God's Word to change lives today and be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. For example, he notes that several years ago God opened his eyes to the plight of the poor. God did so through Chan's experiences, the Scripture, and the Holy Spirit (12). Chan also notes that the main goal of prophetic preaching must be to speak God's message in love. As he paraphrases the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, "I can preach prophetically all day long, but if it's not done in love, it profits me nothing" (15). Chan believes that prophetic preachers must be like good parents who confront their children lovingly (16).

Along these lines, William H. Willimon speaks to the misunderstanding of "prophetic preaching" as preaching that is necessarily antagonistic, especially toward the institutional church. He notes an "enduring misinterpretation that is the basis for our contemporary popular contrast of prophetic with pastoral ministry" (16-17). For example, prophetic preachers supposedly care more about justice and truth while pastoral preachers are more concerned about loving the congregation: "From this misunderstanding flows the notion that as a preacher I am being most 'prophetic' when I speak without regard to the rules, conventions, traditions, and institutional demands of the church" (16-17). However, Willimon believes prophetic preachers are most true to their biblical calling when they speak from within the faith community to the faith community as a part of the faith community. The prophet's primary role is to call the community he or she loves back to following God (19).

Ortberg emphasizes that prophetic preachers must be sensitive to God's leading on speaking out about sin, especially in a world that has become desensitized to God's



standards. For example, after asking why the prophets often seem to be angry, he writes, “Think of it like this. If you’re listening to a piece of music that is played really poorly and you’re tone deaf, it might not bother you.... However, if you are an excellent musician,... it might really bother you” (50). In other words, the prophets *hear* things as musicians that others miss because they are exquisitely tuned in to God’s vision for the world. Ortberg continues, “The prophets have been given the crushing burden of looking at our world and seeing what God sees: rich people trying to get richer and looking the other way while poor people die” (50). Ortberg suggests that preachers who preach on social issues such as justice should remember four things. First, justice is not about partisan politics. For example, Jesus’ concern for the poor does not automatically translate into a higher minimum wage (52-53). Second, preachers should make the abstract concept of “justice” concrete by giving real-world examples of what it should look like, such as explaining how listeners can show justice to people they would normally overlook (55-56). Third, Ortberg recommends providing an opportunity within the next week for people to act on the applications they heard in the sermon. For example, during a sermon on justice, one of the teaching pastors in Ortberg’s congregation encouraged everyone to text a donation to a ministry that fights sex trafficking (56-57). Finally, Ortberg suggests reminding people that Jesus is the ultimate example of justice. Although the cross was the scene of “the most monstrous injustice in history” (57), the cross is where people most clearly see the justice of God.

Finally, Achtemeier focuses on the need for prophetic preachers to call the faithful back to trusting and obeying God: “Prophetic preaching deals with the hearts of the covenant people, and its goal is to awaken that faith in the congregation that will

enable them to trust their Lord ... and to obey him ...” (*Preaching* 118-19). Prophetic preachers must proclaim that God is not mocked and that he will discipline those who sin against him. However, like Woodley and Chan, Achtemeier warns those who wish to preach like the prophets today that they must not equate prophetic preaching with judgment. The prophets did not proclaim judgment for sin without also proclaiming God’s message of salvation (120-21).

This sampling of preachers and homiletics offers several guidelines for those who wish to preach like the prophets today. First, prophetic preachers must believe in the power of God’s Word to transform people today. Second, prophetic preachers must love those to whom they preach. Finally, prophetic preachers must be willing to speak God’s truth courageously but not judgmentally. Pastors who follow these insights can confidently call God’s people back to trust and obedience today (Sanders 266).

### **Research Design**

This project utilized an explanatory, mixed-methods design. A Likert-scaled questionnaire with items measuring the participants’ cognitive and affective responses to the themes of Isaiah’s message was supplemented by focus group interviews that explored these responses further. This portion of the literature review highlights insights from authors who were central to informing the methodology for this project.

In quantitative research, the researcher asks narrowly defined questions, obtains quantifiable data from numerous participants, uses statistics to analyze the data, and conducts the overall inquiry in an objective manner (Creswell 46). Qualitative research includes interviewing participants by asking open-ended questions, collecting verbal data from the participants by recording their responses, and analyzing these responses for

themes (51). Mixed-methods designs use both quantitative and qualitative research in situations where a combination of both forms of research is more likely to result in a better project than the use of either method alone (552). In an explanatory, mixed-method design, the qualitative data is used to supplement the findings from the quantitative research (560).

Robert F DeVellis offers the following guidelines for developing quantitative instruments. First, researchers should determine clearly what should be measured. This step includes understanding the relevant social science theories involved in the project. The second step is to generate an item pool consisting of more items than are necessary for the final questionnaire, thus allowing for the eventual weeding out of weaker items. Third, researchers should determine the format for measurement. Likert scaling is widely used in projects that measure attitudes and beliefs. Fourth, DeVellis recommends having the initial pool of items reviewed by experts who can evaluate the clarity and relevance of each item. Fifth, researchers should consider including some additional items in the initial scale that can be used to determine the validity of the final scale. This step helps identify sources of undesirable responses, such as social desirability. Sixth, DeVellis recommends administering items to a developmental sample to test the reliability and validity of the initial instrument. The seventh step is to evaluate the items for a high correlation with the latent variable. DeVellis recommends a Chronbach's alpha of at least .7, with scores between .8 and .9 considered very good. Finally, researchers should optimize the scale's length by balancing the importance of dropping items with a lower alpha against maintaining enough items for the instrument to be valid (73-112).

Quantitative instruments should be eye-catching, easily understood, and organized via topic headings. Questions should follow a common format (i.e., Likert items should consist of a stem followed by possible responses along a range of “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”; Sensing, *Qualitative Research* 118-20; DeVellis 93). Questionnaires should include a certain amount of redundancy with the understanding that fewer respondents completing a longer valid instrument is better than many respondents participating in a shorter invalid one (DeVellis 77-78).

To be useful, quantitative instruments must be tested for reliability and validity. John W. Creswell states, “Reliability means that scores from an instrument are stable and consistent” (169). DeVellis adds, “For a scale to be reliable, the scores it yields must represent some true state of the variable being assessed” (31). Scores should be nearly the same when the questionnaire is administered to different groups over time and when individuals encounter similar questions within the questionnaire (Creswell 169).

Reliability is a measure of internal consistency. Scales are internally consistent to the extent that they demonstrate a high correlation between the latent variable and the individual items (DeVellis 34). Reliability can be measured through various means, but Chronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha$ ) is one of the most widely accepted tools. Alpha is the proportion of a scale’s total variance from the true score of the latent variable (34-37).

While reliability is a measure of how much a variable influences a set of items, validity measures the extent to which the data reflects the relationship between the variable and the items (DeVellis 59): “Validity ... means that the individual’s scores from an instrument make sense, are meaningful, and enable ... the researcher ... to draw good conclusions from the sample ... to the population” (Creswell 169). Studies may be

invalid if they are poorly designed, if participants misunderstand the questions, or if the data does not result in useful predictions (171). Types of validity include content (item sampling adequacy), criterion (predictive usefulness), construct (a measure of the variable's behavior compared to its predicted behavior), and face (the items assess what they appear to assess; DeVellis 59-71).

In addition to using a questionnaire to obtain quantitative data, this project used focus groups and a semi-structured interview protocol to obtain qualitative data. Creswell defines a focus group interview as "the process of collecting data through interviews with a group of people, specifically four to six. The researcher asks a small number of general questions and elicits responses from all individuals in the group" (226). Focus groups are good for conducting a number of interviews simultaneously. Unlike quantitative instruments that use random sampling derived from statistical probability, focus groups use purposive sampling to select people who meet the criteria and attributes essential to the research (Sensing, *Qualitative Research* 82-83). Sensing suggests choosing a mix of people who are long-term stakeholders and newcomers with fresh perspectives. He also suggests choosing a purposive sample that varies in age, gender, marital status, and beliefs in order to get a richer set of data (83-84). Noting, however, that focus groups that consist of like-minded individuals tend to produce more free-flowing input, Sensing also recommends adding additional focus groups if diversity is needed (121).

Focus group researchers typically use an interview protocol to provide structure for the interview and to guide the data collection process. A semi-structured interview protocol consists of a statement about the purpose of the study, a discussion about confidentiality and discretion, and four or five brief, open-ended questions. The first

question in the protocol often serves as an icebreaker. The remaining questions address major research findings and questions from the quantitative data. The interview is semi-structured to allow the interviewer to ask follow-up questions to probe or elaborate on ideas (Creswell 233-35).

Qualitative researchers typically record focus group sessions and transcribe the sessions later. Researchers then analyze the data by coding the transcript in order to reduce a database of text into a set of themes about a central phenomenon. From this data, the researcher draws conclusions by making comparisons between the findings and the literature or, in the case of mixed-methods designs, by comparing the themes from the focus groups to the data from the questionnaire (Creswell 268).

### **Summary**

This literature review focused on the message of the prophets, the message of Isaiah, and hermeneutical and homiletical issues related to preaching from Old Testament prophetic texts. While the prophets are variously considered as predictors of the future, social critics, or even cranks, they were ultimately God's messengers to his people, spokesmen who called God's people to obedience. Scholars strongly disagree over the authorship of the book of Isaiah, with the majority of scholars over the past century seeing the book as the work of three different authors who lived in the eighth, sixth, and fifth centuries BC. However, a growing consensus believes that Isaiah's message should be interpreted in its canonical context. The literature review identifies at least twenty major themes, seven of which are observed repeatedly by various scholars.

In addition to the authorship of Isaiah, other significant hermeneutical issues include the questions of how to interpret Old Testament passages in light of the New

Testament and how to interpret poetry, figurative language, and various prophetic sub-genres. The question of interpreting prophetic passages in light of the New Testament is closely connected to whether preachers see the prophets more as predictors of the future or as critics of their society. Scholars offer various means of preaching Old Testament passages, from redemptive-historical to prophecy and fulfillment to Bos' four lenses of Scripture. While scholars may disagree over the number and the importance of various prophetic sub-genres, preachers should know how to interpret the major forms such as judgment oracles against God's people, judgment oracles against the foreign nations, woe oracles, promises of salvation and hope, apocalyptic, and predictive prophecy.

Major homiletical issues include learning how to preach prophetic texts, how to apply those texts, and how to preach prophetically. Scholars of different backgrounds offer similar approaches for moving from a prophetic text to a sermon, although the number of steps in each author's estimation varies. Homileticians also emphasize finding the relevance of a biblical passage for today by focusing on the original author's message, finding similarities between the original audience and today's listeners, and remembering that God is the primary focus of every sermon. Pastors and homileticians who offer advice on preaching prophetically today recommend preaching with a high view of the importance of Scripture, preaching messages that rebuke sin while offering the promise of salvation, and preaching from the perspective of love, not judgment.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Problem and Purpose**

Preaching from the Old Testament prophets is seriously lacking in many American churches today. Various reasons are suggested for this discouraging situation. Some preachers find the prophets too confusing. Other preachers struggle to establish the relevancy of the prophets' message for contemporary audiences. Still other preachers have had their faith in the authority of the Old Testament weakened by historical criticism. Finally, some preachers may simply find the prophets to be too "cranky" for modern audiences (Ortberg 48).

However, the New Testament writers quoted frequently from the Old Testament prophets and believed the prophets' messages to be useful for pointing to and teaching about Jesus. Paul notes that all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching Christians, a point that was largely limited to the Old Testament at that time (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Peter notes that the prophets did not make up their messages but spoke as directed by the Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20-21).

Given the challenges of preaching from the prophets as well as the significant need for such preaching, this project focused on demonstrating the relevance of Isaiah's message for contemporary audiences today. The purpose of this research project was to measure the cognitive and affective changes in the worship participants of Ross Christian Church during a seven-week sermon series from the book of Isaiah.



## **Research Questions**

Four research questions were selected to guide this research project. Two questions focused on the participants' pre- and post-series knowledge of the message of Isaiah. Two of the questions measured the participants' pre- and post-series affective response to Isaiah's message. These four research questions were measured with a researcher-designed, Likert-scaled instrument as well as with a semi-structured interview protocol in focus groups.

### **Research Question #1**

What is the participants' knowledge of the message of Isaiah before hearing this sermon series? The answer to this question provides a baseline for comparing the participants' cognitive understanding of Isaiah's message before and after the sermon series. Respondents were asked to note on a Likert scale their understanding of Isaiah's message.

### **Research Question #2**

What is the participants' knowledge of the message of Isaiah after hearing this sermon series? The answer to this question documents the changes in the participants' knowledge and understanding of the message of Isaiah. Respondents were asked to note on a Likert scale how the sermon series changed their understanding of Isaiah's message. Answers to focus group questions added further insights for this research question.

### **Research Question #3**

What are the participants' affective responses to the message of Isaiah before hearing this sermon series? The answer to this question provides a baseline for comparing the participants' acceptance of and attitude towards Isaiah's message. Respondents were

asked to note on a Likert scale how they felt about certain themes in Isaiah's message prior to hearing the sermon series.

#### **Research Question #4**

What are the participants' affective responses to the message of Isaiah after hearing this sermon series? The answer to this question documents changes in the congregation's acceptance of the message of Isaiah. Respondents were asked to note on a Likert scale how the sermon series changed the way they felt about the key themes of Isaiah's message. Answers to focus group questions added additional insights for this research question.

#### **Population and Participants**

The population for this study consisted of all participants age 16 and above who attended Sunday morning worship at Ross Christian Church at least twice monthly during the period of the sermon series. The list of attendees was developed from a church mailing list with input from the elders who would be aware of which attendees fit this criterion. I focused on attendees age 16 and above partly because of the small size of the population and partly because I wanted to see how older teenagers would relate to Isaiah's message. I limited participation to members and visitors who attend at least twice a month in order to increase the chances that participants would hear at least half of the sermons in the series. The age of the survey respondents ranged from 16 to 80. The members of the focus groups were in their 20s through 70s. Focus group members were selected purposefully to provide a mix of age, gender, and spiritual maturity.

### **Design of the Study**

This project employed an explanatory, mixed-methods design using both quantitative and qualitative tools for data collection. A pre-series/post-series protocol using a Likert-scaled questionnaire was employed to observe the changes in the participants' knowledge of and affective responses to sermons preached from Isaiah. Additionally, I met with two focus groups before, during, and after the sermon series to gain deeper insight into these changes. Each focus group consisted of a purposeful sample of six to seven regular attendees of Ross Christian Church.

