

The Earthly Ministry of Jesus Christ

Though Isaiah lived 750 years before Jesus Christ, he saw in vision many aspects of the mortal ministry of the Lord, including his birth, childhood, miracles, trials, and divine sacrifice. Many of the prophecies he recorded of Jesus Christ's great work on earth have already been fulfilled and some are yet to be fulfilled.

ISAIAH 1:18

Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

In this passage scarlet, a bright red, and crimson, a deep red, are both used to symbolize blood, which in turn can signify sin. The sins of the children of Israel were both conspicuous and deep-seated. The Lord, through Isaiah, contrasts the bloodlike reds of scarlet and crimson with pure white snow and wool.

White symbolizes purity, innocence, and light. In addition, wool, a product from a lamb, points to the atonement of Jesus, the "Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The contrast between red and white illustrates the power of Christ's atonement to make the penitent sinner clean.

ISAIAH 8:14

And he shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel.

To the righteous, Jesus Christ is the elect and precious chief cornerstone "upon which they might build and have safe foundation" (Jacob 4:15). But to those who reject his word, Jesus is "a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence" (1 Peter 2:6–8; 1 Corinthians 1:23).

The phrase "both the houses of Israel" refers to the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. During times of apostasy, citizens of these kingdoms viewed Jesus Christ as a stumbling stone, or someone who got in their way during their journey through mortality.

ISAIAH 9:1–2

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

The land of the shadow of death is a land peopled by those who do not know Jesus Christ, the "great light," and his gospel. These people walk in darkness. Jesus was the great light that shone upon the inhabitants of Galilee during his mortal mission. Matthew 4:13–16 contains the fulfillment of this prophecy found in Isaiah 9:1–2. As those who

follow Christ walk through mortality in the latter days, they will receive great hope, comfort, and joy when they accept Jesus as the “great light.”

ISAIAH 9:3

Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest.

Isaiah 9 presents a joyous messianic prophecy. The familiar words “for unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given” (v. 6) are part of this prophecy and foretell the coming of the Savior. Because of Jesus Christ’s coming, joy will increase (v. 3). The Messiah will break the rod of the oppressor (v. 4). The soldiers’ boots, garments, and other items of war will be burned with fire (v. 5). A child who will establish his righteous government and peace among the nations will be born (vv. 6–7; Luke 2:10–11). The Prince of Peace will reign.

The Lord’s victory over Israel’s enemies and his coming will bring Israel a joy similar to that experienced by a farmer at an abundant harvest.

ISAIAH 9:4

For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.

In biblical times, the staff and rod were used by taskmasters on slaves. A yoke was a wooden frame designed to harness together beasts of burden. These three items—the yoke, staff, and rod—signify oppression, or the burdens placed on Israel by its neighbors (Isaiah 10:5, 24–27).

In particular, the language of this verse recalls the manner in which Egypt oppressed the Israelites before Moses led them out of captivity. (For example, see “yoke” in Leviticus 26:13; “burden” in Exodus 1:11; 2:11; 5:4–5; 6:6–7; and “taskmasters” in Exodus 3:7; 5:6, 10–14). Just as Moses delivered ancient Israel from the Egyptian yoke of physical bondage, Jesus Christ delivers his followers from the yoke of spiritual bondage.

ISAIAH 11:1

And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.

The discussion of the tree, its rod, stem, branch, and roots in Isaiah 11:1 is a continuation of the prophecy regarding the cutting down of the forest from the previous chapter. The Lord will “lop the bough,” hew down the “high ones,” and “cut down the thickets of the forest” (Isaiah 10:33–34). The Lord, or forester, will trim the boughs and cut down the trees to clean out the forest and prepare the way for the stem of Jesse to flourish. This trimming and cutting symbolizes the Lord’s severing the power and glory of unrighteous leaders and their nations.

The stem of Jesse is Christ. The Doctrine and Covenants is explicit: “Who is the Stem of Jesse spoken of in the 1st, 2d, 3d, 4th, and 5th verses of the 11th chapter of Isaiah? Verily thus saith the Lord: It is Christ” (D&C 113:1–2). The Davidic royal family, then, is compared to the stump or “stem” of an olive tree. Just as an olive tree is able to send forth a shoot or “rod,” so would the family of David send forth a leader who would have wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, and knowledge (Isaiah 11:2). That leader is Jesus Christ.

ISAIAH 28:16

Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation.

This is a prophecy about Jesus Christ, who is called a “stone,” a “tried stone,” and a “precious corner stone.” A tried stone withstands a test of strength, and a cornerstone adds permanence and strength to the foundation of a building. Here the building is Zion, where “he that believeth” may have a “sure foundation” on which to build (1 Peter 2:6–8). Paul’s imagery accords with that of Isaiah and Peter. Paul says that the church was built “upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” (Ephesians 2:20).

ISAIAH 28:24

Doth the plowman plow all day to sow? Doth he open and break the clods of his ground?

