

Homiletics Analysis: Isaiah 65

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Isaiah 65 is the LORD's response to the intercessory prayer of Isaiah 64, where the remnant cried out for God to rend the heavens and come down in redemptive power. Rather than simply answering with "yes" or "no," God responds by drawing a sharp and decisive distinction — a distinction that runs through the entire chapter like a spine — between those who sought Him and those who did not, between those who turned from Him in persistent rebellion and those who humbled themselves before Him. The chapter opens with a striking reversal: God was found by those who did not seek Him (the nations, v.1), while Israel — who should have sought Him — was a people who provoked Him continually (vv.2–7). God will not respond to the prayer of Isaiah 64 by saving Israel en masse; instead He will act in discriminating judgment, destroying the rebellious majority while preserving a faithful remnant (vv.8–16). The chapter then pivots dramatically to the longest sustained vision of the new creation in the Old Testament — the new heavens and new earth (vv.17–25) — where God promises a transformed creation marked by joy, longevity, fruitfulness, intimacy with God, and the end of all harm and enmity. The wolf and the lamb feed together; the serpent eats dust; the mountain of the LORD is a place of total shalom.

This Text — Intent:

God is seeking to accomplish two interlocked effects through this chapter. First, He is pressing the reader toward honest self-examination: which side of this divide do you inhabit? Are you among those who seek the LORD or among those who provoke Him with religious formalism and syncretism? The description of Israel's rebellion in vv.2–7 is devastatingly specific — it is not gross paganism but subtle, persistent, self-directed religion, the kind that looks religious while turning from the living God. Second, and more profoundly, God is anchoring the hope of His people in a future He alone will create. The new heavens and new earth are not a human project — they are God's sovereign act of total renewal. He is calling His people to live now in light of that promised future: to grieve what breaks His heart, to seek Him rather than substitutes, and to orient their entire present existence by the joy, intimacy, and shalom that He guarantees for those who are His.

Subject Sentence: God sovereignly distinguishes His remnant from rebels and promises them a new creation.

Primary Claim: God will not be confused — He sees clearly who seeks Him and who provokes Him, and He is moving history toward a new creation He will build for those who are His; therefore, seek Him now and live in the light of that future.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Remnant Distinction (vv.8–16): The most significant interpretive question in this chapter concerns the identity of the “servants” (vv.8–16) set against the rebels. A dispensational reading typically insists that this entire chapter — including the new creation vision — applies to ethnic, national Israel in a future millennial or post-millennial kingdom, with the “servants” being a faithful Jewish remnant preserved through tribulation. The text does not forbid this reading outright — there is genuine ethnic and national texture in the passage — but a canonical reading informed by Paul’s use of Isaiah 65:1–2 in Romans 10:20–21 establishes that the “found by those who did not seek” language applies to Gentile inclusion in the gospel age. The distinction between seekers and rebels cuts across ethnic lines and is fulfilled in the new covenant community, not merely in a future national Israel. The Reformed reading holds that the remnant principle — God preserving a faithful people within and through judgment — is fulfilled in the church as the new covenant Israel, without denying that the passage has genuine ethnic texture in its original address. Acknowledge the dispensational attention to the passage’s national Israelite frame; qualify its insistence on restricting fulfillment to ethnic Israel in a future age; the canonical evidence (Romans 10, Galatians 6:16, Revelation 21) requires a broader application.

The New Heavens and New Earth (vv.17–25): A second major interpretive question is whether the new creation vision of vv.17–25 describes a renewed present creation (a transformed earth), a heavenly state, or the final eschatological new creation of Revelation 21–22. Three positions are in play: (1) Dispensational/premillennial: this describes the millennial kingdom, a provisional new order prior to the final state — the continued presence of death (v.20) is read as evidence that this is not yet the final state. (2) Amillennial/Reformed: the vision is a prophetic, hyperbolic portrayal of the whole new covenant age, including its consummation; the “death” reference is interpreted as premature or cursed death still present in the fallen age but drastically reduced as a foretaste of the ultimate renewal. (3) New Creation/inaugurated eschatology: the vision spans the new covenant age and its consummation, with vv.17–20 describing the present inaugurated state and vv.21–25 describing the final consummation — a both/and reading that takes the textual tension seriously. The Reformed reading is most faithfully served by option (3): Isaiah’s prophetic vision encompasses the entire sweep of new covenant redemption from inauguration to consummation, without mapping cleanly onto a single moment. The presence of death in v.20 creates genuine tension with Revelation 21:4 (no more death) that should not be dissolved by either reading — it is the tension of prophetic

overlay, where near and far, partial and final, are held together in a single vision as is characteristic of OT eschatological prophecy. Refute the millennial-only restriction as artificially narrowing the passage's canonical scope; acknowledge the dispensational attentiveness to the passage's textual details (including v.20) as a genuine exegetical concern worth taking seriously even where the conclusion is not followed.

