



BIBLE IN A YEAR 2020



Summary

This challenging book is a revelation of God's fatherly heart for people.

Through Isaiah and his disciples, God showed his chosen people that they had missed the point of religious laws by observing commands to do things without bringing their hearts into alignment with God's values.

Yet God had a plan to bring people back to him. Part of this involved discipline for Israel and tough lessons for its neighbours. But there was more to it. A future saviour was identified, and a greater purpose for Israel to bring the whole world to know God's love and power.

Bern Leckie

Tuesday March 10: Isaiah 1-3

Being God's children

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

This challenging book is a revelation of God's fatherly heart for people. The key to understanding it is at the beginning: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me."

I love that God makes clear that the problem was not that people turned away from religion, but from him. As Simon Gillebaud said at Severn in his talk "Choose Life" (<https://www.severnvineyard.org/sunday-talks/2020/2/25/choose-life-by-simon-guillebaud-february-23-2020>), God has never switched from being about Old Testament rules to New Testament relationship. It's always been about relationship. The whole point of Old Testament law was to point people towards God so they could, through relationship, take on his values, see the world the way he does and love with his love.

But Israel was not doing this. So their religious observance was nonsense, and God wanted them to "stop bringing meaningless offerings!" Instead they should "learn to do right, seek justice, defend the oppressed."

Would people be able to work this out on their own? It seemed unlikely, so God was going to intervene in unmissable ways. Israel would suffer and be forced to ask why. If people turned to God in this painful process, they would not only find answers but also hope.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God provides for people in a parental way, with stuff, guidance, discipline and, ultimately, relationship. He is not looking for people casually to acknowledge his existence and follow some religious rules. He wants people (including us) to know and rely on him so that we can be strengthened by him to live better and do more than we can in our own mortal strength.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

The way I share about my faith is too often limited to comfy chat about activity, meetings, projects and habits. Yesterday I had a great conversation with someone whose faith in God dropped away as a child because all they could see was a church which did not seem adequate or strongly enough empowered to make a difference in the social justice they spent their adult life pursuing. They had seen religion and heard talk of relationship but had not been touched by the passion of God's heart, let alone accepted his authority to drive the changes they were looking for. I want them to meet God, not just ideas about God! So I need my reliance on and relationship with God to grow, so the Spirit can speak through that.

Who am I going to share this with?

This person and others who know, trust and work with them over time.

Thursday March 12: Isaiah 4-7

We are made for fruitfulness, but what are we producing?

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Alongside so much judgement there is also so much that reminds me of Jesus. I'm especially drawn to the picture of the vineyard (anyone else, Severn Vineyard?!) Not just because I like the name, but because it reminds me of stories Jesus told.

Remember the one about the man who built the vineyard with a wall, watchtower and winepress? (It's in Mark 12 and Matthew 21.) It's about what God wanted to grow in the world. In Jesus' version, people are tenants looking after the vines but refusing to recognise the owner. In Isaiah, people are the vines themselves, growing bad fruit instead of good.

That reminds me of another Jesus story where he is the vine and we are branches (John 15). That's how we produce good fruit! Taken together, maybe these stories show how we can't be as good and fruitful as we would like to be on our own. We need closeness to God, and if his instructions don't bring us close, we can never hope to make good fruit by our own efforts.

I also love that there was a spiritually fruitful person in this passage. Closeness to God terrified Isaiah, though, as he knew that God's glory would burn away human imperfections. What Isaiah didn't know is how God would do this and leave him intact, ready for a mission to share what he had seen and heard from God.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God's holiness is scary to us. Just as we know that light takes darkness away, we can sense that darkness in us cannot remain when God's presence lights us up. But God does not destroy people who seek him – he can take deal with sin with a touch.

So why did God bring catastrophic sounding judgement on Israel? It's not for us to judge, but it sounds to me like he wanted real change in people's hearts and in our ability to join him in reshaping the world. We would need to unite with Jesus for this. God does not want anyone to try and manufacture their own fruit. He can grow it in us when we are in Jesus.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I am struck by how much is possible when close to God compared with how little good we can really do independently. So while I might normally lean into project plans and to-do lists next time I am reviewing how to spend chunks of time and effort, I am resolving to spend more time in prayer and other people who are good at hearing and passing on God's words.

Who am I going to share this with?

I will chat with some more people at Severn Vineyard about getting together to pray!

Friday March 13: Isaiah 8-10

For to us a child is born

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Could this be any more dramatic? I love how Father God is so committed to speaking through relationships, his word to Isaiah was to take the form of a son. But his unusual name, "Quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil," probably got him noticed in school, especially because major powers would start shifting before the boy grew up.