Worship attendees were notified from the pulpit of the upcoming sermon series and the research project for two weeks prior to the start of the series. All regular attendees of the church age 16 and above received the pre-series questionnaire with instructions by mail one week prior to the start of the series.

I then preached a seven-week series on the major themes of Isaiah's message using an expository approach to seven major passages. After the series, all regular attendees of the church age 16 and above were mailed another copy of the questionnaire and asked to complete it. They were asked to mail the questionnaire back to the church office in a pre-addressed, stamped envelope. During the week prior to the last sermon, I conducted a final semi-structured interview consisting of four questions with each focus group. While I should have conducted the final focus group interviews after the final sermon, travel plans and schedules for several members forced me to conduct the final interviews a week early.

## Instrumentation

Two research instruments were used in this project. I used a researcher-designed, Likert-scaled instrument to measure the pre- and post-series changes in the participants' knowledge of and affective responses to Isaiah's message. The instrument focused on questions concerning the seven major themes of the sermon series. The pre- and post-series instrument consisted of a number of close-ended questions to be answered on a five-point Likert scale.

The questionnaire gathered quantitative data to measure the cognitive and affective scales related to the four research questions. I began the process by determining that I wanted to measure the change in the participants' knowledge of and affective responses to the message of Isaiah based on hearing the sermon series.

Next, I began generating an item pool for the knowledge and affective scales. I wrote as many items as I could with a goal of establishing an initial pool of ninety-eight items. I estimated that this figure would give me an initial pool of forty-nine items per scale or fourteen items per theme.

I decided to use a Likert scale for the questionnaire because Likert scales work well for measuring attitudes and beliefs (DeVellis 93). I ensured that each question was worded clearly and strongly and that each item asked only one question. I chose to use five possible responses, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Using an odd number of responses allows for the overuse of the middle response, *neutral*, but I believed this risk was acceptable given the nonpersonal (i.e., safe) nature of most of the items (DeVellis 93). To keep respondents from being lulled into a routine, I reversed scored 11.9 percent of the items (see items marked by an asterisk in Chapter 4).

I next had the item pool reviewed by experts before administering it to a group of twenty-five adults in a nearby church as a developmental sample (DeVellis 101-02). Based on their feedback, I removed or revised items from the initial pool based on a lack of clarity or of face or construct validity. This step reduced the number of items from ninety-eight to eighty-four for a total of six knowledge and affect items per theme (see Appendix B).

The second research instrument was a semi-structured interview protocol. I asked two focus groups of six to seven people each their opinions on four questions. The questions were designed to flesh out the data obtained from the pre- and post-series questionnaires. I began each interview with a relatively easy question to get the session going. During the first focus group interviews, I focused primarily on the participants' knowledge of and exposure to Isaiah and the prophets. During subsequent interviews, I focused more on the participants' knowledge and application insights gained from the sermons. Because I used a semi-structured interview protocol, I followed up their responses as necessary to prompt further responses, to clarify questions for those who might need clarification, and to help the participants develop their responses more fully.

### **Expert Review**

Since the instrument was researcher-designed, I conducted an expert review before collecting the data. The expert review panel consisted of my dissertation mentor (a preaching professor) and my internal reader (an Old Testament professor). After obtaining their input, I made changes to ensure that the knowledge questions focused on the biblical text for each sermon while the affect questions measured personal attitudes and reactions to each of Isaiah's themes.

**Pilot Test**

I first administered a draft of the questionnaire to fifteen social workers of various levels of spiritual maturity to gather initial feedback to the questionnaire. I then administered the pre-series questionnaire to twenty-five members of my previous church to establish face validity. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaires and to note any of the questions or instructions that seemed confusing. I made minor changes to the instrument based on their input.

**Variables**

The independent variable was the seven-week sermon series on the major themes of Isaiah. Each sermon was based on a single passage and used a style of preaching that explained, applied, and illustrated the passage. The dependent variables were the participants' cognitive and affective responses to Isaiah's message. Intervening variables included my preaching as an interim pastor and inconsistent summer worship attendance. I attempted to minimize the impact of my newcomer status by preceding the series with a seven-week study of Jesus' parables. Given that many people enjoy sermons from the Gospels, I thought this seven-week period of preaching well-known passages would give the congregation an opportunity to warm up to me and to my preaching style. I attempted to minimize the impact of inconsistent worship attendance by encouraging the congregation to make attendance a priority during the series.

**Reliability and Validity**

I was unable to establish reliability for this study using Chronbach's alpha. However, I was able to establish both context and face validity. I established context validity by first identifying seven major themes from an extensive review of the literature

on Isaiah's themes. Additionally, an Old Testament scholar vetted the selection of these themes. I established face validity by creating a pilot test for the questionnaire. I first submitted it to my mentor and secondary reader for approval and then administered it to a group of twenty-five members of another church for feedback.

### **Data Collection**

I began preparation for collecting the quantitative data by asking the secretary for a mailing list of all regular attendees age 16 or older. I checked the accuracy of this list by asking both the elders to delete anyone whom they knew were no longer attending at least monthly. This list resulted in approximately ninety-five names.

I then prepared a cover letter that explained the importance of this instrument and included instructions for its completion. I asked participants to mail the instrument back to the church office via a pre-addressed, stamped envelope. I also asked participants to self-identify with the first initial of their mother's maiden name and the last four digits of their social security number. I gave participants a week to complete the instrument. I reminded them to turn in their surveys through pulpit announcements, e-mails, and bulletin announcements.

In order to minimize the impact of inconsistent attendance, I asked each participant to indicate his or her attendance anonymously on a 3x5 index card inserted in each week's bulletin. The 3x5 card included the sermon title and passage for that particular week, as well as a place with instructions for each participant to write his or her personal code. Each week, ushers collected the cards during the offering. This practice allowed me to compare each participant's attendance with his or her answers on the post-

series instrument, thus allowing for a better correlation of sermon hearing to changes in knowledge and affect.

Upon completion of the sermon series, I prepared another cover letter that explained the importance of the instrument. I mailed the cover letter and instrument to everyone who received the original instrument. I asked them to complete the questionnaire and mail the results back to the church office within a week. I also asked them to include their personal identification code on the post-series questionnaire.

Prior to the sermon series, I identified a list of eighteen potential members of the focus groups, ensuring that the list contained both men and women of various ages. Potential members were selected with input from the elders to ensure a mix of key stakeholders, members, and relative newcomers. I then asked members on the list if they would be willing to be part of the focus group process. The initial group of eighteen possible candidates was reduced to two focus groups of six to seven members each. I met with each focus group on three occasions. On each occasion, I asked four open-ended questions designed to explore the members' understanding of the content and themes of Isaiah's message.

### **Data Analysis**

After receiving the quantitative data, I calculated the change in scores and the standard deviation for each question. I compared changes in individual test results by comparing each test's unique participant code.

I analyzed the quantitative data for reliability by comparing each participant's changes in knowledge and affect for each question. I analyzed the qualitative data from the focus group and from the weekly question-and-answer sessions by using content



analysis to identify the major themes represented. I searched through the transcription to identify common themes, which I then coded and categorized. After identifying common themes, I coded these themes into general statements that allowed me to analyze the data. I then observed the frequency of these statements.

### **Ethical Procedures**

All participants were informed of the confidential nature of both the quantitative questionnaire and the focus group protocol. In order to protect the identities of participants, personnel completing the questionnaire were instructed not to include their names. Instead, individuals were asked to self-identify with the first letter of their mothers' maiden names and the last four digits of their Social Security number. No space was allowed for a name. Participants in the focus group were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and that their identities would not be disclosed. Participants completed an informed consent form (see Appendix F). Upon completion of the study, I shredded all questionnaire responses and focus group notes. I also erased the recordings of the focus groups.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Problem and Purpose**

The Old Testament prophetic books account for 28 percent of the Scripture that Paul states is inspired by God and useful for teaching (2 Tim. 3:16). Accepting his premise as true, the corollary should also be true—that God can use a sermon series preached from the prophets today to prepare his people for good works (2 Tim. 3:17). However, the Old Testament prophets remain fairly obscure to many American congregations today, either due to preachers' difficulties in interpreting these books or to a perceived irrelevance of the prophets' message for modern audiences (Gibson, "Challenges" 21, 24). Therefore, the purpose of this research project was to measure the cognitive and affective changes in the worship participants of Ross Christian Church during a seven-week sermon series from the book of Isaiah.

#### **Participants**

The pre- and post-sermon series questionnaires were mailed to all worshippers age 16 and above of Ross Christian Church who attended worship at least twice a month. Twenty-six people (27.3 percent of those who met the worship attendance criteria) chose to participate by turning in both the pre-series and post-series questionnaires and by attending at least four of the seven sermons. Of these twenty-six subjects, nine were male and seventeen were female. The age of these respondents ranged from one participant in her 30s to two participants in their 80s. The median age range for these participants was 60-69. All of these participants identified themselves as Christians. One participant stated she has been a Christian for ten years or less. Two participants stated they have been

Christians between eleven to twenty years, with the remaining participants (92 percent) stating they have been Christians for over twenty years.

Table 4.1 indicates the attendance during each sermon for the twenty-six participants in the study. During this series, attendance varied from nineteen to twenty-four participants with an average attendance of 21.43 participants (82.4 percent).

**Table 4.1. Series Attendance for Participants (n=26)**

Sermon Topic	Date	Attendance
God's judgment of sin	2 June 2013	24
God's holiness	9 June 2013	21
Trusting God	16 June 2013	22
The remnant	23 June 2013	23
God's sovereign control	7 July 2013	19
The suffering servant	14 July 2013	20
Eschatology	21 July 2013	21

While each of the members of the focus group interviews was also a regular attender of Ross Christian Church, I did not ensure that each of the focus group participants had responded to the survey as well. Thus, my focus group participants were not a true sub-set of my survey participants. Given the potential for confusion, further discussions about the quantitative data will refer to individuals as *participants* while discussions about the qualitative data will refer to individuals as *focus group members*. I met with two teams of focus group members on three occasions during the project. The

teams were mixed by gender but segregated by age. Table 4.2 gives the demographic information for focus group members for each meeting.

**Table 4.2. Demographic Information and Attendance for Focus Group Members**

<b>Member by Gender</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>First Meeting</b>	<b>Second Meeting</b>	<b>Third Meeting</b>
Female	30-39	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male	40-49	Yes	Yes	Yes
Female	40-49	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male	40-49	Yes	No	Yes
Male	40-49	Yes	No	Yes
Male	20-29	Yes	Yes	No
Female	70-79	Yes	Yes	Yes
Female	70-79	Yes	No	Yes
Male	70-79	Yes	Yes	Yes
Female	70-79	Yes	Yes	Yes
Female	40-49	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male	50-59	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male	70-79	Yes	No	Yes

### **Pre-Sermon Series Knowledge of Isaiah's Message**

The first research question measured participants' knowledge of the message of Isaiah prior to hearing this sermon series. The following tables present the mean and standard deviation for the six items used in each scale to assess participants' prior knowledge of the themes of Isaiah. Tables are identified and discussed according to each of the seven major themes in Isaiah's message (i.e., God's judgment of sin, God's holiness, trusting God, the remnant, God's sovereign control over history and the nations,

the suffering servant, and eschatology). The number included with each item (i.e., 1) identifies the item's location on the pre- and post-series questionnaires (see Appendix C).

### **God's Judgment of Sin**

Six of the eighty-four questionnaire items measured participants' responses to the theme of God's judgment of sin. Mean scores varied from 2.88 to 4.88. Standard deviations varied from 0.33 to 1.48 (see Table 4.3).

**Table 4.3. Pre-Series Knowledge—God's Judgment of Sin (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
1. Sin brings painful consequences in this life.	4.65	0.56
*18. It is impossible to worship God regularly, yet be far from him spiritually.	2.88	1.42
35. The Lord hates worship that does not come from an obedient heart.	4.38	0.80
49. Sin requires some type of punishment to remove guilt.	3.04	1.48
67. The Lord promises to forgive those who repent of their sins.	4.88	0.33
72. Despite his loving care, God's people often turn their backs on him.	4.04	0.92

\* This item is reversed scored.

### **God's Holiness**

Six items measured participants' responses to the theme of God's holiness. Mean scores varied from 3.27 to 4.85. Standard deviations varied from .33 to 1.09 (see Table 4.4).

**Table 4.4. Pre-Series Knowledge—God’s Holiness (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
3. God’s holiness means that he is different from anything in his creation.	4.62	0.80
15. God’s holiness means he is absolutely pure.	4.85	0.37
30. When people see God’s moral purity, they are overcome by their sinfulness.	4.19	1.06
42. Serving God can lead to painful rejection from people.	4.04	0.96
50. When faced with God’s moral purity, humans become aware of their need for divine grace.	4.38	0.85
*71. Most people respond positively to God’s message of grace.	3.27	1.08

\* This item is reversed scored.

### Trusting God

The following six items measured participants’ knowledge of Isaiah’s theme of trusting God. Mean scores varied from 3.54 to 4.69. Standard deviations varied from 0.47 to 1.39 (see Table 4.5).

**Table 4.5. Pre-Series Knowledge—Trusting God (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
*5. God wants people to work their problems out on their own.	4.31	1.09
25. Those who rely on their own strength rather than God will be disappointed.	4.58	0.70
31. God’s people are called to trust him even when their circumstances seem bleak.	4.69	0.47
44. God’s people are often tempted to look to sources other than God for deliverance.	3.54	1.39
51. To trust in the Lord means to rely on him with confident hope.	4.65	0.49
64. Recognizing how God has worked in the past leads to trusting him today.	4.50	0.51

\* This item is reversed scored.

## The Remnant

Six of the items measured participants' knowledge of Isaiah's theme of the remnant. Mean scores varied from 3.35 to 4.69. Standard deviations varied from 0.55 to 1.39 (see Table 4.6).

**Table 4.6. Pre-Series Knowledge—The Remnant (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
6. God allows people to suffer as a result of their sins.	3.38	1.39
16. The Lord promises comfort, not judgment, to his faithful followers.	3.35	1.38
38. The Lord comforts his people with promises of a future deliverance from pain.	4.65	0.85
52. Although God allows his people to suffer for their sins, he will comfort them.	4.27	0.72
69. God will not forget his people forever.	4.50	0.91
76. Although circumstances might dictate otherwise, God's promises will not fail.	4.69	0.55

## God's Sovereignty over History and the Nations

The following items measured participants' knowledge of Isaiah's theme of God's sovereignty over history and the nations. Mean scores varied from 4.0 to 4.77, the tightest of all prior knowledge scales. Standard deviations varied from 0.43 to 1.13 (see Table 4.7).

