

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

10 of the Most Vexing Verses in Isaiah

Univocality vs Multivocality: Biblical **univocality** seeks one coherent divine voice across Scripture, while biblical **multivocality** recognizes that Scripture often speaks through diverse, tension-filled voices that must be honored distinctively rather than harmonized.

1. God wants Israel to repent — but God prevents them from understanding

Isaiah 1:16–20 ¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil; ¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow. ¹⁸Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: If your sins are like scarlet, will they become like snow? If they are red like crimson, will they become like wool?

¹⁹If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land, ²⁰but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Isaiah 6:9–10 ⁹And he said, “Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’” ¹⁰Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes and listen with their ears and comprehend with their minds and turn and be healed.”

The *Oxford Handbook of Isaiah* specifically identifies this as a **moral problem** within the book: Isaiah's commission appears to prevent Israel's repentance in order to accomplish divine judgment.

The apparent result is that the people **won't understand, repent, and be healed**. That creates a theological problem: **Why would God send a prophet whose preaching is designed to prevent repentance?** This became especially important because **Jesus' parables are interpreted through Isaiah 6:9–10** in the Synoptic Gospels.

Scholars debate whether the Hebrew means that Isaiah's preaching **causes** the people's hardening or whether it **reveals/exposes an already existing hardness**.

Isaiah 29:9-10 ⁹Be astounded and stunned; blind yourselves and be blind! Be drunk but not from wine; stagger but not from strong drink! ¹⁰For the Lord has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep; he has closed your eyes (the prophets) and covered your heads (the seers).

The clearest New Testament parallel is **Romans 11:7–8**: “What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, ‘**God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.**’”

2. God does not change his mind — but God changes his mind

Isaiah 14:24 “As I have planned, so shall it be...”

Isaiah 46:10 “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.”

Isaiah 38:1–5 Hezekiah is told: “You shall die, you shall not recover.”

Hezekiah prays, and God responds: “I have heard your prayer...” and extends his life.

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That isn't necessarily a contradiction within ancient prophetic theology—prophetic announcements can function conditionally—but it creates a genuine tension between **divine immutability and divine responsiveness**.

3. The nations will be judged — but the nations will be saved

Isaiah contains extensive judgment against foreign nations:

Isaiah 14 — Babylon/Assyria

Isaiah 19 — Egypt

Yet later:

Isaiah 19:23–25 Egypt and Assyria are blessed alongside Israel: “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.”

That's a remarkable reversal.

4. God hides his face — yet God never abandons Israel

Isaiah 8:17 “I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob.”

Isaiah 54:8 “In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you...”

Yet:

Isaiah 49:15–16 “I will not forget you.”

Isaiah 54:10 “my steadfast love shall not depart from you.”

So we have: **divine abandonment/hiding** versus **divine permanent covenantal presence**.

5. God is incomparable — but God is repeatedly compared to human roles

Isaiah says: **40:18** “To whom then will you liken God?” Yet Isaiah compares God's activity to: a shepherd — **40:11**; a woman in labor — **42:14**; a mother — **49:15**; a husband — **54:5**; a warrior — **59:17**; a redeemer — **63:3–6**

6. Animals become peaceful — but animals are slaughtered

Isaiah 11:6–9 ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed^[a] together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Wolf + lamb, Leopard + young goat, Lion + calf, Cow + bear - “They shall not hurt or destroy...”

-Yet, The sword of YHWH is associated with slaughter of animals.

Isaiah 34:6 ⁶The Lord has a sword; it is sated with blood; it is gorged with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams. For the Lord has a sacrifice in Bozrah, a great slaughter in the land of Edom.

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7. Cyrus the “Messiah” does not know YHWH

Isaiah 44:28–45:1 Cyrus is named and called God's “anointed” (*māšîaḥ*). Yet: **45:4–5** “though you do not know me.” So a Persian king who does not know Israel's God is nevertheless God's chosen agent. That's an extraordinary theological tension concerning **outsiders, election, and divine agency**.

8. Isaiah 14:12 — “Lucifer” or the fallen king of Babylon?

This one is particularly interesting because an enormous amount of later Christian theology grew out of a translation choice. The Hebrew says: **hêlêl ben-šāḥar** roughly: “**shining one, son of dawn**” / “**morning star, son of dawn**.” The Latin Vulgate translated *hêlêl* as **Lucifer**, meaning “light-bearer.” Later Christian tradition came to use **Lucifer as a proper name for Satan**.

But the immediate context of Isaiah 14 identifies the subject as a **taunt against the king of Babylon** (14:4). Historically and literarily, the primary referent is generally understood as the arrogant king of Babylon.

So there's a fascinating distinction: **Isaiah's “morning star” → Latin “Lucifer” → later Christian “Lucifer/Satan.”** Those are not necessarily three identical interpretations.

9. Isaiah 45:5-7 — Does God “create evil”?

⁵ I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, ⁶ so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. ⁷ I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.

“I make peace, and create evil.” This creates an obvious theological problem: **Does Isaiah teach that God creates evil (in context Cyrus)?** The Hebrew word is **raʿ** (רָע), which has a semantic range including things such as: evil, calamity, disaster, distress, misfortune. The context is extremely important. Isaiah 45 is declaring God's absolute sovereignty: God controls both prosperity and catastrophe. The question is whether **raʿ** here means **moral evil** or **calamity/disaster**. If **raʿ** means “evil,” Isaiah 45:7 becomes an important text in debates about: divine sovereignty, the origin of evil, monotheism, divine responsibility, Jewish responses to Persian/Zoroastrian dualism

Isaiah 54:16-17 ¹⁶ See, it is I who have created the smith who blows the fire of coals and produces a weapon fit for its purpose; I have also created the ravager to destroy. ¹⁷ No weapon that is fashioned against you shall prosper, and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment.

10. These tensions in Isaiah invite neither blind defense nor casual dismissal, but a disciplined reverence: one that honors Scripture enough to question it, and trusts God enough not to confuse faith with the absence of difficulty.

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