And yet for people looking to God for hope, they would find it in another child. While stuff came and went, walls rose and fell and even majestic cedar trees could not be a source of pride for human landscapers, the family line God was building through David would last forever and yield salvation.

It's worth looking again to see what God was so angry about. Weren't people trying to spend time with God with worship and sacrifices? Yes, but while they brought their stuff, their hearts were not turning from selfishness to love. God condemned this people's unjust laws, oppression and deprivation of the poor, accumulating riches at their expense.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God's plan to use Assyria, a greedy and proud nation, to disrupt everyone's security was remarkable, especially as God made it clear through Isaiah that he would also judge that nation. In the absence of a good, God-fearing king, God worked through a bad one.

I think this shows that God can work and, ultimately, be recognised even through the worst situations. God knew that after destruction on all sides of a virtually apocalyptic conflict, people would remain who "will truly rely on the Lord".

What am I going to do differently as a result?

This is thankfully a lot more dramatic than my life. But it does remind me of times when I have felt the greatest urgency to turn to God and remind myself that I need to rely on him. These times have often been when I have feared losing something – stuff, security, status, reputation or other things which I later realised gave me more comfort than they should. How much does it keep taking for God to grab my attention?

I'd like to say that this will never happen again, but I noticed that some worries this week made me aware of a continuing reliance on things other than relationship with God for my sense of value, purpose and security. Maybe that's OK up to a point. But I'm reminded by this passage that so much is temporary, and only what God builds relationally is forever.

Who am I going to share this with?

My family. God builds family lines and joins people in marriage, so it makes sense that we should recognise and look to him together.

Monday March 16: Isaiah 11-14

New life from God's fruit shoot/root

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

The scope of God's promises in Isaiah is breathtaking. Some of the word so far has been an extreme challenge, because I think God wants to shake his people out of pride, comfortable religious habits and destructive, self-centred behaviours which cause injustice. All these things can only exist alongside a superficial awareness of God, perhaps a belief in his existence without wisdom, respect and true knowledge of his fearsome power and what it means.

God's promise is to fix this. I love the description of the righteous man, who we can recognise as Jesus. He will grow, thoroughly blessed and defined by the Holy Spirit and, in good righteous relationship with Father God, his life will be earth shattering. Not only will God get recognised properly by a few, but the earth will be filled with - and changed by - knowledge of the Lord.

I think this reading is not just about an afterlife or the idea that things will be better when we can escape the misery of the world. God is making clear that he intends his presence to change the world as we know it in our lifetimes.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God cares deeply both for his chosen people and for "the nations", and he has promised that we can trust in him to overcome oppression and injustice. God also calls his people to recognise and rally around Jesus. Intriguingly, the prophecy refers both to "the root" and "the shoot" of Jesse. Can one person be both the source and the offspring of a family? Only if that person is eternal and timeless - as Jesus claimed, "before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:58).

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I need to stop kidding myself that God's ambition for me, other believers and the rest of the world is in any way ordinary, mundane and limited by my own powers of imagination. If I'm going to be changed by the knowledge of God, I need to get to know Jesus properly and follow him.

Who am I going to share this with?

There are people I know who find church a bit irrelevant and offputting but love the idea of changing the world. They really need to meet Jesus! I don't think I can adequately explain why believing in him is so good, but I would love to provoke them into investigating for themselves. Could God's incredible promises here grab their attention?

Tuesday March 17: Isaiah 15-18

You will see and hear what God raises up

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

To be honest, I didn't find it easy to make sense of everything in today's prophecies directed at Israel's neighbours (see this [map](#)): Moab to the east of the Dead Sea (part of Jordan today), Damascus a bit further north (Syria today) and Cush further away - its people are described as noticeably different, and modern scholars tend to think this is west Africa, perhaps as far south as Ethiopia - and as God is speaking to this most faraway people, he also addresses "all you people of the world" (chapter 18 verse 3).

These words are aimed at very different people with something in common - they have substituted God for other gods and leaders, they have treated God's people badly through oppression or aggression and yet, despite their culture of independence and opposition, God will deal with them. This will be with a force which brings woe, but a promise of - woa! - good life and relationship restored.