**Table 4.7. Pre-Series Knowledge—God’s Sovereignty (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
7. Because God is powerful, he is able to take care of those who trust him.	4.50	0.86
17. God is in control over the events of history.	4.00	1.13
26. God is greater than any force that threatens his people.	4.77	0.43
39. Those who trust in the Lord will find strength to overcome their circumstances.	4.69	0.47
46. Despite terrible events such as the Holocaust, God is in control of history.	4.54	0.65
78. God gives strength to those who trust in him.	4.65	0.49

### The Suffering Servant

Six items measured participants’ knowledge of Isaiah’s theme of the suffering servant. Mean scores varied from 3.54 to 4.77. Standard deviations varied from 0.5 to 1.5 (see Table 4.8).

**Table 4.8. Pre-Series Knowledge—The Suffering Servant (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
*12. Someone can be “right with God” (i.e., righteous) based on their own moral goodness.	4.46	0.86
23. God suffered on behalf of sinners to provide them a way to be saved from their sins.	4.77	0.43
53. God accomplishes his salvation purposes through ways that seem weak to humans.	3.69	1.19
*60. God punishes bad people and rewards good people in this life.	3.77	1.11
*70. Sinners are judged innocent because of their obedience to God’s moral requirements.	3.54	1.50
79. Those who have accepted God’s sacrificial love should serve others in turn.	4.62	0.50

\* This item is reverse scored.



## Eschatology

The following six items measured participants' knowledge of Isaiah's theme of eschatology. Mean scores varied from 2.88 to 4.88. Standard deviations varied from 0.33 to 1.42 (see Table 4.9).

**Table 4.9. Pre-Series Knowledge—Eschatology (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
4. There will come a day when people will no longer die young.	2.88	1.42
14 One day God will create a new heaven and a new earth for his faithful followers.	4.46	0.86
*29. The prophets focused more on the end times than the immediate future of their people.	3.04	1.15
37. One day those who trust God will be blessed beyond measure.	4.88	0.33
54. One day God will punish forever those who are unfaithful to him.	4.50	0.99
74. God promises that one day death will no longer have control over believers.	4.50	0.71

\* This item is reverse scored.

## Pre-Sermon Series Focus Group Responses

Focus group members expressed interest both in learning the content of Isaiah's message and in learning how to apply Isaiah's message to their lives today. Members varied in how much they felt they understood Isaiah's message, but most expressed an interest in learning more. Specifically, several members hoped to gain a better knowledge of Isaiah's message in general while others looked forward to gaining a deeper knowledge of specific passages. For example, one person stated, "Sometimes I read a passage and I don't understand one thing out of it." Another member hoped to learn more about the life and faith of Isaiah, the prophet. She stated, "I'd like to understand all that he went through to keep his faith and to be strong. That just amazes me." Additionally,

focus group members expressed mixed responses as to how much knowledge they retained from hearing previous sermon series from the prophetic books. For example, most of the older members could recall hearing a Sunday evening sermon series on Isaiah approximately five years earlier but stated that it focused almost entirely on content rather than application. Both younger and older members could recall hearing a sermon series on Malachi approximately two years earlier but again complained that the series focused more on content than on life application. When pressed further, several members' expressed concern that this Isaiah series would also be "boring." For example, one woman stated that her first impression upon hearing about the sermon series was, "Why would he choose that?" Another woman stated, "Yeah, I was kind of anxious myself." A young man admitted that he was concerned when he heard about the series because it reminded him of an Old Testament course he had taken in college: "That was a long and boring class!" While a few members admitted complete confusion and two members expressed a general confidence in their knowledge of Isaiah, most members stated that they would like to learn the details of Isaiah's message, how his message fit into the overall story of the Bible, and how to apply his message to their lives.

### **Post-Sermon Series Knowledge of Isaiah's Message**

The second research question looked for changes in the participants' understanding of Isaiah's message after hearing this sermon series. The data is organized into seven sections with tables according to the seven major themes of Isaiah's message. Each table includes six items from the questionnaire in Appendix C along with each item's pre- and post-series mean scores and standard deviations as well as the change in standard deviations between the pre- and post-series questionnaires.

### God's Judgment of Sin

Participants' knowledge of Isaiah's message of human sinfulness remained fairly constant. Mean scores increased for three items (# 18, 35, and 49), decreased for two items (1 and 67), and remained the same for one item (72). Standard deviations increased for four items (1, 18, 49, and 67), decreased for one item (35), and remained the same for one item (72; see Table 4.10).

**Table 4.10. Post-Series Knowledge—God's Judgment of Sin (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD	Post-Series M	Post-Series SD	Change in SD
1. Sin brings painful consequences in this life.	4.65	0.56	4.46	0.99	.30
*18. It is impossible to worship God regularly, yet be far from him spiritually.	2.88	1.42	3.19	1.63	.25
35. The Lord hates worship that does not come from an obedient heart.	4.38	0.80	4.58	0.76	0
49. Sin requires some type of punishment to remove guilt.	3.04	1.48	3.35	1.52	.03
67. The Lord promises to forgive those who repent of their sins.	4.88	0.33	4.69	0.47	.15
72. Despite his loving care, God's people often turn their backs on him.	4.04	0.92	4.04	0.92	0

\* This item is reverse scored.

This theme was meaningful for several focus group members. One person said, "This series just confirms for me that Isaiah is relevant.... [I]t has confirmed for me that the sins they struggle with are the same ones that we struggle with." Another member stated that this sermon was very thought provoking, especially the idea that God hates worship that comes from a disobedient heart.

## God's Holiness

Participants increased in their knowledge of God's holiness as discussed in Isaiah 6. Mean scores increased for four items (15, 30, 42, and 71) and remained constant for two items (3 and 50). Standard deviations increased for one item (3) and decreased for five items (see Table 4.11).

**Table 4.11. Post-Series Knowledge—God's Holiness (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD	Post-Series M	Post-Series SD	Change in SD
3. God's holiness means that he is different from anything in his creation.	4.62	0.80	4.62	0.98	.19
15. God's holiness means he is absolutely pure.	4.85	0.37	4.92	0.27	.05
30. When people see God's moral purity, they are overcome by their sinfulness.	4.19	1.06	4.31	0.88	.18
42. Serving God can lead to painful rejection from people.	4.04	0.96	4.23	0.76	.2
50. When faced with God's moral purity, humans become aware of their need for divine grace.	4.38	0.85	4.38	0.80	.05
*71. Most people respond positively to God's message of grace.	3.27	1.08	3.38	0.90	.18

\* This item is reverse scored.

Several focus group members remarked that they liked the fact that my sermon for this theme covered all of Isaiah 6 and not just the first eight verses that focus on Isaiah's call. One person stated, "Remembering the holiness of God should cause us to slow down and humble ourselves in prayer. Isaiah had an incredibly humbling moment in God's presence." Another member was surprised at how this message on God's holiness matched similar teaching in the New Testament. She was also impressed to learn how much Isaiah seems to cover the same themes as the New Testament.

## Trusting God

Members' understanding of Isaiah's theme of trusting God remained the same. Mean scores increased for two items (31 and 51), decreased for two items (5 and 44), and remained constant for two items (25 and 64). Standard deviations increased for three items (25, 44, and 64) and decreased for three items (5, 31, and 51; see Table 4.12).

**Table 4.12. Post-Series Knowledge—Trusting God (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD	Post-Series M	Post-Series SD	Change in SD
*5. God wants people to work their problems out on their own.	4.31	1.09	4.27	1.08	.01
25. Those who rely on their own strength rather than God will be disappointed.	4.58	0.70	4.58	0.76	.06
31. God's people are called to trust him even when their circumstances seem bleak.	4.69	0.47	4.73	0.45	.02
44. God's people are often tempted to look to sources other than God for deliverance.	3.54	1.39	3.42	1.45	.06
51. To trust in the Lord means to rely on him with confident hope.	4.65	0.49	4.73	0.45	.04
64. Recognizing how God has worked in the past leads to trusting him today.	4.50	0.51	4.50	0.76	.25

\* This item is reverse scored.

Like Isaiah's original audience, members seemed to struggle with understanding God's desire that humans place their trust in him rather than in themselves. However, the general themes of trusting God and of God's sovereign control of history were major highlights for focus group members. Another person stated, "It's a good reminder to take your problem before God and humble yourself. The king knew he couldn't do it on his own and he knew that the king of Assyria had come with more than he could handle."

Other participants were amazed to learn that God sent an angel in response to Hezekiah's prayer.

### **The Remnant**

Members increased in their understanding of God's care for the remnant of Israel. Mean scores increased for four items (6, 16, 52, and 69) and decreased for two items (38 and 76). Standard deviations increased for three items (16, 38, and 76) and decreased for three items (6, 52, and 69; see Table 4.13).

**Table 4.13. Post-Series Knowledge—The Remnant (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD	Post-Series M	Post-Series SD	Change in SD
6. God allows people to suffer as a result of their sins.	3.38	1.39	3.88	1.14	.25
16. The Lord promises comfort, not judgment, to his faithful followers.	3.35	1.38	3.38	1.58	.20
38. The Lord comforts his people with promises of a future deliverance from pain.	4.65	0.85	4.46	1.10	.25
52. Although God allows his people to suffer for their sins, he will comfort them.	4.27	0.72	4.65	0.56	.17
69. God will not forget his people forever.	4.50	0.91	4.62	0.70	.21
76. Although circumstances might dictate otherwise, God's promises will not fail.	4.69	0.55	4.65	0.56	.01

Focus group members were encouraged by Isaiah's message that believers can trust God to keep his promises even when circumstances appear to be bleak. One person remarked, "That's something that sometimes I forget. I think have to control my situations and I have to sit down and say, 'God knows what's best.' It's very hard to relax and put total trust into what's going to happen." Another man commented that he was

encouraged to remember that God can be trusted to keep his promises because his word is everlasting.

### **God's Sovereignty over History and the Nations**

Participants increased in their understanding of God's sovereign control over the nations and history. Mean scores increased for four items (7, 17, 39, and 78), decreased for one item (26), and remained the same for one item (46). Standard deviations increased for two items (26 and 46) and decreased for four items (7, 17, 39, and 78; see Table 4.14).

**Table 4.14. Post-Series Knowledge—God's Sovereignty (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD	Post-Series M	Post-Series SD	Change in SD
7. Because God is powerful, he is able to take care of those who trust him.	4.50	0.86	4.62	0.70	.16
17. God is in control over the events of history.	4.00	1.13	4.31	1.01	.12
26. God is greater than any force that threatens his people.	4.77	0.43	4.73	0.67	.24
39. Those who trust in the Lord will find strength to overcome their circumstances.	4.69	0.47	4.73	0.45	.02
46. Despite terrible events such as the Holocaust, God is in control of history.	4.54	0.65	4.54	0.76	.11
78. God gives strength to those who trust in him.	4.65	0.49	4.69	0.47	.02

Focus group members expressed strong interest in God's sovereignty as it relates to their personal lives. One member stated that "learning that God is in control" was a major highlight for him. Another person commented, "One of the reasons we can trust God is because he will always does what's best, even though we don't realize it at the

time.... [T]hings always work out if we put them in God's hands." Other focus group members echoed these comments about the importance of relearning (i.e., remembering) that God is sovereign and that he is in control of everything.

### **The Suffering Servant**

Participants increased in their understanding of the suffering servant. Mean scores increased for four items (23, 53, 60, and 70), decreased for one item (79), and remained constant for one item (12). Standard deviations increased for one items (53), decreased for three items (23, 60, and 70), and stayed constant for two items (12 and 79; see Table 4.15).

**Table 4.15. Post-Series Knowledge—The Suffering Servant (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD	Post-Series M	Post-Series SD	Change in SD
*12. Someone can be "right with God" (i.e., righteous) based on their own moral goodness.	4.46	0.86	4.46	0.86	0
23. God suffered on behalf of sinners to provide them a way to be saved from their sins.	4.77	0.43	4.85	0.37	.06
53. God accomplishes his salvation purposes through ways that seem weak to humans.	3.69	1.19	3.81	1.30	.11
*60. God punishes bad people and rewards good people in this life.	3.77	1.11	4.00	1.06	.05
*70. Sinners are judged innocent because of their obedience to God's moral requirements.	3.54	1.50	3.69	1.26	.24
79. Those who have accepted God's sacrificial love should serve others in turn.	4.62	0.50	4.58	0.50	0

\* This item is reverse scored.

Several focus group members expressed gratefulness in learning how the New Testament writers used Isaiah 53 as proof that Jesus was the suffering servant. One person was amazed to learn that Isaiah had prophesied about a suffering servant hundreds



of years before Jesus' death on the cross. Another member added that she liked this sermon the best because it seemed to bring the passage alive for her.

### Eschatology

Participants increased in understanding of Isaiah's theme of eschatology. Mean scores increased for five items and decreased for one item (37). Standard deviations increased for three items (29, 37, and 74) and decreased for three items (4, 14, and 54; see Table 4.16).

**Table 4.16. Post-Series Knowledge—Eschatology (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD	Post-Series M	Post-Series SD	Change in SD
4. There will come a day when people will no longer die young.	2.88	1.42	3.92	1.26	.16
14. One day God will create a new heaven and a new earth for his faithful followers.	4.46	0.86	4.77	0.65	.21
*29. The prophets focused more on the end times than the immediate future of their people.	3.04	1.15	3.35	1.29	.14
37. One day those who trust God will be blessed beyond measure.	4.88	0.33	4.77	0.43	.07
54. One day God will punish forever those who are unfaithful to him.	4.50	0.99	4.62	0.57	.42
74. God promises that one day death will no longer have control over believers.	4.50	0.71	4.58	0.90	.19

\* This item is reverse scored.

### Post-Sermon Series Quantitative Responses

Participants' knowledge of Isaiah's major themes increased as a result of hearing this sermon series. Participants increased in their knowledge of God's holiness, God's sovereign control over history and the nations, the remnant, the suffering servant, and

eschatology. Participants' knowledge of Isaiah's themes of God's judgment of sin and of trusting God remained constant.

### **Post-Sermon Series Focus Group Responses**

In general, while some focus group members stated that they had learned new knowledge about Isaiah from this series, most members felt that the series refreshed their memory of themes that also show up repeatedly in the New Testament. For example, members noted that all of these themes have corresponding themes in the New Testament. One woman stated, "I'm sorry I had to miss the first sermon. The next two sermons [God's holiness and trusting God] really helped me see how the New Testament authors say a lot of the same things that Isaiah said." Another member added, "As I was reading the Scriptures two Sundays ago, I realized, 'Oh, you know, I've read this before.'" When members stated that they had learned something new, their statements were generally related to the social-historical context of the book of Isaiah, such as clarifying chronology or explaining historical tensions with the Assyrians. One woman stated that she had never heard a sermon series from the prophets before, but this series has given her a "good education" and exposure to them. Additionally, several members expressed appreciation for how the sermon series helped them learn to apply Isaiah's message to their lives. One man commented that because of this series, he now thinks of the prophets more favorably.

