

Isaiah 66

Eternal salvation or eternal condemnation

1. Introduction

With Chapter 66 of Isaiah a book full of prophecies is coming to an end. Much of what is said in this book has been completely or partly fulfilled. Some of it is not fulfilled yet.

The last words of Isaiah reach out to the “latter things” which God is doing in and with our world. Prior to this we have been shown how God fights for the redemption of his people: his threats, his chastisements, his promises, his way of salvation. In all this God urgently places his people before the choice. Ultimately the final outcome will become visible: eternal salvation or eternal condemnation.

The book of Isaiah confronts us too with the seriousness of this fact. Eventually God will judge us on the basis of our faith and on how we have lived out of that faith. What will his judgement be? The verdict guilty or not guilty is spelled out today in the way we live. What is our response to God’s striving to save us?

2. General remarks

1. A fervent ending

The last chapter of Isaiah is not only the conclusion of the second part of Isaiah (40-66); it is also a good conclusion to the entire book. The scarlet thread that runs through the whole book ends here.

In Chapter 1 the LORD announces his judgement over his people because Judah has forsaken the LORD. By way of judgement God is going to purify his people. They are hounded by enemies and almost eradicated.

Yet it is made clear that the LORD does not intend to destroy his people. His purpose is to continue with a people that seek him again. The wicked Israelites will be the object of his judgement. Also the enmity against the people will come to an end. From far and wide the exiles will return triumphantly. Among this multitude there will also be heathens who seek the LORD in Zion (cf. Outline 1 Section 6).

The restoration that God provides is, above all, the work of the Servant of the LORD. His work of redemption reconciles the people to God, and therefore the Israelites once again become faithful servants of the LORD (see Outline 3).

All these thoughts come together again in this final chapter. The fact that Isaiah 66 forms the conclusion of the whole book is underlined once more because it speaks of eternal salvation and eternal condemnation. The saints will eternally praise the name of God on the new earth, while the wicked will have to pay for their sins with the punishment of hellish agony. This is how the LORD, the Holy One of Israel restores the glory of his name. This is the climax of the entire book of Isaiah.

2. Who are the addressees?

Verse 1 speaks about the building of the temple. Therefore we may assume that the words are directed to the people at the end of the exile. The temple still has to be rebuilt.

Furthermore, we find in this chapter striking similarities with Isaiah 65 (see Outline 9 Section 2). Isaiah 66 speaks of the same terrible idolatry and God's judgement over it. Also here the new earth and the new heaven are mentioned. This supports the idea that both chapters were written in approximately the same time period and are directed to the people that live in the last phase of the exile.

Yet there is a difference between these chapters. Isaiah 65 is mainly directed at the unfaithful Israelites; they receive word of the impending judgement. Isaiah 66 has a different focus. Here the God-fearing Israelites are addressed. No matter how many warnings are given, the main theme is one of encouragement: The LORD will comfort those who are faithful among his people by giving them salvation.

3. Composition

This chapter consists of several parts with different tones and yet all of them belong together.

In verse 1-4 the LORD speaks, in connection with the building of the temple, about the wicked people who practice abominable things (see also v.17), and are therefore not qualified for the rebuilding of the temple.

In the following verses the LORD encourages the believers who suffer from the hostility of their fellow Israelites (vv. 5-6). This thought continues in the rest of the chapter. The LORD will miraculously restore his people (vv. 7-14).

This restoration includes judgement over the enemies (vv. 15-17, 24) but will culminate in great glory for the faithful Israelites (vv. 18-23).

3. Annotations to the text

Verse 1-2

The word of the LORD: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool" forms the opening statement of an indictment against those who want to rebuild the temple. The LORD who created all things, is definitely not dependent on people who want to build a temple for him, as if he would be "without a roof over his head." Just because the temple is in ruins, they should not think that they are doing the LORD a favour by building a new house for him. In saying this, God does not forbid them to build a new temple, but he makes it clear that he will not just accept a temple from anyone. Building a temple and worshipping the LORD in that temple are without meaning if they are not the effect of true piety. The LORD pays heed to those who are "humble and contrite in spirit", those who repent from the heart and stand in awe of his words.

Verse 3-4

The LORD will not accept a temple from those who pretend to serve him, but in fact are living wicked lives. Temple service and idol worship do not go together.

The summary in verse 3 could be explained in two ways. It speaks about actions that are good in themselves: sacrificing a bull, offering a lamb, bringing a grain offering, and burning incense. Besides that a number of abominable practices are mentioned: killing a man, breaking a dog's neck, presenting pig's blood and worshipping an idol.

Perhaps the people who do these good things are so insincere that the offerings they bring are like those abominations.

It is more probable that the worshippers are guilty of practicing those abominable things at the same time. For they "delight in their abominations" and "have chosen their own ways". It is difficult to say exactly what kind of idolatry is meant here (see Outline 9 Section 3 on Isaiah 65:3-5a). Just as these idol worshippers have made a choice against God, so God chooses against them: for those who choose their own ways, apart from God, God chooses calamity. The words of verse 4 strongly remind us of Chapter 65:12 which also speaks about idol worship; so it is possible that it refers to the same people here: people who ignore God's warnings and go their own way.