This is huge and hard to make sense of. It's not our call to armed struggle but a declaration by God of his role in the battle against evil. What I like about it most is the promise in chapter 18 verse 3, directed at all of us, that "when a banner is raised on the mountains, you will see it". I understand at least one meaning of this to be a reference to Jesus. No matter what culture, habits, beliefs or behaviours are getting between my friends and God, Jesus is unmissable - just turn and you'll see - and good will come from responding to him.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God sees way beyond what I can, and yet makes himself visible and accessible to all of us.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Whenever I talk with someone who has a defined faith which isn't centred around Jesus (this could be a religion or a belief in people's lack of need for God), I sometimes feel like pointing them to Jesus is either just offering them one more option they don't think they need, or opening up an argument they definitely don't want.

What I can forget is that God has always intended to make his true self visible to people, and that he made us able to respond to his big, obvious signs. So how am I sharing about Jesus? This needs to be less about the best among many options, or anything particularly subtle, but more boldly as something people can recognise as big, obvious, good, and from God. I always need to remember that it's not up to me to convince people of the truth about Jesus, but that the Holy Spirit works to do this when people face Jesus for themselves.

Who am I going to share this with?

I trust that opportunities will come up in my multi-faith, socially active community!

Thursday March 19: Isaiah 19-22

How do we respond to the people God has raised up?

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

"Like" might be a difficult word today - this was uncomfortable all the way through! God continues his words to Israel's neighbours, this time including the proud and ancient civilisations of Egypt and Babylon. Both had reasons to be confident in their history and the contributions their wisdom and enterprise had made to the world. They also found their identity in their distinctiveness, difference and independence from other cultures, with rich natural resources to rely upon, as well as legendary military strength. Why would they need a foreign God?

God grabs their attention by announcing his choice to invade their strongholds and erode all of the strengths they believe they can rely upon. For Egypt, God announces a turnaround which will lead to the people recognising, being saved by and worshiping him. For Babylon and Arabia, there is no promised happy ending - idols and splendour are heading for destruction. I find the little prophecy to Edom more intriguing - is someone amongst Israel's enemies calling out to God? God seems to want them to call back...

So as God deals with his people's enemies, all should be good for Jerusalem, right? Here is the really difficult bit - God has harsh words for them because although they know about God, they have misused what they were entrusted with, and God needs to deal with them.

But wait – there's hope! "Eliakim" means "who God has set up/raised up/resurrected." There are a few of these in the Bible. This man was King Hezekiah's palace administrator, and we'll hear more about him later. But what a name, also in Jesus' family tree...

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God is the creator, owner and Lord of all - regardless of what a different culture might suggest. His love for people estranged from him is overwhelming, and his power to bring change and ruin where our pride is getting in the way is humbling. Ultimately the greatest human achievements and civilisations will stand or fall based on how they respond to the people that God has raised up.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I believe in Jesus! But do I also recognise other people God has raised up to speak or act in his name, perhaps people I don't yet believe or agree with? Has God set me up to speak for him somewhere too? I can't puzzle this out alone but need to turn to God more to ask him.

Who am I going to share this with?

As we continue exploring who God has made us to be on "The SHAPE of you" course, we'll seek him together while we look for what God has raised up in each other.

Friday March 20: Isaiah 23-25

Only what God builds lasts

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Today continues yesterday's difficult theme about God's determination to humble the proud, and if we think that just means other people, we're missing the point. That's the uncomfortable bit. It applies to rich trading nations like Tyre, but also everyone else whose disregard of God's natural laws ends up ruining the earth. Isaiah describes devastation beyond natural disaster - as if God will actively amplify the effects of human greed and rebellion and see that we find ruin in the things we relied upon for strength.

I find the praise in chapter 25 a really odd image, like some weird post-apocalyptic party on top of the rubble. What would there be to celebrate after such a disaster? Isaiah points to a few things. God's promised actions are to destroy strongholds against him and his people. God will protect the poor and needy - this isn't to be confused with a natural disaster where the poor tend to suffer the most. In fact, the end result will not be devastation but feasting, celebration, recognition of God, praise and new life free from shame, guilt or oppression. Great things are to come, but human pride and its effects - our "high fortified walls" - have to be dealt with before we can enjoy the best possible life. Only what God builds lasts.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

Isaiah is very consistent in his themes! Again we see God as active, not content to let people go on hurting themselves and each other forever, preparing to act decisively against evil, and ready to protect, feed and enjoy spending time with everyone who will trust in him.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

How much do I trust in God? Sometimes I think I mix up my trust in him with trust in my own cleverness. I also tend to think that whatever I don't know or can't do I can remedy with a quick Google search. I don't think that means I should stop being curious or connected, or resolve to be more ignorant or reckless. Rather I want to get better at making the most of the time and money we're entrusted with, but I need to acknowledge something first.