### **Pre-Sermon Series Affective Response to Isaiah's Message**

The third research question sought to establish a baseline for participants' affective responses to the major themes of Isaiah's message.

### God's Judgment of Sin

Six items measured participants' initial affective responses to Isaiah's theme of God's judgment of sin. Mean scores varied from 3.85 to 4.81. Standard deviations varied from 0.40 to 1.29 (see Table 4.17).

**Table 4.17. Pre-Series Affect—God's Judgment of Sin (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
13. If I repent of my sins, God will forgive me.	4.81	0.40
*41. I know what is best for my life.	3.85	1.29
55. God loves me despite my sin.	4.58	0.70
62. God can forgive my darkest sin if I return to him.	4.77	0.43
75. A proper sense of guilt is good for me.	3.88	0.82
80. God wants my inward obedience more than my outward worship.	4.15	0.97

\* This item is reverse scored.

### God's Holiness

Six items on the questionnaire recorded participants' initial affective responses to Isaiah's theme of God's holiness. Mean scores varied from 3.23 to 4.69. Standard deviation scores varied from .47 to .91 (see Table 4.18).

**Table 4.18. Pre-Series Affect—God’s Holiness (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
10. If I understand God’s grace, I will serve him regardless of reward.	4.69	0.47
24. The closer I get to God spiritually, the more I recognize sin in my life.	4.54	0.58
36. The more I realize God’s grace in my life, the more I am willing to serve others.	4.54	0.51
56. My success in ministry is measured by my faithfulness to God’s calling.	4.23	0.91
63. My current behavior is pleasing to God.	3.23	0.76
83. I have been overwhelmed by a sense of God’s holiness.	4.54	.58

### Trusting God

Six items on the questionnaire recorded participants’ initial affective responses to Isaiah’s theme of trusting God. Mean scores for this theme varied from 4.42 to 4.65. Standard deviations varied from 0.49 to 0.58 (see Table 4.19).

**Table 4.19. Pre-Series Affect—Trusting God (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
8. I believe God will intervene in my life.	4.42	0.58
21. I can remember times when God has intervened in my life.	4.62	0.57
28. I believe God knows what is best for my life.	4.65	0.49
40. I trust God to answer my prayers according to his will.	4.65	0.56
57. I trust God to strengthen me against those who criticize my faith.	4.50	0.51
77. When I feel threatened, I take my concerns to God.	4.62	0.5

## The Remnant

Six items recorded participants' initial affective responses to Isaiah's theme of the remnant. Mean scores varied from 4.46 to 4.85 while standard deviations varied from 0.37 to 0.76 (see Table 4.20).

**Table 4.20. Pre-Series Affect—The Remnant (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
22. Although my circumstances may get bad, God's love endures forever.	4.85	0.37
32. When God allows bad things to happen to me, he still loves me.	4.73	0.53
45. When my life is dark, I trust God to rescue me.	4.46	0.76
58. I believe God loves me despite my circumstances.	4.54	0.71
65. I believe God cares about my situation even when I don't see him act in my life.	4.58	0.5
84. Although God may seem silent now, he will not abandon me.	4.81	0.40

## God's Sovereignty over History and the Nations

Six items recorded participants' initial affective responses to Isaiah's theme of God's sovereignty over history and the nations. Mean scores ranged from 3.38 to 4.81. Standard deviations varied from 0.40 to 1.33 (see Table 4.21).

**Table 4.21. Pre-Series Affect—God's Sovereignty (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
*11. I am in control of my life.	3.38	1.33
20. I believe God will get me through difficult times.	4.73	0.53
33. I believe God is still active in the world today.	4.73	0.53
43. I pray with confidence that God will act in my life.	4.54	0.51
59. When I think of God's creation, I am filled with awe at his power.	4.81	0.40
66. God has given me the strength to get through difficult circumstances.	4.73	0.60

\* This item is reverse scored.

### **The Suffering Servant**

Six items recorded participants' affective responses to Isaiah's theme of the suffering servant. Mean scores varied from 3.35 to 5. Standard deviations varied from 0 to 1.09 (see Table 4.22).

**Table 4.22. Pre-Series Affect—The Suffering Servant (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
*2. I am willing to serve others until they take me for granted.	3.35	1.09
19. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross demonstrates God's love for me.	5.00	0
27. Examples of fulfilled prophecy strengthen my faith.	4.42	0.64
47. I am amazed by Jesus' sacrifice for me.	4.92	0.27
73. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is God's way of making salvation possible for me.	4.88	0.33
82. Jesus was sacrificed for my sins so that I could be made whole.	4.85	0.37

\* This item is reverse scored.

## Eschatology

Six items recorded participants' affective responses to Isaiah's theme of eschatology. Except for item 61, the mean scores for this scale are grouped tightly from 4.62 to 4.88. Standard deviations varied from 0.33 to 0.70 (see Table 4.23).

**Table 4.23. Pre-Series Affect—Eschatology (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD
9. I believe heaven will be an indescribably beautiful place.	4.88	0.33
34. I believe one day I will see my Christian loved ones again in heaven.	4.81	0.40
48. I believe God has a better future waiting for me in heaven.	4.81	0.40
61. My belief in God's promises for a better tomorrow helps me stay strong today.	4.38	0.70
68. When I die, I will be with Jesus in heaven.	4.77	0.43
81. I believe a day is coming when I will never cry tears of sorrow again.	4.62	0.70

## Pre-Sermon Series Focus Group Responses

In general, focus group members' responses fell into two groups. Some members expressed interest in learning more about the content of Isaiah's message. An approximately equal number of members were more interested in seeing how Isaiah's themes would relate to their lives today. For example, when I asked members what they hoped to get out of this sermon series, one person stated, "A better knowledge of the prophets," while another one hoped to learn "something that would help me in my walk with the Lord." Overall, when focus group members could recall previous studies or sermon series on the prophets, the presentations focused more on content and history than

on application and relevance. One man stated, “Correct me if I’m wrong, but my feeling is when we did the Isaiah series on Sunday evenings, it was more about history than application. And sometimes we can spend a lot of time on that and no application.”

Several other members seconded his comments.

### **Post-Sermon Series Affective Response to Isaiah’s Message**

The final research question sought to assess changes in affective response to the major themes of Isaiah’s message after hearing this sermon series. The data is organized according to the seven major themes of Isaiah’s message.

#### **God’s Judgment of Sin**

Participants’ affective responses to the theme of God’s judgment of sin remained constant. Mean scores increased for three items (13, 41, and 75), decreased for two items (55 and 80), and remained constant for one item (62). Standard deviations increased for three items (55, 75, and 80), decreased for two items (13 and 41), and stayed the same for one item (62; see Table 4.24).

**Table 4.24. Post-Series Affect—God’s Judgment of Sin (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD	Post-Series M	Post-Series SD	Change in SD
13. If I repent of my sins, God will forgive me.	4.81	0.40	4.85	0.37	.03
*41. I know what is best for my life.	3.85	1.29	4.12	1.18	.11
55. God loves me despite my sin.	4.58	0.70	4.42	0.95	.25
62. God can forgive my darkest sin if I return to him.	4.77	0.43	4.77	0.43	0
75. A proper sense of guilt is good for me.	3.88	0.82	3.92	0.98	.16
80. God wants my inward obedience more than my outward worship.	4.15	0.97	3.92	1.26	.29

\* This item is reverse scored.



This sermon was particularly poignant for several focus group members. One woman stated that this sermon and the one on God's holiness brought out a great deal of buried guilt and forced her to look deep within herself. She said, "I'm one of those people that once you've given over your sins and gotten baptized, you still haven't forgiven yourself of the sins. That's very hard to do." As she broke down into tears, another woman comforted her by reminding her that if God had forgiven her, then she should be able to forgive herself as well. The second woman stated, "But the person you are now, you've gone through all this stuff and you have no idea the number of people who will cross your path in this journey that you'll be able to help." Two other members stated that they were deeply convicted by the idea that God hates worship that comes from disobedient hearts. One member agreed that this sermon made her question whether or not she has been coming to church out of habit rather than a strong desire to worship God.

### **God's Holiness**

Participants' affective responses to the theme of God's holiness increased. Mean scores increased for all six items. Standard deviations increased for three items (24, 56, and 83) and decreased for three items (10, 36, and 63; see Table 4.25).

**Table 4.25. Post-Series Affect—God’s Holiness (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD	Post-Series M	Post-Series SD	Change in SD
10. If I understand God’s grace, I will serve him regardless of reward.	4.69	0.47	4.77	0.43	.04
24. The closer I get to God spiritually, the more I recognize sin in my life.	4.54	0.58	4.65	0.63	.05
36. The more I realize God’s grace in my life, the more I am willing to serve others.	4.54	0.51	4.73	0.45	.06
56. My success in ministry is measured by my faithfulness to God’s calling.	4.23	0.91	4.27	1.12	.21
63. My current behavior is pleasing to God.	3.23	0.76	3.62	0.75	.01
83. I have been overwhelmed by a sense of God’s holiness.	4.54	0.58	4.65	0.63	.05

This sermon emphasized that God’s grace should lead Christians to serve him gladly despite potential opposition and lack of results (Isa. 6:9-13). One woman told a story of how she had been growing frustrated with the lack of volunteers to help with vacation Bible school. She said, “Well, for me the whole week before this sermon, I’ve been thinking about VBS. And it has been a struggle to get people to serve. I don’t think it was a coincidence that the message on that Sunday was about how God’s grace should cause us to want to serve him.” She was amazed by the number of people who volunteered to help immediately after hearing this sermon. Another person thought that Isaiah’s theme of holiness should be preached in every pulpit across America. In his opinion, “The world is going to hell in a hand basket. Today we live like God isn’t in control and we don’t care.” Several members agreed that the message of God’s holiness is missing today.

## Trusting God

Participants' affective responses to the theme of trusting God increased slightly. Mean scores increased for three items (8, 28 and 57) and remained constant for the other three items (21, 40, and 77). Standard deviations increased for two items (8, 77), decreased slightly for two items (28 and 57), and remained constant for two items (21 and 40; see Table 4.26).

**Table 4.26. Post-Series Affect—Trusting God (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre- Series SD	Post-Series M	Post- Series SD	Change in SD
8. I believe God will intervene in my life.	4.42	0.58	4.65	0.63	.05
21. I can remember times when God has intervened in my life.	4.62	0.57	4.62	0.57	0
28. I believe God knows what is best for my life.	4.65	0.49	4.69	0.47	.02
40. I trust God to answer my prayers according to his will.	4.65	0.56	4.65	0.56	0
57. I trust God to strengthen me against those who criticize my faith.	4.50	0.51	4.62	0.50	.01
77. When I feel threatened, I take my concerns to God.	4.62	0.50	4.62	0.57	.07

The sermon on trusting God strongly encouraged the focus group members. One member was particularly enthusiastic about the image of Hezekiah placing his own letter from the Assyrian king on the altar of the Lord. He stated, "It's not just that Hezekiah takes his prayer to God but he takes the actual document and lays it out on the altar. I just love that he ... says, "Here it is. Take care of it for me." Other members stated that some of their greatest highlights of the series involved remembering that God is in control and that they can trust him to keep his promises.

## The Remnant

Participants' affective responses towards the theme of the remnant increased.

Mean scores increased for four items (22, 32, 45, and 65) and remained constant for two items (58 and 84). Standard deviations decreased for five items (22, 32, 45, 58, and 65) and remained constant for one item (84; see Table 4.27).

**Table 4.27. Post-Series Affect—The Remnant (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD	Post-Series M	Post- Series SD	Change in SD
22. Although my circumstances may get bad, God's love endures forever.	4.85	0.37	4.88	0.33	.03
32. When God allows bad things to happen to me, he still loves me.	4.73	0.53	4.77	0.51	.02
45. When my life is dark, I trust God to rescue me.	4.46	0.76	4.54	0.58	.18
58. I believe God loves me despite my circumstances.	4.54	0.71	4.54	0.65	.06
65. I believe God cares about my situation even when I don't see him act in my life.	4.58	0.5	4.65	0.49	.01
84. Although God may seem silent now, he will not abandon me.	4.81	0.40	4.81	0.40	0

Focus group members expressed appreciation for seeing how God keeps his promises when circumstances seem to be bleak. Several people commented about how they had witnessed God doing so in their lives or in the lives of fellow church members. For example, one person stated, "I don't have any problem believing things like God is in control until I experience something that challenges that belief. I think experience is very important when you come to that crossroads when you have to trust God." Another person added that the primary thing she remembered from the second half of the sermon series was that God has promised to comfort his followers.

### God's Sovereignty over History and the Nations

Participants' affective responses to the theme of God's sovereignty over history and the nations increased slightly. Mean scores increased for four items (11, 20, 33, and 43), decreased for one item (66), and remained constant for one item (59). Standard deviations decreased for five items (11, 20, 33, 43, and 66), and remained constant for one item (59; see Table 4.28).

**Table 4.28. Post-Series Affect—God's Sovereignty (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre- Series SD	Post-Series M	Post- Series SD	Change in SD
*11. I am in control of my life.	3.38	1.33	4.04	1.31	.02
20. I believe God will get me through difficult times.	4.73	0.53	4.85	0.37	.16
33. I believe God is still active in the world today.	4.73	0.53	4.81	0.40	.13
43. I pray with confidence that God will act in my life.	4.54	0.51	4.65	0.49	.02
59. When I think of God's creation, I am filled with awe at his power.	4.81	0.40	4.81	0.40	0
66. God has given me the strength to get through difficult circumstances.	4.73	0.60	4.64	0.56	.04

\* This item is reverse scored.

Belief in God's sovereignty and the corollary of trusting God were major areas of relevance for focus group members. The man who expressed amazement earlier about Hezekiah's faith in God actually got to experience trusting God himself during this series. Approximately halfway through the series, he tore a ligament in his knee and his wife was fired from her job. However, they continued to express confidence in God's sovereign control and were highly blessed when the wife received a better job within a week. Other members spoke of how God took care of a church member whose declining health and poor family situation had nearly resulted in her death. However, through the

efforts of several members of the focus group and through God's blessings, this woman was able to receive Medicare assistance for assisted living. Another woman expressed gratefulness that her biopsy results for breast cancer were negative.