Isaiah presents the Parable of the Farmer in Isaiah 28:23–29. The Lord is the plowman who, like the farmer, performs all his work in its proper order, with specific results in mind. Through a rhetorical question in verse 24, Isaiah explains that a plowman does not plow continuously—literally all day, every day. If he did, the growing season would be over before the seeds were ever planted. The farmer must undertake many tasks to ensure a successful harvest. Similarly, the Lord follows a precise pattern as he deals with his people. Everything occurs in its proper order with specific results in mind.

ISAIAH 32:1–2

Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness . . . And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.

Jesus Christ is the “king” and the “man” mentioned in the passage above. Isaiah provides four metaphors to indicate the Lord’s temporal and spiritual preservation of the Saints: “hiding place” (or shelter), “covert,” “rivers of water,” and “shadow of a great rock.” These correspond with “wind,” “tempest,” “dry place,” and “weary land”—words that pertain to this earthly existence with all of its tribulation and hardships. When the Lord’s followers are thirsty, the Lord will provide rivers of water to quench their thirst, and when they require rest, he will provide shadow beside a great rock. In other words, when they need shelter from the tempests of life, Jesus will be their refuge.

ISAIAH 40:11

[The Lord God] shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

This passage compares the Lord to a shepherd and his people to lambs. The same images have been used by many other prophets in describing humanity's relationship with God (Psalms 23; 28:9; Jeremiah 23:3). Isaiah says that the Lord will do four things for his people: (1) he will feed them as a shepherd feeds his flock; (2) he will gather them with his arm; (3) he will carry them in his bosom, or the fold of the shepherd's robe, a symbol of intimate, loving care; and (4) he will lead those that are with young. That is to say, he will provide his people with temporal as well as spiritual sustenance.

ISAIAH 42:3

A bruised reed shall [the Lord] not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench.

Isaiah had a great understanding of the Savior and his mission to strengthen those who were faltering. He knew that Jesus' mission would include serving the house of Israel and the gentiles. He knew that Christ would not fail his mission (Isaiah 42:1–9).

Isaiah introduces two images in Isaiah 42:3—a “bruised reed” and a “smoking flax.” A reed is a marsh plant with tall, hollow stems. A bruised reed is one that is bent and cracked, and therefore weak. A bruised reed may represent physical weaknesses or afflictions. A smoking flax is a wick made from linen for an oil lamp, whose flame wavers, about to go out. This may signify someone who is spiritually weak, whose faith falters.

Jesus healed and cared for the physically infirm, and he taught and guided the spiritually weak. A reed requires much water to grow properly. A linen wick burns brightly when it has sufficient oil. Symbolically, Jesus Christ, as the water of life, provides water to the reed and, as the Anointed One, provides oil to the wick.

ISAIAH 44:22

I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee.

Isaiah 44:21–23 declares that the Lord has redeemed the house of Israel. In these verses the Lord reminds the children of Israel of their preferred status as his servants, adding that he will forgive them and forget their sins if they will return to him. The atonement has already been firmly decreed, and mankind's sins can be blotted out by the Redeemer. Because of this great gift of redemption, all God's creations sing praises to him (v. 23).

In verse 22, the Lord uses a universal image—a thick cloud—to illustrate how he is able to blot out sins. As a thick cloud blots out the sky, the Lord will blot out sins and remove them from his memory. A scripture revealed through Joseph Smith presents a similar message: “Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more” (D&C 58:42).

ISAIAH 46:4

And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you.

“Hoar hairs” are gray hairs. Here the Lord comforts his people by promising that he will support and help them from the beginning to the end of their lives (Psalm 71:16–18, 21). The imagery depicts the Lord as a kind and loving father. He made his children, carried them, delivered them, and even when they grow old and their hair has turned gray, he will continue to carry them. He says, “I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you” (Isaiah 46:4).

ISAIAH 49:16

Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.

The phrase “graven thee upon the palms of my hands” refers to the marks of the nails in Christ’s hands. These marks remained after his resurrection (Luke 24:38–40; 3 Nephi 11:13–14). The nail marks are a sign to Israel—and to the world—that Christ fulfilled his mission as Savior (Isaiah 22:23, 25; John 20:25; 3 Nephi 11:14–15; D&C 6:37; 45:48–53).

The words “thy walls are continually before me” likely refer to the walls of Jerusalem. These walls are ever present in the consciousness of those who dwell in the city. In the same way, an awareness of the people of Israel is ever present with the Lord.

ISAIAH 53:2

For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground.

Isaiah 53 is one of the most detailed prophecies of the Messiah found in the Old Testament. It gives Isaiah’s readers vast insight into the work of the mortal Jesus and the blessings he offers. Worshipers learn from this chapter that Jesus Christ would bear the transgressions and iniquities of all mankind. He would take the sins of his followers upon himself so that they could be cleansed. He would also bear their grief and sorrow, their emotional pain and suffering. If they would turn to him, he would heal them of all these infirmities.

Isaiah uses two plant metaphors to portray the young mortal Jesus: “tender plant” and “root.” Jesus was like a tender plant, untouched by corruption and sin. He was subject to temptation, hunger, fatigue, sickness, and pain. The Father, however, watched over the young Jesus as a careful gardener watches a tender plant. Luke records: “The child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40).