The Syncretism Description (vv.2–7): The specific practices named in vv.3–5 — sacrificing in gardens, burning incense on bricks, sitting among graves, eating swine's flesh, keeping vigil in crypts — are contested as to whether they describe specifically Canaanite fertility rites, general Near Eastern syncretism, or the kind of self-generated religion that substitutes ritual performance for genuine seeking of God. The Reformed reading is that the precise identification of each practice matters less than the structural indictment they collectively represent: Israel is not an atheistic people but a profusely religious one who has directed that religiosity toward everything except the living God. This structural reading is reinforced by v.2 ("a rebellious people... who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices") and is the reading with the strongest claim on applicational force across cultures.

Key Canonical Support

- **Romans 10:20–21** — Paul quotes Isaiah 65:1–2 directly, applying v.1 (found by those who did not seek) to Gentile inclusion and v.2 (spread out my hands to a rebellious people) to Israel's rejection of the gospel — establishing the remnant/rebel distinction as a new covenant hermeneutical key.
 - **Revelation 21:1–5** — John's vision of the new heavens and new earth draws explicitly on Isaiah 65:17–19, establishing this passage as the Old Testament root of the consummated new creation; the direct echo confirms the eschatological trajectory of Isaiah's vision.
 - **Romans 9:6–8, 27–29** — Paul's argument that "not all Israel is Israel" and the Isaiah quotation about a remnant being saved directly corroborates the discriminating-remnant principle of Isaiah 65:8–16; the election of grace principle is operative here.
 - **Isaiah 64:1–12** — The immediate prayer to which Isaiah 65 is the response; reading the answer (ch. 65) in light of the petition (ch. 64) establishes the dialogue structure of the passage and explains why the chapter opens with God speaking, not acting in the way requested.
 - **2 Peter 3:10–13** — Peter explicitly grounds the present-age call to holy living in the coming new heavens and new earth, paralleling the applicational intent of Isaiah 65: the certain future of God's new creation is meant to reorient present conduct and identity.
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Aim: To show that God’s sovereign distinction between the remnant and the rebels is grounded in His character, confirmed by the canon, and is meant to anchor believers in a hope that reshapes everything about how they live now.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	The LORD reveals Himself to those who did not seek Him — a ready God to an unready people	Paul applies this to Gentiles (Rom. 10:20); the initiative is entirely God’s
2	God spread out His hands all day to a rebellious Israel following their own devices	Paul applies this to Israel’s rejection of the gospel (Rom. 10:21)
3–5	Specific catalogue of syncretistic, self-generated religious practices: gardens, bricks, graves, swine, crypts	Not atheism but self-directed religiosity — the most persistent form of rebellion
5b	“Who say, ‘Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you’”	Devastating irony: the rebel claims superior holiness while provoking God
6–7	God will repay — He has not been silent; judgment is determined and will be executed	The prayer of ch. 64 will not be answered by general amnesty
8–9	But as new wine is found in a cluster, so God will not destroy all — He has servants among them	The remnant principle: preservation within judgment; the elect within the nation
10	Sharon and the Valley of Achor become pastureland for those who seek the LORD	Restoration of the land for the seeking remnant — Achor echoes Joshua 7 (reversal of curse)
11–12	Those who forsook the LORD and set tables for Fortune and Destiny will be slaughtered	“Fortune” and “Destiny” — names of pagan deities; their worshippers receive what they chose
13–14	Stark contrast: “My servants shall eat... drink... rejoice... sing” / “you shall be	Seven contrasts; the servants’ joy and the rebels’ misery are mirror images

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	hungry... thirsty... ashamed... cry out”	
15	The rebels’ name becomes a curse; God’s servants receive a new name	Identity transformation: the old name perishes; new covenant identity granted
16	Those who bless/swear will do so by the God of truth (Heb.: “Amen”); former troubles forgotten	“God of Amen/Truth” — the faithful God whose word holds; the past is sealed and buried
17	“Behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered”	The hinge verse: sovereign new creation announced; explicit discontinuity with the old order
18–19	God commands: “Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating”; Jerusalem becomes a joy; weeping and crying no more	The emotional texture of the new creation — commanded delight, abolished grief
20	No more infant death or premature old age; the centenarian is still called young; the sinner at 100 is accursed	Most contested verse: death still present but radically transformed — prophetic overlay tension
21–22	They shall build houses and inhabit them; plant vineyards and eat — no more building for others to inhabit	Reversal of Deuteronomy 28 curses (futility curses); labor and enjoyment restored
22b	“For like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be”	The tree as emblem of uninterrupted, flourishing longevity
23	They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity — they and their offspring are the blessed of the LORD	Reversal of Genesis 3 curses: toil and childbearing loss healed
24	“Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear”	Perfect intimacy: the communication gap between creature and Creator closed completely
25	Wolf and lamb feed	Reversal of enmity (Genesis