### **The Suffering Servant**

Participants' affective responses to the theme of the suffering servant remained constant. Mean scores increased for three items (2, 27, and 73) and decreased for three items (19, 47, and 82). Standard deviations increased for four items (2, 19, 47, and 82) and decreased for two items (27 and 72; see Table 4.29).

**Table 4.29. Post-Series Affect—The Suffering Servant (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre- Series SD	Post-Series M	Post- Series SD	Change in SD
*2. I am willing to serve others until they take me for granted.	3.35	1.09	3.38	1.24	.15
19. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross demonstrates God's love for me.	5.00	0	4.96	0.20	.20
27. Examples of fulfilled prophecy strengthen my faith.	4.42	0.64	4.58	0.50	.14
47. I am amazed by Jesus' sacrifice for me.	4.92	0.27	4.88	0.33	.06
73. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is God's way of making salvation possible for me.	4.88	0.33	4.92	0.27	.06
82. Jesus was sacrificed for my sins so that I could be made whole.	4.85	0.37	4.81	0.40	.03

\* This item is reverse scored.

Focus group members expressed varying responses to this theme. One older man said that predictive prophecy helped him feel more confident in defending his faith to those who might question it. A younger woman was surprised at how much the predictive prophecy in this passage had strengthened her faith. She was amazed to learn the specific

level of matching detail between Isaiah's prophecy of a suffering servant and the death of Jesus hundreds of years after this prophecy.

### Eschatology

Participants' affective responses to the theme of eschatology remained constant. Mean scores increased for three items (48, 61, and 81), decreased for two items (34 and 68), and remained constant for one item (9). Standard deviations increased for two items (34 and 68), decreased for three items (48, 61, and 81), and remained constant for one item (9; see Table 4.30).

**Table 4.30. Post-Series Affect—Eschatology (n=26)**

Items	Pre-Series M	Pre-Series SD	Post-Series M	Post-Series SD	Change in SD
9. I believe heaven will be an indescribably beautiful place.	4.88	0.33	4.88	0.33	0
34. I believe one day I will see my Christian loved ones again in heaven.	4.81	0.40	4.77	0.43	.03
48. I believe God has a better future waiting for me in heaven.	4.81	0.40	4.88	0.33	.07
61. My belief in God's promises for a better tomorrow helps me stay strong today.	4.38	0.70	4.58	0.50	.20
68. When I die, I will be with Jesus in heaven.	4.77	0.43	4.69	0.47	.04
81. I believe a day is coming when I will never cry tears of sorrow again.	4.62	0.70	4.69	0.68	.02

### Post-Sermon Series Quantitative Responses

Participants' affective responses to Isaiah's themes increased slightly. Affective responses increased for Isaiah's themes of God's holiness, trusting God, God's sovereignty over history and the nations, and the remnant. Affective responses to Isaiah's

themes of God's judgment of sin, the suffering servant, and eschatology remained constant.

### **Post-Sermon Series Focus Group Responses**

In general, focus group members expressed a strong appreciation for the relevance of this sermon series. One person stated, "Sometimes you see things that you've seen before but it doesn't really strike home until it relates to you." Another person exclaimed that he could definitely see portions of Isaiah "coming to life," especially in the application parts of each message. One participant stated, "[Isaiah's message] is relevant for today. I don't see any difference between two thousand years ago and now. I mean, the Word is there, the facts are there, and it applies to everything that's in our lives today." Another member commented, "I just see so many applications from the prophets that apply to today. And I think you brought several things out in your sermons that show how our society is a lot like theirs." When asked how relevant they thought this sermon series was to their lives, several people replied that they thought it was an "eight" or a "nine" on a scale of one to ten.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

There were three significant findings in this study:

1. Focus group members expressed a strong desire to understand Isaiah's message and to see its relevance for their lives.
2. Survey participants' knowledge of Isaiah's message increased as a result of hearing this sermon series.
3. Survey participants' affective responses to Isaiah's message increased slightly as a result of hearing this sermon series.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

My original intent for this dissertation was to take this opportunity to learn how to preach from the Old Testament prophetic books. Like the pastors described in Chapter 1, I wanted to learn how to interpret the prophets' message and how to preach that message in a relevant way. Beyond my own concerns for growth, however, I was also hesitant to preach from the prophets because of my doubts about the relevance of their message for today. However, like the scholars mentioned in Chapter 1, I felt a strong desire to see whether modern audiences would relate to sermons from the prophetic books that emphasized both content and relevance. Finally, as a homiletician dedicated to biblical preaching in general and to expository preaching by choice, I believed Paul's encouragement in 2 Timothy 3:14-17 that *all* Scripture is not only inspired by God but is also useful for teaching Christians and for training them in righteousness. Therefore, my purpose for this research project was to measure cognitive and affective changes in the worship participants of Ross Christian Church during a seven-week sermon series from the book of Isaiah.

### Major Findings

This study utilized an explanatory, mixed-methods design to measure quantitative and qualitative changes in the participants' knowledge of and affective responses to seven major themes of Isaiah's message. Approximately 27 percent of the worshippers who attended Ross Christian Church during the sermon series participated in the study by completing the pre- and post-series questionnaires and by hearing at least four of the sermons. The qualitative data indicates that focus group members showed a strong desire

to understand the content and to see the relevance of Isaiah's message for their lives. The quantitative data indicates that participants increased in their knowledge of and affective responses to Isaiah's themes. While direct causality cannot be proven, the qualitative data indicates that focus group members also increased in their knowledge of and affective responses to Isaiah's themes.

### **The Importance and Relevance of Preaching Isaiah's Message Today**

As mentioned previously, I was concerned that the participants in this study would react with indifference toward Isaiah's message. While several focus group members as well as other leaders of the church did express this concern initially, fortunately their fears and mine evaporated by the time of the mid-series focus group meetings. By the end of the series, several focus group members rated this series as highly relevant for their lives.

When I first presented the possibility of this sermon series during my interview with the search committee, all six members of the committee expressed concern about the relevance and the length of the series. Some of their fears were related to the idea of a sermon series from the prophetic books. At least three of the members could remember a Sunday evening sermon series on Isaiah within the past five years that focused more on content than on life application. Additionally, all of the committee members could recall a sermon series on Malachi within the past two years that also seemed to emphasize content over application. Finally, all of the committee members were concerned about the proposed length of the series, jokingly referring to a recent series that "seemed to last forever." Indeed, the relatively low participation rate in the study (27.4 percent) might reflect these concerns. However, based on my personal convictions about the importance

of Isaiah's message and the importance of biblical preaching that combines content with life application, I assured the committee that their concerns were unfounded.

My convictions were borne out by the findings of this study. While some focus group members did express concern about the series upon first hearing about it, the majority of them were interested in learning the content of Isaiah's message and how to apply his message to their lives today. Initially, focus group members appeared to be divided into two groups, with one group seemingly interested in learning more about Isaiah's message and the other group interested primarily in learning how to apply his message. Several focus group members complained that previous sermon series from the prophets focused more on explanation than application. Others seemed baffled by how to interpret the prophets in general.

However, by the midpoint of the sermon series, all focus group members were amazed by both the content and the applicability of Isaiah's message. Several members were visibly moved by Isaiah's message of sin and God's grace. Two women admitted struggling with their own guilt, another woman was thankful to learn that the ancient Israelites faced the same temptations that she faces, and several men and women expressed a strong desire to see Isaiah's message on sin and repentance taught more broadly in American churches. Additionally, the majority of members resonated with Isaiah's themes of trusting in God because of his sovereignty and his concern for his children. One man expressed thankfulness for the reminder that God will take care of his financial worries, while four other members witnessed God's sovereign care in other ways through temporary unemployment, health concerns, and providing for a sick woman in the congregation. One man was amazed by Hezekiah's faith in placing his

letter from the Assyrian commander before the altar of God, only to find himself in a similar situation when his wife lost her job. After the sermon on how God's grace should lead believers to serve him more willingly, the head of the vacation Bible school program was overwhelmed by people volunteering to serve. She said, "I don't think it was a coincidence that the message on that Sunday was about how God's grace should cause us to want to serve him." One woman seemed to sum up the overall thoughts of the group when she stated, "I just see so many applications from the prophets that apply to us today." Based on the qualitative data of this study, I believe many Christians in America today are hungry to hear a well-presented sermon series on the prophets that balances content and application.

The literature review supports this finding of the prophets' relevance for modern audiences. As Gibson notes, his doctor of ministry students often complain that many Old Testament texts do not appear to fit the current approach to felt-needs preaching (24). However, scholars point to the importance of applying the truths of biblical passages as the key to helping listeners see the relevance of Old Testament texts. For example, Miller states, "I know some of these preachers who are killing their churches with the dagger of dull homiletics.... The difference between a dull lecturer and a glorious preacher is all in the application" (50). Overdorf concurs, noting that preachers can demonstrate the relevance of a passage by showing how the central truth of the text—what God originally taught through the authors—is still relevant to listeners today. While applications may change from culture to culture, the central truths of God's Word do not change (102-03).

The biblical framework supports this finding of the prophets' relevance as well. Peter reminds his readers that the Old Testament prophecies did not come from the

prophets' imaginations but from God (2 Pet. 1:21). By analogy, preachers should encourage their hearers to pay close attention to what the prophets spoke. Paul concurs in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, stating that all Scripture—by which he probably meant the Hebrew Scriptures or the *Old Testament* of his day—are inspired by God and useful for teaching, correcting, and preparing believers for every good work. Paul encouraged Timothy to remain faithful to what he was taught because he could trust that the words of the Old Testament, including those of the prophets, represented the very words of God himself. By another analogy, preachers should be able to encourage their listeners to pay attention to the words of Isaiah and the prophets for the same reason today.

While preachers express various concerns for avoiding prophetic texts, a perceived lack of relevancy should not be among them. This research project affirms that when presented with sermons that balance the original meaning of the text with contemporary applications for today, Christians are hungry to hear from the prophets. Pastors who are considering preaching from the prophets might begin with Isaiah. Many scholars recommend preaching from the book of Isaiah because of its literary grandeur, its familiarity to audiences from Christmas sermons and New Testament citations, or its relevance for today's postmodern, individualistic audiences (Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah: 1-39* 3; *Isaiah* 55-64; Davis 91).

### **Increase in Knowledge of Isaiah's Themes**

When I began writing this dissertation, I felt certain that survey participants would increase in their knowledge of Isaiah's themes as a result of hearing this sermon series. After all, I believed I was only vaguely aware of the content of the book of Isaiah myself. Other than reading through the Old Testament several times and studying the

highlights of the book of Isaiah as part of a graduate course in the Old Testament prophets, my knowledge of Isaiah's themes was limited. The only sermons I could recall hearing from the book of Isaiah were occasional missions-themed sermons from Isaiah 6, Christmas sermons from Isaiah 9, and Easter sermons from Isaiah 53.

I was not the only one who felt ignorant of Isaiah's content. Participants stated that their exposure to Isaiah and the prophets was limited as well. When asked to identify the last time they heard a sermon series from any Old Testament prophet, nearly 46 percent of questionnaire respondents indicated they had last heard a sermon from the prophets about five years ago. Additionally, several focus group members stated that they struggled to understand the prophets and that they were looking forward to learning more about Isaiah's message.

Therefore, I was pleased to find that participants' knowledge of Isaiah's themes increased as a result of hearing this sermon series. For example, participants' knowledge of Isaiah's themes of God's holiness, God's sovereign control over history and the nations, the remnant, the suffering servant, and eschatology all increased. Participants' knowledge of Isaiah's themes of trusting God and God's care for the remnant remained constant.

Quantitative scores indicate that participants increased in their understanding of God's holiness, God's sovereignty, the remnant, the suffering servant, and eschatology. Four of the mean scores increased for questions concerning God's holiness, God's sovereignty, the remnant, and the suffering servant. Five out of six mean scores increased for questions about eschatology. Qualitative data augments these observations as well. Several members expressed appreciation that my sermon on Isaiah 6 covered the entire

chapter, including God's warning to Isaiah about the remnant, as many of the members had never heard a sermon on Isaiah 6 that extended past Isaiah's call in verse 8. Additionally, focus group members were thankful for the reminder that God's sovereignty means he is in control of their lives and that he will do what is best for them.

I was surprised to see that participants' knowledge of Isaiah's theme of human sinfulness remained constant. For example, participants' agreement with the statement that "sin requires some type of punishment to remove guilt" remained fairly low with a post-series mean of 3.35. Additionally, participants decreased in their agreement with the statements that "sin brings painful consequences in this life" and "the Lord promises to forgive those who repent of their sins." The answers to these items lead me to question how well these long-term Christians understand the gospel.

While I was pleased to find that participants' knowledge of Isaiah's themes increased, I expected that increase to be more significant. However, this situation may be due to the fact that the New Testament authors cite or allude to Isaiah so often. For example, while some focus group members stated they learned new information about Isaiah's content, most members stated that this series seemed to match themes they find in the New Testament. Additionally, several members expressed appreciation that this series helped them remember basic truths about God's Word.

The literature review supports this finding of increased participant knowledge. For example, several scholars note a general lack of familiarity in Western congregations with the Old Testament (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 15; Achtemeier, *Preaching* 21; Davis 91). However, scholars also note that Isaiah is a good prophetic book from which to preach because many audiences are generally familiar with its content due to the New

Testament writers' tendency to cite from Isaiah (Watts 111-13; Davis 91; Oswalt, *Isaiah* 17). Additionally, given that the prophets were primarily theological reformers whose main tasks included warning their generation and comforting future generations, one can see how long-term Christians would be generally familiar with Isaiah's themes (Laney 32; Fee and Stuart 167; Sailhammer 120-21).

The biblical framework supports this finding of increased knowledge as well. Peter reminds his readers that Christians must pay close attention to the Old Testament prophets because those words point to Christ and because they illuminate the darkness in people's lives (2 Pet. 1:19-21). Paul states that all Scripture is useful for teaching the content of the Christian faith and for equipping believers for good works (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

While participants' knowledge of Isaiah's themes did not increase as much as I had hoped, even a small increase warrants a commitment to preaching from the prophets. The prophets are part of the "all Scripture" that Paul states is useful for teaching believers the difference between right and wrong behavior. Since Christians today struggle with the same basic temptations to disobedience as did the prophets' original audiences, an increased commitment among pastors to preach from the prophets can have an important impact upon their hearer's behavior today.