I can't live a great life alone, or even in community with other people if all we do is praise and rely on ourselves and each other. I want to declare right here that I think the best of what I know comes from God, and in all the many things I don't know, I want to trust God more than Google as a source of help when I'm searching.

Who am I going to share this with?

These striking images and my choice to seek God as a result seem like they should be relevant in discussions with people in my community who want a better world, but don't yet look to God for it.

Monday March 23: Isaiah 26-28

Hope in God, stronger than death

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Although Isaiah is bleak at times, when he praises and celebrates God's goodness, he really goes for it. What strikes me the most in this passage is his declarations about dealing with death.

I imagine when most of us are faced with death – perhaps when we or someone we love are in extreme danger or have a serious illness – we might seek God to try and avoid death. I'd guess that would also be true of Israel living through some of the disastrous upheavals Isaiah was prophesying. But is that the limit of God's power, to help us avoid death?

Not according to Isaiah. God's promise to his people was not to save them temporarily from death, but permanently. Even their graves would not be their ends. "Your dead will live, Lord; their bodies will rise..." That is a lot of faith to declare, in a death-filled world, that God really wants us to partner with him into eternity.

However, it seems that people had also been thinking about defeating death independently of God. Jerusalem's rulers boasted to have made an agreement with death, seeking refuge with false gods. That sounds like an appealing bargain. So how could people know whether to trust these gods or the one God of Israel for eternal life?

I love that God addressed this directly by telling people what he was doing and how they could test it. They could rely on "a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation." And what kind of life would result? "I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line." God's power could be tested by justice being restored.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

The foundation stone sounds a lot like Jesus! God knew that laws alone were not making people align with him, so he would provide a physical help. Build on this stone, line up with it, and we will be able to measure justice and righteousness in our own lives at last. God allowed his promise to be tested, not only through the quality of Jesus' life, but through the fact that he was first to demonstrate resurrection from death. We can follow him into life.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

This reminds me that faith in Jesus is necessary but not the end of God's desire for me. Is my life measurably just and righteous? In stressful times ahead as people worry about death and may panic (check the supermarket shelves...), I need to trust more in God, rely on him for security and have faith that we can love our neighbours where increasingly needed.

Who am I going to share this with?

My family as we observe and reflect on where practical love is needed in our community.

Tuesday March 24: Isaiah 29-31

Make plans with God, not without him

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

God's people may try to say and do all the right things, based on human rules about religious worship and law, while keeping their hearts and true intentions from God. People like this make plans and appear to be building power and alliances successfully. However, God describes them as "obstinate children". For them, God's prophecies and warnings are "nothing but words sealed in a scroll", so it will be a surprise when shame and ruin come to them. In fact, they actively encourage prophets to give them good news instead of confronting them with the truth and the person of God.

However, I love the way God promises grace when people cry to him for help, which will include unmistakable guidance on ways to live, provision of good conditions to grow food, healing from brokenness and freedom from the oppression of enemies. There's an astonishing Clockwork Orange-style reference to God thrashing his "punishing club... to the music of timbrels and harps..." (chapter 30 verse 32) Ouch.

There are serious warnings to people to rely on their own strength or that of strong-looking foreign allies, and it seems clear that many will suffer. However, I love that God still promises compassion for all (chapter 30 verse 18). Although many will not understand it until facing the consequences of rebellion, God is leaving a written witness (verse 8) of his promises and expecting a time when people who did not recognise him will start to trust in him, and healing awaits them.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God does not muck about. He knows that we might ignore or dismiss words but will ultimately have to recognise God's actions. So God acts to grab people's attention, but would much rather that we pay attention to his guidance and rely on him, consult and plan with him rather than get lost in other plans and bound up in alliances which result in ruin.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I have an ongoing struggle with planning. It's not that I can't get lots of things done, it's more that as soon as I commit too much to to-do lists, they seem to stop being helpful. Is God grabbing my attention to rely on him more and myself (and fancy time management techniques) a lot less? For the next two weeks, I will pray before writing down my stuff to do and see what difference that makes. Will it change what I commit to, or how I credit God?

Who am I going to share this with?

As some of this practical stuff involves working for other people, I will also look for an opportunity to share what happens with one of them. Let's see what God does!

Thursday March 26: Isaiah 32-24

God's kingdom is for now, not just for later

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

While God continues to warn people who are complacent and relying on their own efforts and resources, I like that in today's reading, God adds details of what he is promising for people who trust in him - a righteous king, just rulers (more than one) and the Spirit which will produce fertility, peace and "confidence forever."

