

Homiletics Analysis: Isaiah 66

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Isaiah 66 is the closing chapter of the entire book and functions as its eschatological capstone. The chapter opens with a divine declaration that reorients the entire temple-building project of the post-exilic community: heaven is God's throne and earth His footstool — what house could Israel possibly build Him, and where would He rest (vv. 1–2)? This is not a rejection of temple worship per se but a challenge to the posture behind it. The LORD shifts attention from the externals of sacrifice to the heart of the worshiper: He looks to the one who is humble, contrite, and trembles at His word (v. 2). Verses 3–4 indict those who have made external ritual a substitute for genuine obedience — their sacrifices are as defiling as the most abhorrent acts because they have chosen their own ways rather than God's. These verses set up the division between the two groups that will structure the rest of the chapter: those who tremble at God's word (v. 5) and those who hate and reject them.

Verses 5–14 contain a dramatic reversal. Those who were mocked for their trembling faith will witness the LORD's vindication. The birth-image in verses 7–9 is one of Scripture's most striking: Zion gives birth before she labors — a sudden, miraculous national restoration. The LORD who opens the womb will not fail to bring it to completion. The passage breaks into exhortation to rejoice (vv. 10–11), followed by an image of Jerusalem as a nursing mother dispensing peace and comfort, with the LORD Himself as the one who comforts like a mother (vv. 12–13). Verses 14–17 return to the two-group structure: the LORD's servants will be made glad while His enemies, including those who practice abominable rites in gardens, will face fire and sword.

The chapter closes with a sweeping universal vision (vv. 18–24): the LORD will gather all nations and tongues to see His glory; survivors will be sent to the nations as missionaries; and from all nations, people will come to worship at Jerusalem. The universal scope is sealed with a new-creation promise — as the new heavens and new earth endure, so Israel's name and offspring will endure before the LORD. The chapter — and the book — ends with the most jarring image in Isaiah: those who worshiped the LORD from new moon to Sabbath will go out and look upon the corpses of the rebels, in a vision of unending judgment (v. 24).

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish a searching division within every reader: forcing a choice between the one who trembles at His word and the one who chooses his own ways. He simultaneously offers the most extravagant comfort to those who mourn over Zion and warns those who trust in external religion without a contrite heart. The chapter closes the

entire book of Isaiah by confronting the reader with the ultimate stakes — not merely a question of liturgy or national politics, but of eternal standing before the God who fills heaven and earth, will not share His glory, and will one day be worshiped by all nations while those who rejected Him face unending consequence.

Subject Sentence:

The LORD closes His prophetic word with final division — ultimate comfort for the contrite and irreversible judgment for the self-willed.

Primary Claim:

God demands the one thing external religion cannot manufacture — a trembling, contrite heart — and He will have it from a people drawn from every nation, while those who substitute ritual for genuine surrender face a judgment without end.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Temple Critique (vv. 1–2)

A common misreading treats verses 1–2 as a wholesale rejection of temple worship, reading them as proto-prophetic spiritualism (God has no need of buildings; “true religion” is interior). This reading is refuted by the book’s own context: Isaiah’s vision elsewhere includes the future temple’s glory (Isaiah 2:2–4; 60:7, 13), and the New Testament cites Isaiah 66:1 (Acts 7:49–50) in Stephen’s speech not to abolish temple worship categorically but to challenge the Sanhedrin’s presumption that they could contain or control God. The contrast in verses 1–4 is not between building and not building, but between the heart posture of the worshiper. The text refutes any notion that liturgical correctness or architectural devotion is sufficient without the humility and contrition that true worship requires.

The Abomination List (vv. 3–4)

Some interpreters read verses 3–4 as condemning legitimate sacrifices (bull, lamb, grain) by placing them in apposition with abominations (whoever slaughters an ox is like one who kills a man). This reading generates two positions: (1) the sacrificial system itself is now abominable (a supersessionist reading anticipating the obsolescence of Mosaic worship); (2) this is hyperbole for the wickedness of those whose hearts are far from God. The Reformed reading holds the second position as exegetically preferable: the verse does not condemn the sacrifice but the person who offers it without a contrite heart. The literary structure is comparative — *like* the one who does abominations — and the passage immediately moves to the criterion of the worshiper: “they have chosen their own ways.”

The issue is the heart, not the act. This reading is fully consistent with the Psalter (Psalm 51:16–17), Samuel (1 Samuel 15:22), and the prophets generally (Amos 5:21–24; Micah 6:6–8).