### **Slight Increase in Affective Response to Isaiah's Themes**

Participants' affective responses to Isaiah's themes increased slightly as a result of hearing this sermon series. When I began writing this dissertation, I thought that if listeners could hear sermons that helped them see how their circumstances were similar



to those of the original hearers, then they would experience similar affective responses to Isaiah's message today. The data affirmed my belief.

Quantitatively, participants' affective responses increased to Isaiah's themes of God's holiness, with mean scores increasing for all seven items. Participants increased slightly in their affective response to the themes of trusting God, God's sovereignty over history and the nations, and the remnant, with each of these themes showing a mix of increases and decreases in mean scores. Participants' affective responses to Isaiah's themes of human sinfulness, the suffering servant, and eschatology remained constant.

Focus group members expressed strong appreciation for six of Isaiah's themes (due to a last-minute schedule change, I was not able to interview members about their reaction to Isaiah's theme of eschatology). Members reacted with tears and humility to Isaiah's themes of human sinfulness and God's holiness and with gratitude and amazement to Isaiah's themes of God's sovereignty and trusting God. Members expressed appreciation for how the sermon on the suffering servant strengthened their faith as well.

The literature review supports this finding of increased affective response. Oswalt believes Isaiah has "remarkable relevance" due to themes such as serving others and personal holiness, themes that resonated with focus group members (*Isaiah* 55-64). Sandy contends that the prophets had three roles—convicting people of sin, persuading them to return to God, and using prediction to make their message more convincing (130-31). Again, participants related strongly to these themes in this sermon series. While Ortberg asks, "Don't the prophets strike you as kind of cranky?," focus group members were overcome emotionally with Isaiah's themes of personal sin and God's holiness (48-

49). Finally, scholars such as Achtemeier (*Preaching* 52-56) and Sanders (338-41) note that preachers who help their audiences connect closely with the original audience's circumstances can help their audiences relate strongly to the passage's call on their own lives.

The biblical framework supports this finding of increased affective response as well. Peter mentions that the Old Testament prophets' message can strengthen believers' faith (2 Pet. 1:20-21), while Paul states that the Scriptures give believers wisdom to trust in Christ. More specifically, Paul contends that the Scriptures can convict believers of sin and convince them of the correct way to live (2 Tim. 3:14-17). While the quantitative data shows mixed support for Paul's statement, the focus group members' comments clearly support his argument.

While the participants' affective responses to Isaiah's themes did not increase as strongly as I wished, the slight increase warrants an increased commitment to preaching the prophets' message today. Additionally, preachers must remember that the Spirit convicts the hearts of hearers, not the preacher's eloquence alone. The Spirit can use the words of the prophets to convict hearers today just as he did over 2,500 years ago.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The strongest implication of this study is the need for pastors to preach more often from the Old Testament in general and from the prophets in particular. Anecdotal evidence from several scholars and homileticians indicate that a general familiarity with Old Testament teachings has decreased over the past fifty years (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 15; Achtemeier, *Preaching* 21; Duduit 10; Clark 23-24). This observation was supported by my own discovery that the participants of Ross Christian Church could only

remember two sermon series from the prophets in over five years. However, given the participants' hunger for sermons that show the relevance of Old Testament texts, and given that the prophets represent as large a percentage of the Bible as does the entire New Testament, pastors should be encouraged to preach from the prophets. Not only would such preaching be welcomed by their congregations, preaching from the prophets would dramatically increase the amount of available material for preaching.

A second implication of this study is that audience interest in sermons from the prophets is closely tied to their perception of the relevance of the sermon. The literature review indicates that preaching from Old Testament texts can be just as relevant and as exciting as preaching from New Testament texts if the pastor learns how to connect the needs and the circumstances of modern hearers to the needs and circumstances of the original hearers. For example, many of the homiletics consulted in the literature review recommended studying the historical context of the passage (Longman, *Making Sense* 47-48; Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 284-86; Long, *Witness* 88-90; Sanders 295-301) to determine parallels between the original audiences' situation and that of modern audiences (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ* 288-89). These suggestions were borne out by numerous comments from focus group members concerning the relevance of this sermon series for their personal lives.

### **Limitations of the Study**

I assume that most doctoral students approach their dissertation with high hopes for its importance and impact. I know I did. While I think this dissertation should be helpful for pastors who want to learn how to preach from the prophets, it has more limitations than I initially imagined.

For example, while I was blessed to be able to preach this series as an interim minister for Ross Christian Church, I think my interim status might have reduced the number of people who were willing to participate in the questionnaire process. If I had been a long-term pastor, I believe more people would have been willing to participate, either out of trust or from a desire to help the pastor. I tried to counteract this possibility by preaching a seven-week series from Jesus' parables before launching this series, but I am not certain that this warm-up period was enough time to connect with the congregation.

Second, I think this study could have been helped if a larger number of people had participated and if a broader range of seekers, new Christians, and long-term Christians had been part of the mix. As it was, the average age of participants was in the 60-69 range and nearly all of those participants had been Christians for ten years or more. Fortunately, however, while these factors may have skewed the quantitative data, the qualitative data was balanced by a better cross-section of age and spiritual maturity.

Third, the qualitative observations could have been strengthened slightly. For one thing, I did not fully understand the need to focus the pre-sermon series focus group interviews on Isaiah's themes. Instead, I focused my initial questions more on the members' familiarity with Isaiah and the prophets as well as their thoughts about the relevance of a sermon series on Isaiah. Additionally, I did not ensure that focus group members had also responded to the quantitative questionnaire; therefore, I cannot show causality between my qualitative data and my quantitative data. Finally, I was not able to capture focus group members' reactions to Isaiah's theme of eschatology. Due to a last-minute scheduling problem, I had to choose between conducting the final focus group

interviews prior to the sermon on eschatology or several weeks after the conclusion of the sermon series. I chose to conduct the interviews prior to the final sermon in order to record the participants' thoughts on the other sermons while their impressions were still fresh.

Fourth, instead of creating scales for each of the themes that could be statistically analyzed for internal reliability, each questionnaire item stood on its own. Therefore, the quantitative analysis was limited to observing a change score from the pretest to the posttest. This deficiency was offset somewhat by supplementing the quantitative findings with qualitative findings from the focus group interviews. However, even if I could have used Chronbach's alpha, the results would have been statistically insignificant due to the low number of survey respondents.

### **Unexpected Observations**

This project contained one unexpected observation. I was surprised by the intensity of the participants' interest in understanding Isaiah's message and in seeing the relevance of that message for their lives. Indeed, I was initially concerned by the relatively low percentage of people who participated in the questionnaire and by some of the focus group members' initial comments during the pre-sermon series interviews. However, these concerns evaporated rapidly once the members had heard the first three sermons in the series. From that point forward, focus group members were very positive about the relevance of Isaiah's message.

### **Recommendations**

I think the findings of this dissertation are helpful to any pastor seeking to preach from the prophets. Pastors who preach from the prophets and who learn how to demonstrate the relevance of the prophets' message can be assured that their sermons will resonate with their hearers. The prophets speak of themes such as sin, holiness, salvation, hope, and trust, themes that are as important to hearers today as they were to the prophets' original hearers. Preachers who learn how to preach these themes from the Old Testament prophetic books will find their preaching strengthened and their range of biblical passages greatly expanded.

Additionally, I believe the findings concerning participants' knowledge and affective response could be strengthened by eliminating some of the limitations of this study. Specifically, I think another dissertation conducted by a more established pastor in a larger setting could validate these findings. Also, a dissertation and sermon series conducted on a lesser-known prophet such as Amos or Zechariah might be helpful for measuring changes in participants' knowledge of prophetic themes. Finally, my approach of preaching one sermon for each theme was not enough to measure significant changes in participants' knowledge of or affective response to Isaiah's themes. Instead, my approach served more as an introduction to Isaiah's message. A future dissertation that preaches six sermons on one theme from Isaiah might be a better methodology for determining changes in participants' knowledge and affective response.

### **Postscript**

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this project. I have been blessed to learn how to interpret and preach from the prophets. Additionally, my own faith in the

relevance of the Old Testament has been strengthened. I hope that other pastors seeking to grow in these areas will benefit from this dissertation as well.

## APPENDIX A

### COVER LETTER FOR PRE-SERIES QUESTIONNAIRE

May 20, 2013

Dear friend,

As announced this Sunday, we will begin our seven-week sermon series on the major themes of Isaiah on June 2.

I am writing my doctoral dissertation on the importance and relevance of preaching Isaiah's message today. If you are sixteen or older, I invite you to participate in this project by filling out the enclosed questionnaire. Based on the experience of other people who have taken this questionnaire previously, it should take you approximately fifteen minutes to complete.

Your participation in this research is, of course, voluntary. Your confidentiality and anonymity are assured. Although the survey will be coded to match attendance with survey response, you will not be individually identified with your questionnaire. Return of this survey indicates your consent to participate in this project.

Please fill in the blank at the top of the questionnaire with the first letter of your mother's maiden name and the last four digits of your social security number. You will also be asked each week to mark an index card enclosed in the weekly bulletin with this same code and place the card in the offering. This practice will allow us to match attendance with survey response while maintaining anonymity and confidentiality. At no time will anyone be able to identify your individual results.

***Please return the completed survey to the church office in the enclosed, self-addressed stamped envelope by Friday, May 31, 2013.***

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this survey and for being part of the Ross Christian Church family! The elders and I greatly appreciate your help.

Bill Thompson  
Interim Senior Minister

P.S. Please accept this bookmark as a small token of my appreciation for your time.  
Thanks!



## APPENDIX B

### KNOWLEDGE AND AFFECT ITEMS BY THEME

The questionnaire included the following items to document changes in the participants' knowledge of the message of Isaiah:

#### God's Judgment of Sin (Isaiah 1:1-20)

- 1. Sin brings painful consequences in this life.
- 18. It is impossible to worship God regularly, yet be far from him spiritually.
- 35. The Lord hates worship that does not come from an obedient heart.
- 49. Sin requires some type of punishment to remove guilt.
- 67. The Lord promises to forgive those who repent of their sins.
- 72. Despite his loving care, God's people often turn their backs on him.

#### The Holiness of God (Isaiah 6)

- 3. God's holiness means that he is different from anything in his creation.
- 15. God's holiness means he is absolutely pure.
- 30. When people see God's moral purity, they are overcome by their sinfulness.
- 42. Serving God can lead to painful rejection from other people.
- 50. When faced with God's moral purity, humans become aware of their need for divine grace.
- 71. Most people respond positively to God's message of repentance.

#### Trusting God (Isaiah 36-37)

- 5. God wants people to work their problems out on their own.
- 25. Those who rely on their own strength rather than God will be disappointed.
- 31. God's people are called to trust him even when their circumstances seem bleak.
- 44. God's people are often tempted to look to sources other than God for deliverance.
- 51. To trust in the Lord means to rely on him with confident hope.
- 64. Recognizing how God has worked in the past leads to trusting him today.

#### The Remnant (Isaiah 40:1-11)

- 6. God allows people to suffer as a result of their sins.
- 16. The Lord promises comfort, not judgment, to his faithful followers.
- 38. The Lord comforts his people with promises of a future deliverance from pain.
- 52. Although God allows his people to suffer for their sins, he will comfort them.
- 69. God will not forget his people forever.
- 76. Although circumstances might dictate otherwise, God's promises will not fail.

#### God's Sovereignty (Isaiah 40:12-31)

- 7. Because God is powerful, he is able to take care of those who trust him.
- 17. God is in control over the events of history.

- 26. God is greater than any force that threatens his people.
- 39. Those who trust in the Lord will find strength to overcome their circumstances.
- 46. Despite terrible events such as the Holocaust, God is in control of history.
- 78. God gives strength to those who trust in him.

The Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53)

- 12. Someone can be "right with God" (i.e., righteous) based on their own moral goodness.
- 23. God suffered on behalf of sinners to provide them a way to be saved from their sins.
- 53. God accomplishes his salvation purposes through ways that seem weak to humans.
- 60. God punishes bad people and rewards good people in this life.
- 70. Sinners are judged innocent because of their obedience to God's moral requirements.
- 79. Those who have accepted God's sacrificial love should serve others in turn.

Eschatology (Isaiah 65:17-25)

- 4. There will come a day when people will no longer die young.
- 14. One day God will create a new heaven and a new earth for his faithful followers.
- 29. The prophets focused more on the end times than the immediate future of their people .
- 37. One day those who trust God will be blessed beyond measure.
- 54. One day God will punish forever those who are unfaithful to him.
- 74. God promises that one day death will no longer have control over believers.

The following items on the questionnaire documented changes in the participants' affect or attitude towards the prophets and towards Isaiah's message:

God's Judgment of Sin (Isaiah 1:1-20)

- 13. If I repent of my sins, God will forgive me.
- 41. I know what is best for my life.
- 55. God loves me despite my sin.
- 62. God can forgive my darkest sin if I return to him.
- 75. A proper sense of guilt is good for me.
- 80. God wants my inward obedience more than my outward worship.

The Holiness of God (Isaiah 6)

- 10. If I understand God's grace, I will serve him regardless of reward.
- 24. The closer I get to God spiritually, the more I recognize sin in my life.
- 36. The more I realize God's grace in my life, the more I am willing to serve him.
- 56. My success in ministry is measured by my faithfulness to God's calling.
- 63. My current behavior is pleasing to God.

83. I have been overwhelmed by a sense of God's holiness.

Trusting God (Isaiah 36-37)

8. I believe God will intervene in my life.

21. I can remember times when God has intervened in my life.

28. I believe God knows what is best for my life.

40. I trust God to answer my prayers according to his will.

57. I trust God to strengthen me against those who criticize my faith.

77. When I feel threatened, I take my concerns to God.

The Remnant (Isaiah 40:1-11)

22. Although my circumstances may get bad, God's love endures forever.

32. When God allows bad things to happen to me, he still loves me.

45. When my life is dark, I trust God to rescue me.

58. I believe God loves me despite my circumstances.

65. I believe God cares about my situation even when I don't see him act in my life.

84. Although God may seem silent now, he will not abandon me.

God's Sovereignty (Isaiah 40:12-31)

11. I am in control of my life.

20. I believe God will get me through difficult times.

33. I believe God is still active in the world today.

43. I pray with confidence that God will act in my life.

59. When I think of God's creation, I am filled with awe at his power.

66. God has given me the strength to get through difficult circumstances.

The Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53)

2. I am willing to serve others until they take me for granted.

19. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross demonstrates God's love for me.

27. Examples of fulfilled prophecy strengthen my faith.

47. I am amazed by Jesus' sacrifice for me.

73. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is God's way of making salvation possible for me.