Verse 5-6

Verse 5 addresses the believers in Israel, those who "tremble at his word". We find this expression also in verse 2. These are the people whom God remembers. They are threatened by their brothers. These brothers are their wicked fellow Israelites. Apparently they are in power and they trouble the faithful ones, specifically because they desire to serve the LORD, because of his name. In their enmity they severely mock and are provocative: let the LORD defend his pious people! Either they do not believe that the LORD actually takes the side of the believers, or they do not care about the LORD at all. In response to this challenge, verse 6 sounds very alarming indeed. In Hebrew this verse consists of three very short sentences that start with the same word, namely *hear*, or, *pay attention!* *Hear: that uproar from the city! Hear: that noise from the temple! Hear: the sound of the LORD repaying his enemies all they deserve!*

From the temple the LORD goes out to battle against his enemies. The fact that the temple is pictured as rebuilt already, does not necessarily contradict verse 1, where the rebuilding has to take place yet. This deals with the LORD's judgement that is to come, when the temple will be functional again.

Verse 7-9

In verse 5 the enemies challenge God to show his glory. After the proclamation of judgement over the enemies, in verse 6, verse 7-9 promises salvation for the persecuted believers. God intervenes miraculously. The LORD does not abandon those who fear him, but his wonderful intervention will stun his enemies.

Something amazing happens: a woman bears a son, even before she goes into labour. This is unbelievable, unheard of! The amazement is even stimulated by the questions that follow: who has ever heard of a whole nation being born all at once?

This miracle is the work of the LORD. The woman is the city of Zion, who brings forth a great number of children, because the LORD opens the womb and grants delivery (cf. Isaiah 49:20-21; 54:1-3). The LORD himself will take care that there will be great numbers of believers again. This will happen, among other things, because the exiles will return, as becomes apparent in what follows.

Verse 10-14

The imagery of a mother and her children is continued here. The LORD makes Jerusalem, who was pictured as a bereaved mother to be pitied, into a woman who shouts for joy. Those addressed are told to rejoice with her. In verse 10b-11 we realize how closely they are involved: they are the children and they may drink from the comforting breasts of Zion.

Then the LORD himself speaks again and proclaims salvation for Jerusalem: "I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream".

Jerusalem becomes a haven of comfort; her children are caressed. The LORD himself will be there as a mother who consoles her children.

The LORD's intervention gives much reason for joy. His consolation is refreshing. Jerusalem "will flourish like grass". Again: the LORD does not forget his servants, but his wrath will burn with fury on his enemies.

Verse 15-17

Verse 15 tells us how the LORD will appear in wrath. At the same time the thread of verse 6 is picked up again, which is comfort for his servants but wrath over his enemies: those are the two sides of the coming of the LORD.

The LORD is coming with "fire". That fire is the means by which punishment is carried out (cf. 2 Peter 3:7). The number of casualties will be heavy: the idol worshippers, spoken of earlier (see 65:2-7, 11-12; 66:3), they become the victims of God's wrath. Again a short summary is given of all the abominable sins they have committed. With their leader in their midst, their "priest," they go into the gardens to commit their abominations. The "rat" is a symbol of uncleanness (see Leviticus 11:29). In his judgement the LORD clears the enemies out of the way.

Verse 18-19

It is difficult to understand the implication of the verses that follow. It becomes clear, however, that the LORD is not only concerned with the immediate enemies of the people of Israel; the nations round about come into the picture too. The LORD gathers all the nations together in Jerusalem. And among these people he will set a sign. What that sign exactly means, we are not told. Perhaps we should think of the judgement that God is carrying out over his enemies, by which the nations will be punished as well. The LORD's majesty becomes visible as an awesome sign in this judgement.

Also among the nations there are those who will be spared. They become, as it were, missionaries who have to proclaim the LORD's glory that they have seen among the nations who have not heard about it yet.

Tarshish represents the far west (see Isaiah 60:9; also Outline 7 Section 3). The Libyans and the Lydians are most likely nations from northern Africa (see Ezek 30:5). Tubal is probably a nation in Asia Minor and Javan refers to the inhabitants of Greece. All the coastlands are thus represented, i.e. all the nations surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. It is remarkable that all these nations are listed in Genesis 10.

Verse 20-21

“They will bring all your brothers, from all the nations.” An impressive and colourful parade on horses and mules is pouring into Jerusalem. Together they are presented as a sacrifice to the LORD. The LORD accepts this offering, for it pleases him as much as a sacrifice from his own people. In this way the nations are fully involved in the worship of the LORD.

That becomes even clearer when the LORD appoints “priests and Levites” from among the heathen nations. Before the LORD the difference between Israel and the nations disappears.

Verse 22-24

The LORD guarantees that the salvation that he gives to his people will endure forever. He refers to the new heaven and the new earth, announced already in Isaiah 65:17, which will endure forever. Israel and his descendants will endure as long as the new heaven and the new earth. Those descendants will include all those from among the nations who have come to Jerusalem, the “spiritual” descendants of Abraham.