The Birth Metaphor and Restoration (vv. 7–9)

Dispensational interpreters typically read the birth-of-a-nation imagery as a reference to the literal political restoration of Israel in 1948 and the promise of future national conversion at the end of the age, drawing a direct line from verse 8 (“a nation born in one day”) to modern Israel. This reading contains a genuine insight: the passage clearly has national Israel and the restoration of Zion in view, and the language of corporate restoration cannot be dissolved into a purely “spiritual” application without remainder. However, the reading overreaches when it restricts the fulfillment to a specific modern political event and defers the ultimate application to a yet-future millennium, effectively bypassing the canonical claim that this passage makes on the present community of faith. The Reformed reading, following the pattern of Paul’s use of Isaiah in Galatians and Romans, holds that these promises find their fulfillment in Christ and His body — the new Israel gathered from all nations (vv. 18–21) — while not denying the ongoing significance of God’s purposes for ethnic Israel. The Dispensational tradition’s insistence that the national dimension not be dissolved is a contribution worth retaining even where its specific fulfillment-timetable is not adopted.

The Universal Mission and the Nations (vv. 18–21)

Several traditions read verses 18–21 (survivors sent as missionaries to the nations; Gentiles brought as an offering to Jerusalem) as primarily anticipating the church’s global mission. This reading is materially correct and finds strong canonical support (see below), but it must not collapse the eschatological dimension into a merely present-age program. The passage presents the ingathering of the nations as the final movement before the new heavens and new earth — not simply the pattern of evangelism but the eschatological completion of God’s redemptive purposes. The Reformed reading holds both: the pattern of mission is inaugurated in the present age through the proclamation of the gospel, and it will be consummated at the end of the age when every knee bows and every tongue confesses.

The Closing Vision of Judgment (v. 24)

The final verse — the corpses of the rebels, where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched — has generated significant interpretive controversy. Some within the Annihilationist tradition read this as describing the permanent state of destruction (not ongoing conscious experience), since the verse describes bodies, not living persons. Jesus’ citation of this verse in Mark 9:44–48 as a warning about gehenna is the decisive canonical control: Christ uses the language of continuing judgment to warn the living, which is unintelligible if the verse describes only annihilation. The Reformed reading holds that verse 24 is the Old Testament’s most direct anticipation of what the New Testament calls eternal conscious judgment, even while acknowledging that the full apocalyptic disclosure

awaits the New Testament. The verse should be preached with the weight Christ Himself gives it — as a living warning to those who have not yet made their choice between the two groups the chapter describes.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 1:11–17** — The book’s opening oracle on false worship establishes the same critique that chapter 66 closes with: sacrifices without obedience are an offense, not an offering; the LORD demands a clean heart, not a full altar. Chapter 66 completes what chapter 1 began.
 - **Psalms 51:16–17** — “You do not delight in sacrifice... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” The Psalter’s own theology of worship grounds the Isaiah 66:2 criterion and prevents the passage from being read as merely anti-ceremonial.
 - **Mark 9:43–48** — Jesus cites Isaiah 66:24 three times in rapid succession as the definitive warning about gehenna, giving the closing verse of Isaiah its full eschatological weight and making it the canonical control for how the church understands eternal judgment.
 - **Romans 15:20–21 and Acts 1:8** — The Isaiah 66:19 vision of survivors sent to the nations as witnesses to God’s glory underlies the New Testament’s theology of mission: the gospel goes to those who have not heard, and the church’s global proclamation is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s eschatological vision, inaugurated at Pentecost and consummated at the end.
 - **Revelation 21:1–4** — The new heavens and new earth of Isaiah 66:22 find their explicit New Testament counterpart in John’s vision; the promise that God’s people will endure before Him forever is the positive eschatological anchor against which verse 24’s judgment is set in sharpest relief.
-

Aim:

To confront every reader with the binary the chapter presents — trembling contrition or self-chosen religion — and to show that only the former has any standing before the God who will be worshiped by all nations and who will judge without end.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
----------	---------	-------