82. Jesus was crucified for my sins so that I could be made whole.

Eschatology (Isaiah 65:17-25)

9. I believe heaven will be an indescribably beautiful place.

34. I believe one day I will see my Christian loved ones again in heaven.

48. I believe God has a better future waiting for me in heaven.

61. My belief in God's promises for a better tomorrow helps me stay strong today.

68. When I die, I will be with Jesus in heaven.

81. I believe a day is coming when I will never cry tears of sorrow again.

## APPENDIX C

### QUESTIONNAIRE

#### The Relevance of Isaiah's Message for Today

**ID Code:** \_\_\_\_\_

*First letter of your mother's maiden name  
plus last four of SSN (example: Z1234)*

#### 1. Your information

Gender:      Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Age range:    16-19 \_\_\_\_\_ 20-29 \_\_\_\_\_ 30-39 \_\_\_\_\_ 40-49 \_\_\_\_\_

                 50-59 \_\_\_\_\_ 60-69 \_\_\_\_\_ 70-79 \_\_\_\_\_ 80-89 \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been a Christian?

Not a Christian \_\_\_\_\_

5 years or less \_\_\_\_\_

6-10 years \_\_\_\_\_

11-20 years \_\_\_\_\_

Over 20 years \_\_\_\_\_

How regularly do you attend church?

Once a month \_\_\_\_\_

Twice a month \_\_\_\_\_

Three or more times a month \_\_\_\_\_

When was the last time you heard a sermon series on one of the Old Testament prophets (i.e., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Daniel, etc)?

Within the past five years \_\_\_\_\_

Within the past ten years \_\_\_\_\_

Over ten years ago \_\_\_\_\_

Never \_\_\_\_\_

I don't remember \_\_\_\_\_

## 2. Questionnaire

Indicate the degree to which the following statements reflect your thoughts by checking ☒ whether you:

☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree

1. Sin brings painful consequences in this life.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
2. I am willing to serve others until they take me for granted.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
3. God's holiness means that he is different from anything in his creation.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
4. There will come a day when people will no longer die young.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
5. God wants people to work their problems out on their own.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
6. God allows people to suffer as a result of their sins.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
7. Because God is powerful, he is able to take care of those who trust him.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
8. I believe God will intervene in my life.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
9. I believe heaven will be an indescribably beautiful place.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
10. If I understand God's grace, I will serve him regardless of reward.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
11. I am in control of my life.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree

12. Someone can be “right with God” (i.e., righteous) based on their own moral goodness.  
☐Strongly disagree   ☐Disagree   ☐Undecided   ☐Agree   ☐Strongly agree
13. If I repent of my sins, God will forgive me.  
☐Strongly disagree   ☐Disagree   ☐Undecided   ☐Agree   ☐Strongly agree
14. One day God will create a new heaven and a new earth for his faithful followers.  
☐Strongly disagree   ☐Disagree   ☐Undecided   ☐Agree   ☐Strongly agree
15. God’s holiness means he is absolutely pure.  
☐Strongly disagree   ☐Disagree   ☐Undecided   ☐Agree   ☐Strongly agree
16. The Lord promises comfort, not judgment, to his faithful followers.  
☐Strongly disagree   ☐Disagree   ☐Undecided   ☐Agree   ☐Strongly agree
17. God is in control over the events of history.  
☐Strongly disagree   ☐Disagree   ☐Undecided   ☐Agree   ☐Strongly agree
18. It is impossible to worship God regularly, yet be far from him spiritually.  
☐Strongly disagree   ☐Disagree   ☐Undecided   ☐Agree   ☐Strongly agree
19. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross demonstrates God’s love for me.  
☐Strongly disagree   ☐Disagree   ☐Undecided   ☐Agree   ☐Strongly agree
20. I believe God will get me through difficult times.  
☐Strongly disagree   ☐Disagree   ☐Undecided   ☐Agree   ☐Strongly agree
21. I can remember times when God has intervened in my life.  
☐Strongly disagree   ☐Disagree   ☐Undecided   ☐Agree   ☐Strongly agree
22. Although my circumstances may get bad, God’s love endures forever.  
☐Strongly disagree   ☐Disagree   ☐Undecided   ☐Agree   ☐Strongly agree
23. God suffered on behalf of sinners to provide them a way to be saved from their sins.  
☐Strongly disagree   ☐Disagree   ☐Undecided   ☐Agree   ☐Strongly agree
24. The closer I get to God spiritually, the more I recognize sin in my life.  
☐Strongly disagree   ☐Disagree   ☐Undecided   ☐Agree   ☐Strongly agree

25. Those who rely on their own strength rather than God will be disappointed.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
26. God is greater than any force that threatens his people.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
27. Examples of fulfilled prophecy strengthen my faith.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
28. I believe God knows what is best for my life.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
29. The prophets focused more on the end times than on the immediate future of their people.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
30. When people see God's moral purity, they are overcome by their sinfulness.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
31. God's people are called to trust him even when their circumstances seem bleak.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
32. When God allows bad things to happen to me, he still loves me.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
33. I believe God is still active in the world today.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
34. I believe one day I will see my Christian loved ones again in heaven.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
35. The Lord hates worship that does not come from an obedient heart.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
36. The more I realize God's grace in my life, the more I am willing to serve him.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
37. One day those who trust God will be blessed beyond measure.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree

38. The Lord comforts his people with promises of a future deliverance from pain.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
39. Those who trust in the Lord will find strength to overcome their circumstances.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
40. I trust God to answer my prayers according to his will.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
41. I know what is best for my life.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
42. Serving God can lead to painful rejection from other people.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
43. I pray with confidence that God will act in my life.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
44. God's people are often tempted to look to sources other than God for deliverance.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
45. When my life is dark, I trust God to rescue me.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
46. Despite terrible events such as the Holocaust, God is in control of history.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
47. I am amazed by Jesus' sacrifice for me.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
48. I believe God has a better future waiting for me in heaven.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
49. Sin requires some type of punishment to remove guilt.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
50. When faced with God's moral purity, humans become aware of their need for divine grace.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree



51. To trust in the Lord means to rely on him with confident hope.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
52. Although God allows his people to suffer for their sins, he will comfort them.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
53. God accomplishes his salvation purposes through ways that seem weak to humans.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
54. One day God will punish forever those who are unfaithful to him.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
55. God loves me despite my sin.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
56. My success in ministry is measured by my faithfulness to God's calling.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
57. I trust God to strengthen me against those who criticize my faith.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
58. I believe God loves me despite my circumstances.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
59. When I think of God's creation, I am filled with awe at his power.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
60. God punishes bad people and rewards good people in this life.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
61. My belief in God's promises for a better tomorrow helps me stay strong today.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
62. God can forgive my darkest sin if I return to him.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
63. My current behavior is pleasing to God.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree

64. Recognizing how God has worked in the past leads to trusting him today.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
65. I believe God cares about my situation even when I don't see him act in my life.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
66. God has given me the strength to get through difficult circumstances.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
67. The Lord promises to forgive those who repent of their sins.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
68. When I die, I will be with Jesus in heaven.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
69. God will not forget his people forever.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
70. Sinners are judged innocent because of their obedience to God's moral requirements.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
71. Most people respond positively to God's message of repentance.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
72. Despite his loving care, God's people often turn their backs on him.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
73. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is God's way of making salvation possible for me.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
74. God promises that one day death will no longer have control over believers.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
75. A proper sense of guilt is good for me.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree
76. Although circumstances might dictate otherwise, God's promises will not fail.  
☐ Strongly disagree   ☐ Disagree   ☐ Undecided   ☐ Agree   ☐ Strongly agree

77. When I feel threatened, I take my concerns to God.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
78. God gives strength to those who trust in him.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
79. Those who have accepted God's sacrificial love should serve others in turn.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
80. God wants my inward obedience more than my outward worship.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
81. I believe a day is coming when I will never cry tears of sorrow again.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
82. Jesus was crucified for my sins so that I could be made whole.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
83. I have been overwhelmed by a sense of God's holiness.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree
84. Although God may seem silent now, he will not abandon me.  
☐ Strongly disagree    ☐ Disagree    ☐ Undecided    ☐ Agree    ☐ Strongly agree

**APPENDIX D**

**SAMPLE WEEKLY ATTENDANCE TRACKING SHEET**

**Isaiah Sermon Series**

**“When We All Get to Heaven” (Isaiah 65:17-25)**

**July 21, 2013**

**User ID Code:** \_\_\_\_\_

(1<sup>st</sup> initial of mother’s maiden name plus last 4 SSN)

The purpose of this sheet is to allow me to compare survey responses to Sunday attendance without being able to identify anyone’s personal responses. *Please take a moment each Sunday to fill it in and place it in the offering plate.*

Thanks!

Bill

D.Min. dissertation: “Hearing Isaiah’s Message Today”

## APPENDIX E

### COVER LETTER FOR POST-SERIES QUESTIONNAIRE

July 20, 2013

Dear friend,

It's hard to believe we are coming to the close of our seven-week sermon series on the major themes of Isaiah!

As you know, I am writing my doctoral dissertation on the importance and relevance of preaching Isaiah's message today. If you are sixteen or older, I invite you to participate in this project by filling out the enclosed questionnaire. It should take you approximately fifteen minutes to complete.

Your participation in this research is, of course, voluntary. Your confidentiality and anonymity are assured. You will not be individually identified with your questionnaire. Return of this survey indicates your consent to participate in this project.

Please fill in the blank at the top of the questionnaire with the first letter of your mother's maiden name and the last four digits of your social security number. This practice will allow us to match attendance with survey response while maintaining anonymity and confidentiality. At no time will anyone be able to identify your individual results.

***Please return the completed survey to the church office in the enclosed, self-addressed stamped envelope by Saturday, July 27, 2013.***

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this survey and for being part of the Ross Christian Church family! The elders and I greatly appreciate your help.

Bill Thompson  
Interim Senior Minister

## APPENDIX F

### INFORMED CONSENT SAMPLE FORM

**Purpose:** To provide additional information and understanding into the research project “Hearing Isaiah’s Message Today.”

#### Your information

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender:      Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Age range:    16-19 \_\_\_\_\_ 20-29 \_\_\_\_\_ 30-39 \_\_\_\_\_ 40-49 \_\_\_\_\_  
                  50-59 \_\_\_\_\_ 60-69 \_\_\_\_\_ 70-79 \_\_\_\_\_ 80-89 \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been a Christian?

Not a Christian      \_\_\_\_\_

5 years or less      \_\_\_\_\_

6-10 years      \_\_\_\_\_

11-20 years      \_\_\_\_\_

Over 20 years      \_\_\_\_\_

#### Consent

I agree to participate in this focus group discussion with Bill Thompson and other members of Ross Christian Church. I understand that the questions will be general in nature and are designed to provide additional information into statistics gathered from the questionnaires. I also understand that I will not be identified by name in the dissertation nor at any other time, beyond normal email coordination measures. I commit to doing my best to participate in all three focus group meetings.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## **APPENDIX G**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR FIRST FOCUS GROUP**

Date of interview: May 30, 2013

Time of interview:

Place: Ross Christian Church, Ross, OH

Focus group participants:

Go over the purpose of the research project.

Have participants fill out consent forms.

#### **Questions**

1. Can you recall hearing other sermon series on Isaiah? On other prophets?
2. What do you think about the prophetic books in general and about Isaiah in particular?
3. What did you think of the questionnaire?
4. What do you hope to get out of this sermon series?

## **APPENDIX H**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SECOND FOCUS GROUP**

Date of interview: June 20, 2013

Time of interview:

Place: Ross Christian Church, Ross, OH

Focus group participants:

#### **Questions**

1. How has the sermon series so far affected your understanding and acceptance of Isaiah's message?
2. So far, we have covered three themes—our sin, God's holiness, and trusting God. What have been some key take-aways for you?
3. Which aspects of the preaching process (either sermon writing or delivery) seem most helpful to your understanding and acceptance of Isaiah's message?
4. How relevant does the series seem to be to your life so far?



## **APPENDIX I**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR THIRD FOCUS GROUP**

Date of interview: July 18, 2013

Time of interview:

Place: Ross Christian Church, Ross, OH

Focus group participants:

#### **Questions**

1. Since our last meeting, we have talked about having hope for today because God keeps his promises ("The remnant"), trusting God to take care of us because he is in control ("God's sovereignty"), and Jesus, the Suffering Servant. What highlights or insights stick out in your mind from these sermons?
2. How has your knowledge or understanding of Isaiah's message changed because of this series?
3. How has your belief in or acceptance of Isaiah's message changed because of this series?
4. After hearing the entire series, how relevant would you say Isaiah's message is for us today?

## APPENDIX J

### OUTLINES OF SERMONS PREACHED FROM ISAIAH

#### June 2

*Title:* The Scarlet Letter

*Text:* Isaiah 1:1-18

*Big Idea:* Sin brings painful consequences, but God will forgive us if we repent.

*Worship ideas:* “The Heart of Worship,” “Your Grace is Enough,”

#### June 9

*Title:* Close Encounters with God

*Text:* Isaiah 6:1-13

*Big Idea:* A close encounter with God can change your life forever.

*Worship ideas:* “Holy is the Lord,” “Better is One Day,” “How Great Thou Art”

#### June 16

*Title:* Letters from Assyria

*Text:* Isaiah 36-37

*Big Idea:* Trust God in everything because he is faithful.

*Worship ideas:* ““Whom Shall I Fear?,” “10,000 Reasons,” “You Alone Can Rescue”

#### June 23

*Title:* The Story of My People (1<sup>st</sup> person narrative sermon)

*Text:* Isaiah 40:1-11

*Big Idea:* We can have hope for today because God keeps his promises.

*Worship ideas:* “Forever,” “Lord, I Need You”

#### July 7

*Title:* God’s Got This!

*Text:* Isaiah 40:12-31

*Big Idea:* We can trust God to take care of us because he is in control.

*Worship ideas:* “God of Wonders,” “Everlasting God”

#### July 7

*Title:* Isaiah, Bob Dylan, and the Big Bang Theory

*Text:* Isaiah 52:13—53:12

*Big Idea:* Jesus suffered for our sins so we wouldn’t have to.

*Worship ideas:* “How He Loves,” “Scandal of Grace”

#### July 14

*Title:* When We All Get to Heaven

*Text:* Isaiah 65:17-25

*Big Idea:* Life is hard but there’s a better day coming!