Jesus came forth not in fertile land, but in “dry ground,” both temporally and spiritually. He grew up in the harsh conditions of an arid land and a spiritually barren nation. Dry ground is the opposite of streams of water, which

usually denote temporal happiness and prosperity. Streams of water also represent the spiritual life brought by the gospel. The dry ground represents the spiritual barrenness of apostate Judaism.

ISAIAH 53:5

But he was wounded for our transgressions.

Isaiah 53 comprises a detailed prophecy of the ministry, atoning sacrifice, and triumph of Jesus Christ. Verse 5 speaks concerning Christ's atoning sacrifice. The expression "he was wounded for our transgressions" may better be translated from the Hebrew as "he was pierced for our transgressions." Jesus Christ was pierced for the transgressions of all mankind while on the cross. The Psalmist prophesied: "They pierced my hands and my feet" (Psalm 22:16). In April 1829, Joseph Smith received this revelation from the Lord: "Behold the wounds which pierced my side, and also the prints of the nails in my hands and feet" (D&C 6:37).

ISAIAH 53:5

He was bruised for our iniquities.

The phrase "he was bruised for our iniquities" is more correctly rendered "he was crushed [Hebrew *daka*'] for our iniquities." Jesus Christ was crushed in the Garden of Gethsemane. The word Gethsemane (Hebrew *Gath Shemen*) itself signifies "oil press." Just as olives are crushed at an olive press to render pure olive oil, so the Anointed One was crushed to sanctify mankind. He suffered so mightily in the Garden of Gethsemane that he bled from every pore (Luke 22:44; Mosiah 3:7; D&C 19:18).

ISAIAH 53:6

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.

Isaiah 53 testifies again and again that Jesus Christ bore the sins of mankind. "He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows," "he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities," "[he] hath laid on him the iniquity of us all," "for the transgressions of my people was he stricken," "he shall bear their iniquities," and "he bare the sin of many" (vv. 4–12).

Though Jesus Christ has carried the burdens and sins of humanity, all have strayed from the Shepherd and wandered from the strait and narrow path. Every soul who has ever lived—except for Jesus—has sinned (Romans 3:23; 1 Peter 2:25; 1 John 1:8, 10). Rather than walking the Lord's path, they often go their own way. The sheep that have strayed need a Shepherd to guide them.

ISAIAH 53:7

He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

Isaiah uses two similes to describe Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice: "as a lamb" and "as a sheep." Not only is Christ the Good Shepherd (John 10:14), but he is also the sacrificial lamb, who went without protest or resistance to his death. This contrasts mankind, the sheep that willfully went astray (Isaiah 53:6). The sacrifice of an unblemished lamb under the law of Moses prefigured the atoning sacrifice of Christ (Genesis 22:7-8; Exodus 12:3). The atonement fulfills the symbolism of the lamb.

The prophecy "he opened not his mouth" was fulfilled when Jesus appeared before Herod and Pilate. Herod "questioned with him in many words; but he answered him nothing" (Luke 23:9). Mark similarly records that when Jesus stood before Pilate, "the chief priests accused him of many things: but he answered nothing. And Pilate asked him again, saying, Answerest thou nothing? Behold how many things they witness against thee. But Jesus yet answered nothing" (Mark 15:3-5).

ISAIAH 53:9

And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death.

Isaiah prophesies that Jesus Christ would make his "grave with the wicked." This prophecy was fulfilled when Christ was crucified between two robbers (Matthew 27:38). It may also mean that his grave was with those who had sinned, though he himself was without sin.

The prophecy that Jesus would be buried "with the rich" was fulfilled when he was buried in the tomb of the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea (Matthew 27:57-60).

ISAIAH 55:1

Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

This short passage is an invitation to come to the living waters of Christ and drink freely. Those who are thirsty are offered living water, and wine and milk besides. This promise is echoed in the Gospel of John, in which the apostle records Jesus as saying, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink" (John 7:37; Revelation 21:6; 22:17).

The living water is the love of God (1 Nephi 11:25). Ultimately, it represents Jesus Christ and his atonement, the only true source of eternal life. The blessings of the atonement have no temporal cost. Individuals pay no monetary price to receive the blessings of the atonement of Christ. Yet God does require a spiritual price: a broken heart and a contrite spirit (2 Nephi 2:7; 3 Nephi 9:20; D&C 59:8).

ISAIAH 64:8

But now, O Lord, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand.

Isaiah 64:8 is part of Isaiah's Intercessory Prayer, offered in powerful poetry (Isaiah 63:15–19; 64:1–12). In this prayer, the prophet pleads on behalf of his people, asking the Lord to look down from heaven in mercy (Isaiah 63:15). Isaiah directly addresses the Lord eight times—five times with the words, “O Lord,” twice as “thou art our father,” and once with the expression “O God.”

The address, “thou art our father” (Isaiah 64:8), suggests a God who is also a Father, one who knows and loves his children. The people through Isaiah acknowledge their true relationship to their creator. As clay, they are nothing without the creator, having no shape and no power to mold themselves. They are in all things subject to the potter. It is a prayer not only from those of old but from the hearts of God's covenant people in the latter days as well.