I notice that God is again not just promising rest and good things for those who believe when they die. In chapter 33 verse 6, the promise is for God to be "the sure foundation for your times", which I believe means that we can be confident that God's salvation, wisdom and knowledge will make a noticeable difference to our lives and anyone else we know who may come to trust in God.

But look at how much the world needs to change as God's kingdom is brought to fruition. In chapter 34, Isaiah's message becomes addressed to all nations. From this chapter alone, it looks like the world will be overrun with God's judgment. However, we also know that God's offer of life through Jesus would extend to everybody, including us.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God isn't just interested in spending eternity with us after we've toughed out a miserable life. He wants us to be saving present day lives from the destructive power of sin and rebellion against God. He also knows people very well - including what we think we can rely on when we don't want to engage with him. God unsettles us from self-centred complacency, but he also promises that he will provide for those who recognise and respect him, living righteously as a result.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

This got me thinking about what I can show people who don't yet share my faith about how God's promises of provision work out practically.

I think it's difficult to persuade people into faith by pointing to abundant provision of stuff - I know lots of rich people with no faith and lots of people with faith who struggle financially, for example. But I think God's promised salvation, wisdom, knowledge and Spirit do make a difference to how people decide to live with comparatively little money, for example. I can look back on years when we have been challenged financially but provided for by God.

I will make more note of how that has worked, and still does, and consider how to share it.

Who am I going to share this with?

As I expect we may be entering a time of practical challenge, I think there might be people we help (or are helped by) practically, and I want to share what we have found with them.

Friday March 27: Isaiah 35-37

Trust God and we will notice how he acts

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

It's a really clear illustration of what can happen when willingness to submit to God and hear his word meets the power to act upon it. Isaiah was trusted by King Hezekiah, who had the option of relying on his own forces or alliances with other countries against aggressors like the king of Assyria, whose field commander does his best to provoke people to be angry, fearful and mistrustful of their leaders. However, Hezekiah is a good king. People want to follow him, and his willingness to follow God makes him a good person to follow.

God's response to Hezekiah's submission includes powerful words of blessing for the faithful and cursing for the aggressors, but it's not just words. God sends an angel to act, resulting in swift death for the enemy army and eventually the fall of their king at the hands of his own sons - all in response to the man who prayed, trusted his priests and could act on the words of the prophet.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

Imagine there were a way for us to hear God, even see the way to follow him - wouldn't it be great to be blessed like King Hezekiah? God promises that this is accessible to us in chapter 35.

God is willing not just to save people from death, but give them healing, strength and abundant life, and he identifies a Way of Holiness where those he has redeemed (by taking care of their guilt and sin) will walk without fear and with everlasting joy.

We can understand this as a reference to Jesus who uniquely combined the powers of a prophet, priest and king. Until he was revealed, God would point towards him through the stories of other faithful people he had empowered.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I think it's important not just to pray nice prayers, but properly seek God's living words which may involve the input of prophecy, and certainly involves the willingness to act upon what God says, especially what he has already said through the Bible. I want to pray like Hezekiah does in chapter 37 - simply, directly and with praise to God, recognising his unique nature and power.

Who am I going to share this with?

I am seeking more opportunities to pray with people in our community, including for our school. Please pray for me in this, and for my expectations not to be limited – I think God wants to be seen by people who don't yet follow Jesus. Who might join in prayer?

Monday March 30: Isaiah 38-40

Do we want God-centred glory or self-centred tragedy?

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

I love Hezekiah's seeking and trusting God. Could he have been a glorious God-seeking hero? It almost looked like it until he was faced with death and overcome with anguish. For some reason, despite God graciously granting him healing, this seemed to tip his view of life towards being strangely self-centred.

"Me" and "my" figured an awful lot in his prayer, and I think we would be picking up some really bad theology if we took Hezekiah's words as gospel when he said, "Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish..."

How do we know he became too self-centred? I think it's the best way to make sense of chapter 39. Some suggest he was preparing a deal to ally with the Babylonians, and that would have displeased God. But they approached him, interested by his illness and recovery. This could have been a time when Hezekiah gave glory to God for everything. Who knows how that could have changed the world?

But instead, he sounded more like a child showing off his stuff as if it's an essential part of themselves. Having stuff isn't a problem, nor is showing it to others. But losing perspective on whose stuff it is can be our undoing. "They saw everything in my palace... my treasures...", said Hezekiah, and Isaiah spoke God's word that this stuff was not going to stay belonging to him or his family. Yet even when faced with terrible news about his descendants, Hezekiah only heard the bits about himself. It's an awful prophecy which he calls good news, because "there will be peace and security in my lifetime."