The worship service will always continue in the LORD’s new creation. Every Sabbath, every week and every new moon, every month, all will come to bow down before the LORD. The liturgy of the Old Testament worship is used here to paint a picture of the heavenly worship.

The enemies of the LORD are once for all subdued. After describing the heavenly glory, verse 24 gives us, as it were, a glimpse of hell.

Also in the description of hell, symbols are used relating to life on earth. We see a picture of a battlefield outside the city with the “dead bodies of those who rebelled against” the LORD. A terrifying example to all who see it: this is what happens to those who rebel against the LORD (see Mark 9:48).

Of course when we speak of hell, corpses cannot be taken literally because God’s enemies will suffer eternally in hell under horrifying circumstances.

4. Application for today

The topic of worship is central in Isaiah 66. And that refers to worship as we (should) find it on earth as well as the eternal worship in heaven. We cannot separate these two.

That becomes clear throughout the whole book of Isaiah and it is especially emphasized in the last chapter.

The LORD wants to live among a people who serve him; a people who worship him may live with him. The LORD refuses to live in a temple built for him by builders whose hearts are not dedicated to him. He is not satisfied with superficial worship and he sees through the facades. He does not want to share his honour with anyone. He will not tolerate competition with idols. He wants us completely, our heart and mind, our soul and body.

He who refuses to serve him in this way will in the end face eternal condemnation. Refusal to worship results in eternal slavery in hell.

Over against this the LORD will dwell with the *humble* and *contrite in spirit*, with those who revere his Word. He will rebuild Jerusalem for them, and in the end they will be showered with glory and splendour. Together with all those whom the LORD calls to Jerusalem, they may live in the new heaven, on the new earth. There the LORD will dwell with them forever and they will worship him continually.

These two lines run through all of Chapter 66, on the one hand for our warning and on the other for our encouragement.

He who goes his own way today, or who thinks that he can combine being a child of God with an ungodly lifestyle, deceives himself. The judgement of the LORD does not pass by the doors of the church. Instead the *judgement begins with the house of God*, and he also puts his own people to the test, and does away with what is not right.

But he who seeks the LORD, even with many shortcomings, and wants the Holy Spirit to dwell within him in order to be ruled by God's Word, may look forward to eternal salvation.

This is how it may be experienced in the church of Christ. The LORD wants to dwell in the midst of his congregation by his Holy Spirit. The members of his church may be a living house, a temple for the living God, forever!

The LORD is coming with salvation and condemnation. He will only continue with a purified people. Already Isaiah 1:10-20 impresses this upon us. The end of this book places before us the final warning: heaven or hell. A choice has to be made and God will pass judgement.

Seek the LORD with all your heart, in Jesus Christ, the Servant of the LORD and be sanctified by his Spirit. Only then will you have a future!

5. Suggestions for the introduction and preparatory study

1. Use a concordance or a Bible encyclopaedia or dictionary to find all the geographical names that occur in this chapter. Also look up the expression *new moon* (or *feast of the new moon*).
2. Use verse 1-2 to discuss the idea that you might be able to manipulate the LORD by doing something for him.
3. Discuss the two aspects of the coming of the Lord, for salvation and condemnation, as spoken of in this chapter. Compare also 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12 and 2 Peter 3:3-16.
4. In verse 13 the LORD compares himself to a mother who comforts her child. In feminist theology they speak wrongly about God as Mother. The fact is that God speaks about himself as God the Father. Yet the question could be asked if we do not have a one-sided view of God. God is also like a mother for his people (cf. Isaiah 49:15).
5. The LORD will also appoint priests and Levites from among the heathens (v.21). Compare this statement to the meticulous way in which Nehemiah checked if the family tree showed that certain people had a right to be priests (Nehemiah 7:61-65). How should the difference be explained?

6. Ideas for the discussion

1. Often the Old Testament is viewed as irrelevant for our time, and consequently these books are often not appreciated. What do you think of this? How should we treasure the Old Testament, especially what we read in Isaiah?
2. The LORD does not want to dwell in a house built by those who do not wish to serve him from the heart. What does that mean for the Christian congregation of today? What does it mean for your personal lifestyle? (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; 1 Peter 2:1-10.)
3. The LORD is not satisfied with lip service, external religiosity only. How would you be able to detect such outward religion in yourself?
4. Verse 19-21 speaks about a multitude of people who serve the LORD together with Israel. May we draw a conclusion from this for church growth today? Should you have doubts about the church if you observe a lack of growth “from the outside”?
5. God’s people will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against the Lord (v.24). How should you be glad about the doom of God’s enemies? Does the existence of hell not put a damper on the joy of heaven?
6. What imagery for hell is used in the New Testament? Can you conclude from that what it will really be like in hell?
7. Isaiah 66 alternately describes salvation and condemnation. Are we sometimes not too confident that salvation will be ours? In what sense are we too one-sided in our expectations for the future?
8. How do you picture the eternal worship in heaven?

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