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	together; lion eats straw; serpent eats dust — no hurt or destruction on God’s holy mountain	3:14–15); the serpent’s curse maintained; Eden restored and exceeded

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–7	God’s Indictment: The Ready God and the Rebellious People
2	8–16	God’s Discrimination: Remnant Preserved, Rebels Destroyed
3	17–25	God’s New Creation: What He Is Building for Those Who Are His

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God sovereignly distinguishes His remnant from rebels and promises them a new creation.

Primary Claim: God will not be confused — He sees clearly who seeks Him and who provokes Him, and He is moving history toward a new creation He will build for those who are His; therefore, seek Him now and live in the light of that future.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine whether your religion is directed toward God or toward yourself.

(*Mind/Belief*) The rebels of Isaiah 65 were not irreligious people. They burned incense, made offerings, observed practices — the entire catalogue of vv.3–5 is relentlessly religious. What made it rebellion was that it was self-generated, self-directed, and self-congratulatory (“Keep away — I am holier than you,” v.5). Examine your own religious activity: Is it fundamentally a seeking of God on His terms, or is it a performance of religiosity that serves your own need for identity, control, or social standing? The man who is found by God (v.1) is the man who was looking for something else — the rebel is the man who thinks he has God already and has organized religion around his own preferences.

2. Let the certainty of God's new creation reorder what you grieve and what you hope for. (*Affections/Worship*) Verses 17–19 do not merely predict a future — they command a present emotional posture: “Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating” (v.18). God is calling His people to feel something now in light of what is coming. The weeping and crying of v.19 will be abolished because God will personally abolish them. If you are living as if the present griefs are final — as if the futility is the last word, as if the death is permanent, as if the labor is ultimately in vain — you are living as if Isaiah 65:17 were not true. Let the new creation be not a theological footnote but an emotional home.

3. Trust that God's discrimination between the remnant and the rebels is an act of grace, not cruelty. (*Mind/Belief*) The first instinct when reading vv.11–16 — the stark “you shall be hungry / my servants shall eat” contrast — is discomfort at the severity. But the discriminating act of preservation is itself grace. If God swept everyone together in general amnesty, the prayer of Isaiah 64 would have been answered — but answered in a way that dissolved the meaning of covenant faithfulness and made seeking God indistinguishable from provoking Him. The remnant principle is the grace principle: God is the God who does not treat all things as equal. He sees. He knows. He keeps. The same sovereign discrimination that judges the rebel is what secures the servant.

4. Live and labor now as though your work is not in vain, because in the LORD it is not. (*Will/Behavior*) Verses 21–23 directly reverse the futility curses of Deuteronomy 28 — building for others to inhabit, planting for others to eat, laboring in vain. In the new creation, there is no more disconnection between effort and enjoyment. But this is not simply a future promise to wait for passively — it is a framework for present action. Paul draws the identical line in 1 Corinthians 15:58: because the resurrection is certain, your labor in the Lord is not in vain. Concretely: invest in your family, your congregation, your work, and your service with the confidence that none of it evaporates. God's new creation does not abolish your efforts — it vindicates them.

5. Pray with the confidence of those whose communication gap with God has already been closed. (*Will/Behavior*) Verse 24 is one of the most staggering promises in the Old Testament: “Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.” The intimacy described here — anticipatory answer, real-time hearing — names the end of the distance between God and His people that the fall introduced. This is the promise that grounds Jesus's instruction to pray without ceasing, to ask and receive, to persist at the throne. If you are treating prayer as a formal religious duty performed without expectation of being heard, you are living beneath the promise of v.24. Pray specifically. Pray persistently. Pray as one whose Father hears before the words are finished.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Isaiah 65 reveals that God is not indiscriminate in His judgment or His salvation. He is the God who sees and distinguishes — who knows His servants from the rebels, who preserves a people within and through the fire of judgment, and who will