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

Psalm 24 says "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it." Sometimes God speaks and acts so directly that we must acknowledge this. But he always gives us a choice. If we give God credit and glory, he can be seen by others. If we confuse his work and provision as our own, we have fallen into a self-centred trap.

But even as Hezekiah did that, God kept his promise to grant life. God keeps his promises.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I'm reminded that "my" stuff is really God's stuff, and I want to renew my commitment to make the most of it without taking any for granted. I also want to get better at remembering prayers God has answered and giving him credit for what he does.

Who am I going to share this with?

God has answered prayers for our school and people who work in it. I will look for appropriate times and ways to share this, although not everyone shares the same faith.

Tuesday March 31: Isaiah 41-43

God reveals his plan for the world – surprise!

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Yesterday we looked at God judging Hezekiah for not crediting God for his provision. Today God seems to declare to the rest of the world, even nations far from Israel, that they too should have noticed God at work, and will be judged for preferring powerless idols.

So what kind of intervention would God make to command the attention of the world? How could everyone start to understand who God is, what he wants and how he works?

I love this passage for setting out God's plan to bring "justice to the nations." It's not a new set of laws. It's a person, with the surprising quality of gentleness. A servant. Who is this?

Full marks if you put your hand up and shouted "Jesus!" But while we know this now, how new and shocking would it have been to Jews in Jesus' day? They expected God's kingdom coming to mean vindication for Israel against foreign oppressors, not salvation for the world outside of Israel.

I love the ways God tries to express the newness of what he is going to do through this section of Isaiah's prophecy, such as "Sing to the Lord a new song..." (chapter 42 verse 10), and "Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!" (43:18-19). But at the same time, God knows that new things aren't always received well, and that his people will not understand. "Who is blind like the one in covenant with me..." (42:19) and "Now it springs up, do you not perceive it?" (43:19) sum this up.

Nevertheless, God promises amazing things for people he has summoned - a calling, a value, safety and protection through intense trial, and a part in a glorious global assembly.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

"Apart from me there is no saviour," says God. This is a good reminder that Jesus cannot be just a good, wise, loving or well-meaning man. The work of bringing people to salvation is God's work, accomplished through Jesus but spread and gossiped by us as we recognise and praise God. We are his witnesses (43:10-12) of the reality of God and his unique power.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Reflect more (myself and with others) on how I recognise God in action and praise him for it. If I only pray about my own issues, I'll miss the perspective God wants his people to gain by seeing him at work.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I pray with this week.

Thursday April 2: Isaiah 44-46

God vs gods

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

From a human point of view, there have been many cultures and many different ideas across the world about how life came to be and what a god-like creator, protector or saviour might look like. It's still a live modern question - can any or all of these ideas be right?

Today's reading appears to be God's answer to this. Yes, he is real, and offers the evidence of creation itself and of transformed human lives in relationship with him to prove it. So what about other nations' gods? They are dismissed as human inventions which cannot be compared. There is a keen observation of people's tendencies to take on the role of creator and worship created things, rather than recognise and worship the maker of all things, including the heavens, earth and the sources of everything we want to get creative with.

I like that God presents himself clearly in this - if we can accept that he is real, and he gives reasons and ways to do this, we can't also carry around a belief that all gods are equally real. We have to choose - not between gods as much as between God and ourselves as the source of life and good stuff. God is also making it clear that, while he has been close to a people, he is not limited by location or time. He has a long-standing purpose to bring salvation and the chance of right relationship back to all people. This reading isn't the first to point forward to Jesus, and the saviour has now come for us, yet the scope of what God describes sounds like he is pointing to our future and not just our past.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God has a unique view across time, the world and its people, and a commitment to transform human lives by his blessing, provision and presence. God needs us to recognise the difference between this reality and the little gods we create for ourselves.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I'm not in the habit of wood carving, but I do recognise my tendency to get so wrapped up in the things I create that I can forget the most important thing - relationship with the Creator. I want to submit all of this to God and make sure there is nothing I have placed in the way of this relationship.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I pray with this week, and also - where there is an appropriate opportunity - with other creative people I work with.