*Worship ideas:* “I Can Only Imagine” video, “When We All Get to Heaven”

**Series: Hearing Isaiah's Message Today**

**Title: The Scarlet Letter**

**Text: Isaiah 1:1-18**

**Bill Thompson**

**June 2, 2013**

**Ross CC**

**Big idea: Sin brings painful consequences, but God will forgive us if we repent.**  
.....

### **Introduction**

- A. *The Scarlet Letter* tells the tragic story of a woman named Hester Prynne.
- B. There are two other major characters in the story: a physician named Roger Chillingsworth and a minister named Arthur Dimmesdale.
- C. While Hester is publicly shamed for adultery, Chillingsworth and Dimmesdale slowly pay the price for their hidden sins.
- D. *The Scarlet Letter* is a good introduction to our series because Isaiah 1 speaks of people who think they are right with God yet ignore his warnings against sin.

### **Context**

- A. Isaiah 1:1 sets the historical context for our message today.
- B. Isaiah prophesied during a tumultuous period in Judah's history.

### **Sin brings painful consequences**

- A. The first lesson we learn is that sin brings painful consequences (Isa. 1:2-6).
- B. In *The Scarlet Letter*, both Chillingsworth and Dimmesdale are being punished for their sins, yet neither man realizes it.
- C. Isaiah says the same thing happens to us when we sin against God.
- D. Have you ever known someone who was suffering for their sins but didn't realize the cause of their pain? If so, you know that Isaiah's message is relevant for today.

### **We all have sinned**

- A. We all have sinned, but sometimes we deceive ourselves into thinking otherwise (Isa. 1:10-15).
- B. The Puritans began well, but some adopted a legalistic faith that exchanged faithful worship attendance for faithless disobedience in other areas of life.
- C. Isaiah says the same thing happened to the people of his day.
- D. God hates worship that comes from disobedient hearts (Isa. 1:16-17).
- E. We're a lot more like Isaiah's audience than we might think.

### **God will forgive us if we repent**

- A. We all have sinned but the good news is that God will forgive us if we repent (Isa. 1:18).
- B. We all wear scarlet letters of sin, but God can wash away our sins with the blood of his son, Jesus Christ.
- C. A friend asked me to visit her grandfather in the hospital, a person she described as "the meanest man I've ever known."
- D. As Stanley lay dying, his guilt caused him to reach out for forgiveness.

### **Invitation**

- A. Like Stanley, all of us have sinned but God will forgive us if we repent.

**Series: Hearing Isaiah's Message Today**

**Title: Close Encounters with God**

**Text: Isaiah 6:1-13**

**Bill Thompson**

**June 9, 2013**

**Ross CC**

**Big Idea: A close encounter with God can change your life forever.**  
.....

### **Introduction**

- A. In *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Richard Dreyfus plays an electrical lineman who has a close encounter with space aliens that changes his life forever.
- B. Isaiah had a close encounter with a holy God that changed his life forever.
- C. As we look at Isaiah 6 today, we ask, "How would our lives be different if we had a close encounter with God?"

### **Encountering God's holiness to confession**

- A. The first thing we see is that a close encounter with God should lead us to confess our sins (Isa. 6:1-4).
- B. When Isaiah encountered God, he was overcome by his own sinfulness (Isa. 6:5-7).
- C. God's holiness means that he is completely pure and sinless.
- D. That's why when Isaiah encountered God, he was overcome by his own sinfulness.
- E. The closer we get to God, the more we should recognize our sinfulness.
- F. What kinds of things help you encounter God's holiness?

### **Encountering God's grace leads to faithful service**

- A. Encountering God's grace should lead us to serve him faithfully (Isa. 6:8).
- B. How many of you have had a close encounter with God?
- C. If you feel God calling you today, would you consider serving here at church?

### **Encountering God's call can lead to painful rejection**

- A. Unfortunately, a close encounter with God can also lead to rejection from others (Isa. 6:9-13).
- B. How many of you have ever heard a sermon on Isaiah 6 that includes these verses?
- C. God told Isaiah that most of his listeners would reject his message, but that a remnant would remain faithful.
- D. A close encounter with God should lead us to serve him faithfully, but it may also lead others to reject us.

### **A close encounter with God can change your life forever**

- A. A close encounter with God can change your life forever.
- B. When I met Roger, he wasn't a Christian. After encountering God, today he is a deacon in his church.
- C. How will your life be changed by a close encounter with God?

**Series: Hearing Isaiah's Message Today**

**Title: Letters from Assyria**

**Text: Isaiah 36-37**

**Bill Thompson**

**June 16, 2013**

**Ross CC**

**Big idea: Trust God in everything because he is faithful.**  
.....

### **Introduction**

A. Jacob Loewen was a missionary who believed in God but not in miracles until he saw God miraculously heal a sick friend.

B. Just like us, Hezekiah had to choose to believe even though he had never seen God do a miracle.

C. Today we're going to see that we should trust God in everything because he is faithful.

### **Background**

A. Israel and Judah were located in a battleground area between Egypt and Assyria.

B. King Hoshea of Israel made a terrible decision to trust Egypt instead of God.

C. Twenty years later, Hezekiah faced a similar decision against Assyria (Isa. 36:1-3).

### **Who are you placing your trust in?**

A. The Assyrian chief of staff asks a question that we all struggle with: "Who are you placing your trust in?: (Isa. 36:4-7).

B. This was a critical question for the tiny country of Judah.

C. It is a critical question for God, too, who often watched his people place their trust in idols or other nations.

D. It's a critical question for us as well, because we all have a tendency to put our trust in something or someone other than God.

### **What do you believe about prayer?**

A. This brings us to our second question today: "What do you believe about prayer?" (Isa. 37:9-12).

B. The king of Assyria tried to get Hezekiah to doubt God's faithfulness.

C. We might not have a king talking to us, but we all have voices that make us question whether we can trust God to take care of our problems.

D. We don't know why God sometimes answers prayers in a miraculous way and sometimes seems silent. All we know is that God wants us to trust him.

### **What are you trusting God for today?**

A. Our last question is, "What are you trusting God for today?" (Isa. 37:14-20).

B. When Hezekiah read this letter from Assyria, his hands must have trembled.

C. Listen to how God answered Hezekiah's prayer (Isa. 37:36-37).

D. Though Hezekiah had never seen a miracle, he trusted God to do what is right.

E. What is your "letter from Assyria" that you are trusting God for today?

**Series: Hearing Isaiah's Message Today**

**Title: The Story of My People**

**Text: Isaiah 40:1-11**

**Big idea: We can have hope for today because God keeps his promises.**  
.....

**Bill Thompson**

**June 23, 2013**

**Ross CC**

### **Introduction**

A. After Hezekiah's act of faith, the people of Judah continued to disobey God until God allowed them to be carried off into captivity in 586 B.C.

B. Can you imagine how they felt? Maybe you are living in a different captivity.

C. If this is how you feel, we can have hope because God keeps his promises.

D. Today I'm going to preach a first-person narrative sermon.

### **Allow me to introduce myself**

A. Oy veh! Sometimes the prophets make no sense!

B. My name is Rabbi Solomon. I'm working on my sermon from Isaiah.

C. I'm glad you're here. I want to tell you an amazing story!

### **The story of my people**

A. The story of my people is a story of rebellion and grace.

B. If you have ever felt this way, listen to what Isaiah says in 40:1-2.

C. No matter what you have done, God has not abandoned you.

### **It seems like Yahweh has abandoned us**

A. I know this in my head, yet I struggle to believe it in my heart.

B. For example, today we still live under Roman rule.

C. Isaiah says the Lord is coming in power, but I don't see it (Isa. 40:3-5).

D. Isaiah says that God has not abandoned us, but sometimes it looks that way.

### **Something amazing is happening!**

A. Then last week my brother told me of a new prophet!

B. John spoke with such power that hundreds lined up to be baptized.

C. Could this be the messenger that Isaiah foretold?

### **I have met the messiah!**

A. I began to study Isaiah with new eyes, but I was still confused (Isa. 40:9-11).

B. What does Isaiah mean? How can God be coming here?

C. As I looked out over the crowd yesterday, I didn't know what to say so I handed the scroll of Isaiah to a promising young rabbi.

D. He stood and read from Isaiah 61:1-4. Then he sat down and said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

### **God's word lasts forever**

A. As soon as he said that, the crowd went crazy!

B. Suddenly, it was as if I could truly understand the prophets!

C. Isaiah says, "Comfort, comfort my people." Is there any better story than that?

E. Let us pray.

**Series: Hearing Isaiah's Message Today**

**Title: God's Got This**

**Text: Isaiah 40:12-31**

**Big Idea: We can trust God to take care of us because he is in control.**  
.....

**Bill Thompson**

**July 7, 2013**

**Ross CC**

### **Introduction**

- A. C.S. Lewis was an atheist who became a Christian after meeting Tolkien.
- B. Lewis remained a bachelor for most of his life until he married Joy Davidman.
- C. When Joy died of cancer four years later, Lewis wrote a scathing book questioning God's goodness.
- D. We all go through times when God seems to be silent.
- E. The people of Judah living in captivity did, too.
- F. When we experience God's silence, we want to know the answers to three questions.

### **Does God care about my situation?**

- A. The first question we ask is, "Does God *care* about my situation?"
- B. Twenty-five hundred years ago, the people of Judah asked the same thing.
- C. The Old Testament prophets refer to these people as *the remnant*.
- D. We saw in Isaiah 40:1-2 that God did care about their situation.
- E. He cares about our situation as well.

### **Can I trust God to handle my situation?**

- A. If we believe God cares about our situation, we still wonder if he will *handle* our situation.
- B. The people of Judah asked the same question, which is why they often put their trust in idols or other nations.
- C. Listen to what God says about trusting others rather than him (Isa. 40:12-17).
- D. We can trust God to take care of us because he is sovereign over the nations.
- E. Do we put our trust in "the nations"? If you think not, how do you feel about national elections?
- F. Isaiah says that if God created the universe, we can trust him to handle our problems (Isa. 40:18:20).
- G. We can say that we trust God, but do you find yourself trusting in yourself or others instead?

### **What will God do about my situation?**

- A. Finally, we ask, "What will God *do* about my situation?" (Isa. 40:27-31).
- B. To "trust in the Lord" doesn't mean we don't plan for our future, but that we leave the results to him.
- C. Sometimes God intervenes with a miracle. Other times, he intervenes with comfort.
- D. The real question isn't "Does God care about my situation?" but "Do I trust God to take care of it?"
- E. What do you need to trust God for today?

**Series: Hearing Isaiah's Message Today**

**Title: Isaiah, Bob Dylan, and the Big Bang Theory**

**Text: Isaiah 52:13—53:12**

**Bill Thompson**

**July 14, 2013**

**Ross CC**

**Big idea: Jesus suffered for our sins so we wouldn't have to.**  
.....

### **Introduction**

- A. If someone asked you to explain why you are a Christian, what would you say?
- B. Today we come to the theme of the suffering servant found in Isaiah 53.
- C. We don't know what Isaiah's audience thought of this servant, but the New Testament writers believed Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy of the servant.
- D. As we will see today, Jesus suffered for our sins so we wouldn't have to.

### **God's ways of salvation are not our ways**

- A. The first thing we see is that God's ways of salvation are not our ways (Isa. 52:13-53:3).
- B. When we read these verses, we often think Jesus was not attractive.
- C. Instead, Isaiah says the servant would be "despised," which means "ignored."
- D. Isaiah is right—Jesus doesn't look like a deliverer to us. We want our leaders to be strong and likeable.
- E. Because God's ways of salvation are not our ways, we tend to ignore what the Bible says about Jesus and listen to what the world says about him instead.

### **Sin alienates us from God**

- A. The Bible tells us that sin alienates us from God, which is why we don't need a charismatic leader to deliver us—we need a savior (Isa. 53:4-6).
- B. Sin alienates us from God, which is why we need a suffering servant.
- C. Many thought Jesus was being punished for his own sins but Isaiah says the servant died for our sins.
- D. All of us are born with a tendency to sin that separates us from God.

### **Jesus suffered in our place**

- A. The Bible says that the wages of sin is death, which is why Jesus suffered in our place (Isa. 53:7-9).
- B. Once a year on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would sacrifice a lamb for the people's sins.
- C. Why did Jesus have to suffer in our place? Because without the shedding of blood, there can be no forgiveness of sins.
- D. Jesus suffered for our sins so we wouldn't have to.

### **God planned this long ago**

- A. Jesus' death was not a mistake. God planned it long ago (Isa. 53:10-12).
- B. Today, skeptics reject Jesus' sacrifice by saying the church invented this story.
- C. Last night my wife I met a Jewish atheist who asked me why I am a Christian. We ended up talking about Isaiah, Bob Dylan, and the Big Bang theory!
- D. Isaiah predicted Jesus' suffering 700 years before he died.
- E. How would your life change if you really believed Jesus suffered for you?



**Series: Hearing Isaiah's Message Today**

**Title: When We All Get to Heaven**

**Text: Isaiah 65:17-25**

**Big idea: Life is hard but there's a better day coming!**  
.....

**Bill Thompson**

**July 21, 2013**

**Ross CC**

### **Introduction**

- A. Over the past two months, we've talked about six major themes in Isaiah.
- B. Today I want to talk about the difficulty of life. While we don't face hardships like the remnant in captivity, life can be difficult for us in other ways.
- C. When the waves of doubt crash over us, we ask, "Is there any hope?"

### **Life is hard**

- A. If you're not a Christian, then the answer is "No, there is no hope."
- B. William Provine is a leading voice for atheism. Although he suffers from brain cancer, he refuses prayer or sympathy.
- C. Isaiah says that life doesn't have to be hopeless (Isa. 65:17-25).
- D. A day is coming when God will remake the heavens and the earth.
- E. Genesis says the universe was perfect until sin entered the picture. As a result of sin, the whole world is in chaos.

### **But there's a better day coming**

- A. Life is hard, but there's a better day coming!
- B. It will be a day of no more tears (Isa. 65:19-20).
- C. It will be a day of no more frustration (Isa. 65:21-23).
- D. It will be a day of no more silence because God will hear our prayers (Isa. 65:24).
- E. Finally, it will be a day of no more conflict (Isa. 65:25).

### **Conclusion**

- A. Life is hard, but there's a better day coming!
- B. Bart Millard was only 18 when his dad died from cancer. Over the next nine years, he kept trying to imagine what heaven would be like.
- C. To help us imagine that day, we're going to watch the music video *I Can Only Imagine*.
- D. Isaiah says there will be a time of no more death, no more conflict, and no more sorrow. Friends, life is hard but there's a better day coming!
- E. If you are a Christian, I hope this message inspires you to live with hope.
- F. If you are not a Christian, I pray you will become one today.

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