not allow the faithful and the faithless to be treated as equivalent. The passage establishes that God's grace is never cheap or general — it is specific, electing, and remnant-shaped. Equally, the chapter reveals God as the sovereign Creator of new realities: the new heavens and new earth are not a renovation project undertaken by human progress but a sovereign act of divine creation ("Behold, I create" — the same verb as Genesis 1). God is not repairing the present order; He is making all things new. And the God who announces this future is the God of Amen (v.16) — the God of truth and faithfulness whose word does not return empty. The former troubles will be forgotten not because they were insignificant but because what God creates will so exceed them that they lose their power to define.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Isaiah 65 is one of the Old Testament's most direct presentations of the doctrine of the remnant, which is the Old Testament face of election by grace. The servant/rebel distinction in vv.8–16 is not based on relative moral performance but on the sovereign discriminating act of God who finds those who were not seeking Him (v.1) and preserves new wine in a cluster that seemed ripe only for destruction (v.8). Paul's citation of vv.1–2 in Romans 10 establishes this as the hermeneutical key to the entire passage: the remnant principle is the election principle, and it operates across the Israel/Gentile boundary in the new covenant. The new creation vision (vv.17–25) grounds Reformed eschatology not in a flight from creation but in its total renewal — the material, physical, communal, and ecological dimensions of God's original creation are not abandoned but redeemed and exceeded. This counters any dualistic or gnostic tendency to treat salvation as escape from the physical. Most significantly, the intimacy of v.24 — before they call, He answers — is the eschatological fulfillment of the covenant formula "I will be your God and you will be my people," the end-state toward which all of redemptive history has been moving: a people with direct, unmediated, anticipatory access to the God who made them.

Main Takeaway

God sees you clearly — which side of His distinction you inhabit — and He has not been silent. He is moving every moment of this present age toward a new creation He will build by His own power for those who are His. Do not be a religious person who provokes Him with self-directed ritual. Be the one who seeks Him. And then live — today — with the settled confidence of someone whose Father hears before they finish the sentence, whose labor will not be in vain, and whose future has already been spoken by the God of Amen.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching the new creation as merely a distant comfort rather than a present reorienter.** The most common homiletical failure with vv.17–25 is to present the new creation as a future reward that makes present suffering tolerable — a “someday it will be better” message. But the text commands a present emotional and behavioral posture (“Be glad and rejoice *forever* in what I am creating,” v.18; “they shall not labor in vain,” v.23). The new creation is meant to be inhabited now by faith, not merely anticipated from a distance. Sermons that use these verses only to comfort grief without also challenging how the congregation lives will have done only half the work the text intends.
- **Separating the judgment section (vv.1–16) from the new creation section (vv.17–25) and preaching only one.** The two halves of the chapter are organically connected. The new creation is *for the servants specifically distinguished from the rebels* — which means the new creation promise has no traction without the discriminating act that defines who inherits it. Preaching only the new creation produces a loose universalism with no defining boundaries. Preaching only the judgment section produces terror without hope. The chapter is designed as a complete movement: indictment, discrimination, new creation — and all three must be preached together.
- **Flattening the rebels’ sin into general sinfulness rather than specific self-directed religion.** Verses 3–5 are not describing pagans who have never heard of God — they are describing God’s own people who remain relentlessly religious while directing that religiosity away from Him. The indictment is specifically of *religious* rebellion — the substitution of self-generated ritual for genuine seeking. A sermon that softens this to “everyone sins” misses the precise and devastating target of the text, which is the person in the congregation who is religiously active but seeking something other than God.
- **Treating v.20 as a problem to be explained away rather than a tension to be held.** The presence of death in v.20 creates real tension with Revelation 21:4 and should not be resolved by simply assigning v.20 to a “different dispensation” (which severs it from the passage’s own movement) or by spiritualizing it into meaninglessness. The most faithful homiletical posture is to name the tension honestly — prophetic vision in the Old Testament characteristically overlays near and far, inaugurated and consummated, in a single image — and to let it do its work: Isaiah 65 gives us enough to live by; Revelation 21 gives us the full consummation. Both are true. Neither cancels the other.
- **Preaching v.24 (“Before they call I will answer”) as an unconditional promise of immediate answered prayer in all circumstances.** This verse is a description of the new creation’s intimacy — the end-state of the covenant relationship — and should not be extracted and used as a proof text for the prosperity gospel or as a

promise that God will always give us what we ask for before we finish asking. The context is the new creation's relational fullness, not a technique for effective prayer. Handle this verse with the care its power demands: it is a profound promise, but its fulfillment is eschatological and covenantal, not a formula.

- **Missing the Christological fulfillment of the “new name” and “servants” language.** Verse 15 grants God's servants a new name; Isaiah 62:2 and Revelation 2–3 develop this into the new-covenant identity given to those who overcome. The servant of Isaiah in the broader context of Isaiah 40–66 is ultimately the Servant — Jesus Christ — who accomplishes the discrimination that makes new creation possible. A sermon on Isaiah 65 that does not at minimum gesture toward Christ as the one through whom the remnant is constituted, the new creation inaugurated, and the new name given will have left the passage in the Old Testament rather than showing its fulfillment in the gospel.