Friday April 3: Isaiah 47-50

Trust God's plan and obey his servant

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

I like that clear themes are emerging from Isaiah's prophecies. One is the foolishness of basing a life, or indeed a nation and culture, on wisdom which is meant to operate independently from God. For some that is expressed as idols, for others as magic, astrology, or, perhaps more widespread today, learning or military strength. God's warning to the proud and powerful civilisation of Babylon suggests that such self-reliance goes together with corrupt, wicked behaviour, and blindness to its consequences.

This was important to God's people because they had to endure exile from their own land and captivity under Babylon. God's promise to free them will have reminded them of God freeing Israel from Egypt, the story told in Exodus.

But this happened before God completed the plan announced again here, for God to empower a servant (Jesus) to rescue Israel and become "a light for the Gentiles" (us!)

Just like Hezekiah, Israel should have noticed and credited God for the scope of what he was doing, but they did not. So, they had all these promises, not just of freedom for themselves but for world-changing significance, yet they would get hung up on their own need for restoration for centuries to come. They would keep looking for a saviour, but not recognise him because they didn't recognise the point of him, or the purpose God intended.

But as Easter approaches, and we get ready to celebrate this saviour's greatest work, we must credit God. We are included in his kingdom, even part of his family, because of Jesus.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God always had a bigger plan than people could get their heads around. The world would recognise and be able to obey God because his servant saviour would lead the way. God knows that without him, we would always be looking for other bases for our lives and end up corrupt, not knowing who we really are. God chose not to correct us through ideas and laws alone, but with a person we can both relate to and marvel at when we see God powerfully at work through their life. God then expects us to trust and obey him.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I'm struck by the command to trust God when walking in the dark, not a torch I have lit for myself. I need to bring myself to listen to and obey God more often, not just try to work things out for myself.

Who am I going to share this with?

This reminds me that there are people I should pray with more, and I'll share with them.

Monday April 6: Isaiah 51-54

God's promises rest on Jesus

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Today's epic reading is an amazing promise by God to his people, which includes us because of Jesus. In chapter 51, I like the way the focus is on the Jewish family with a reminder of their heritage - one man and one woman? Yes, but they aren't the "rock" - that is a title reserved for God. The whole nation comes from God's promise to work with a people to call his own, and one of its roles is to demonstrate right relationship with God and his justice to other nations. Despite the difficulties God's people have faced, God's promise is to restore them to glory so he can be recognised worldwide.

Key to this restoration is God's suffering servant. The description, written centuries before Jesus, is so reminiscent of Jesus to us that it might seem odd that some don't recognise him in this. The heart of Easter is right here. God makes one man's life an offering for our sin (chapter 53 verse 10) yet seeing "the light of life" after his suffering (verse 11.) If someone did want to live a life which convinced people they were taking on this role for themselves, they would have to pull off rising from the dead. This thing God is describing cannot be faked. Jesus has done it.

Finally, I like the way God tells his people to get ready to spread out - you're going to need a bigger tent! It is strange and sad that some people think Jesus makes the Old Testament irrelevant. Jesus is very much part of this book, and if we take the bits which point to him seriously, we also have to pay attention to the rest of God's promises, which include remembering and honouring his past covenant agreements with the people who were part of them. "Terror will be far removed; it will not come to you" might not sound like today's news, but it is God's promise to the people whose trust is in him.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God's plan is much bigger, wider and stronger than our ability to do things on our own. Jesus' work, promised first to Israel, is uncontainable in scope and importance, and the blessing we get from it depends on many centuries of work God has done with his people, by his choice.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Thank God this week for what he has made us part of, which I take for granted too often.

Who am I going to share this with?

Others who celebrate Easter with us this week.

Tuesday April 7: Isaiah 55-58

Don't go your own way, go God's better way

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

I like the distinctiveness of God's call to a way of thinking and life that we cannot achieve by ourselves. He promises nourishment, relationship, healing and restoration to thirsty, hurting people. After the judgement, it's hope.

So what do people need to do for this? Some of it sounds a little vague – “Maintain justice and do what is right” (chapter 56 verse 1). Wasn't not knowing or being able to do what is right the problem in the first place? How can God have such high expectations?

I don't think that God left anyone to work this out by themselves. That's the real point. By growing closer to God, including spending time keeping God's Sabbath days, God's ways, thoughts, values and power to put them into practice would become accessible, even though they are different from our own.

The way God addresses people, I notice high expectations. Injustice, oppression and hunger will not fix themselves. God demands that people who want to draw close to him, say through fasting, be mainly concerned and engaged with practical love and social justice.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God's kingdom plan is not to gather believers now simply to look forward to a better life in heaven. He does not call people to escape the world but to change it.

In order to do this, God offers cleansing, healing and empowerment to people who put him and his ways above themselves and their own ways. He dismisses people who do religious activities without self-sacrifice for the hungry and oppressed.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

How comfortable am I in what I call faith? If I have settled for simply claiming eternal security in exchange for a belief in the existence of God, I have missed God's point entirely. In my head, I don't think that is my life, but in my heart, I know I need to be closer to God and what he values, and more active in seeking his kingdom in practice.

One practical way to do that is being less distracted on a Sabbath day of rest with him. I do let work creep in there sometimes. Is there maybe a better way to fast sometimes too? It's been a while since I fasted by giving away food, money or work rather than just not eating for a bit (and ending up cranky and quarrelsome.) I need to submit to God's way here.

Who am I going to share this with?

Some of this, like when I might fast, needs to be private according to Jesus. Hopefully you won't notice! But I'll share some of what I might notice afterwards with family.

Thursday April 9: Isaiah 59-62

The year of the Lord's favour

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

I love the breakthrough that God makes clearer in this passage. From the previous chapters, it might appear that God's high expectations of his people mean that we somehow have to earn our way into his good favour. But the flow of Isaiah's revelation from God reminds me that no-one called for justice, "so [God's] own arm achieved salvation for him." We didn't deserve it, but he rescued us from our own self-centred traps.

This must have been a puzzle to Israel. A promise of a new kingdom, new life, delivered by God rather than earned through struggle, yet leading to much-changed lives and attitudes. When would all this happen? How would they know when God acted?

You might know that Jesus quoted Isaiah chapter 61 (in Luke 4:18) to apply to himself. These transformational promises apply to us when we have faith in him.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God wants huge change in the world and in the attitudes and abilities of people who believe in him. He knows that we cannot puzzle this out for ourselves, so he sent Jesus to show and empower us to live differently, hope for more, seek what God wants and be used by him to deliver it.

In some ways, God works through believers to bring encouragement and comfort. But it's not all about words. God also equips believers to share love in practical ways and to be "a display of his splendour", big and solid like oak trees.

This would begin with Jesus and Israel for other nations to observe. But it has ended up sweeping the globe as Isaiah foretold centuries before Jesus. God speaks, prophets listen and pass words along faithfully, and the world can be amazed by God's power.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

As much as this regular format tends to prompt me to make a plan and a promise, I think I simply want to spend time with Jesus this Easter weekend. Let's see what he wants to say!

Who am I going to share this with?

I will do this with my family!

Friday April 10: Isaiah 63-66

New heavens and a new earth

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

While gentleness was a characteristic Isaiah described in his picture of the servant we believe to be Jesus – “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out,” (Isaiah 42:3a), the promise was also, “In faithfulness he will bring forth justice” (42:3b). As Isaiah’s account concludes, it’s time for some tough, decisive action.

Isaiah’s words here begin with a history lesson, remembering God’s power displayed around Moses and Israel’s rebellion despite God’s kindness. This brought the country to exile from their promised land, a physical reminder of their hearts’ distance from God.

The prayers seeking restoration look like a call to rebuild particular cities, and these were answered, but God’s rebuilding plan was much bigger. They extended to “new heavens and a new earth.” The freedom, joy and healthiness described sound like something to look forward to in our future, not some glorious period in Israel’s past.

I love that Isaiah’s concluding vision from God goes way beyond a restoration of religion. The whole system that God gave to point the way to him becomes redundant in God’s presence. Even the food laws that Isaiah didn’t seem to see ending (like a ban on eating pig flesh) would get surprisingly rolled back as God’s kingdom progressed (see Acts chapter 10.)

People still get to choose whether to go God’s way or their own, just as we all chose how to respond to Jesus. It’s ultimately a life or death decision. But the way to life is open.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God has a comprehensive and effective plan to replace evil with good, darkness with light, suffering with joy and broken relationships with love-fuelled, functional family bonds.

He has communicated this in a variety of ways in history, including large scale movements of his chosen people and powerful words like Isaiah’s, received by people looking to God for hope in difficult circumstances.

God keeps his promises and acts decisively. He will bring judgement, but not before we have all had a chance to respond to Jesus. His love is shown most powerfully in the day we remember today, Good Friday, when Jesus fulfilled his calling to be the suffering servant, “led like a lamb to the slaughter” (Isaiah chapters 52 and 53) before seeing “the light of life.”

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Simply praise God this weekend for his love and for including us in his family.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I worship with this weekend, and afterwards when we have experiences to share.