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	The LORD declares heaven His throne, earth His footstool — no house can contain Him; He looks to the humble, contrite one who trembles at His word	Sets the fundamental criterion of true worship; the contrast with the following verses is between heart posture, not ritual compliance
3–4	Those who offer sacrifices while choosing their own ways are as defiling as those who commit abominations; because they did not answer when the LORD called, He will repay their deeds	Verses 3–4 are structurally parallel to v. 2 — the worshiper who does not tremble turns legitimate acts into abominations
5	“Hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at His word” — those who are hated and excluded by their brethren for the LORD’s sake will be vindicated	The two groups now named explicitly; this verse is a turning point
6	The sound of uproar from the city, the voice of the LORD rendering recompense to His enemies	Brief, dramatic anticipation of judgment
7–9	Zion gives birth before she labors — a nation born in one day; the LORD who opens the womb will not fail to bring it to completion	One of Scripture’s most striking birth metaphors; miraculous, sudden, divine-initiative restoration
10–11	Call to rejoice with Jerusalem, all who love her; to nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast	Shift from announcement to exhortation; those who mourned are now invited to rejoice
12–13	The LORD will extend peace like a river; Jerusalem will nurse and carry her children; the LORD will comfort them as a mother comforts	The LORD’s own maternal tenderness applied to comforting His people — the comfort of Zion is ultimately the comfort of God Himself
14	The servants’ hearts will rejoice; the hand of the LORD will be known to His servants and His indignation	Returns to the two-group structure: servants/enemies

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
15–17	to His enemies The LORD will come in fire and whirlwind to render judgment; those who consecrate themselves to eat abominable things in gardens will be consumed together	Judgment language intensifies; specific cultic practices named; no escape for the self-devoted
18–19	The LORD will gather all nations and tongues to see His glory; survivors sent to the nations as witnesses — Tarshish, Pul, Lud, Tubal, Javan — those who have not heard of His fame	The universal mission vision; explicit nations listed suggest the ends of the known world
20	All nations will bring Israel's brothers as an offering to the LORD, to His holy mountain, in all manner of vessels	The nations as participants in the ingathering — not merely witnesses but agents
21	The LORD will take some from among them as priests and Levites	The radical inclusion of Gentiles in priestly service — anticipating the New Testament's royal priesthood of all believers
22	As the new heavens and new earth endure before the LORD, so the offspring and name of Israel will endure	The eternal covenant guarantee secured by new creation
23	From new moon to Sabbath, all flesh will come to worship before the LORD	Universal, unending worship — the eschatological goal of all history
24	Those who go out will look on the corpses of the rebels — their worm will not die, their fire will not be quenched; they will be an abhorrence to all flesh	The closing warning; Jesus cites this passage in Mark 9 as the canonical description of gehenna; the book ends not with comfort alone but with the final stakes set before every reader

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–4	The Criterion of True Worship: Contrite Heart, Not Correct Ritual
2	5–6	The Coming Vindication of Those Who Tremble
3	7–14	Zion’s Miraculous Birth and the Comfort of Her Children
4	15–17	The LORD Comes in Fire: Judgment on the Self-Devoted
5	18–21	All Nations Gathered: The Universal Ingathering and Mission
6	22–23	New Creation and Unending Worship
7	24	The Final Warning: Irreversible Judgment on the Rebels

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD closes His prophetic word with final division — ultimate comfort for the contrite and irreversible judgment for the self-willed.

Primary Claim: God demands the one thing external religion cannot manufacture — a trembling, contrite heart — and He will have it from a people drawn from every nation, while those who substitute ritual for genuine surrender face a judgment without end.

Applications (Five)

1. The LORD is not impressed by religious volume — He is looking for a specific posture. (*Mind/Belief*)

Isaiah 66:2 is one of the most diagnostic verses in the Old Testament: the God who fills heaven and earth, who needs no house from human hands, turns His eyes toward the one who is humble, contrite in spirit, and trembles at His word. This is not a counsel of general piety — it is a precise anatomy of the worshiper who actually meets with God. The application is diagnostic: examine not how much religious activity you produce, but

whether that activity is accompanied by this posture. You may be in the right pew, in the right church, offering the right liturgy, and entirely miss the God you claim to be worshipping, because He is looking past the offering to the one bringing it. Ask yourself honestly: do you tremble at God's word — not merely admire it, study it, or agree with it, but feel its weight upon you as the living address of the living God?

2. Substituting correct religious form for genuine surrender is not a small error — it is a defilement. (*Mind/Belief*)

The shock of verses 3–4 is intentional: the one who sacrifices a bull while choosing his own ways is *like* the one who kills a man. The LORD does not grade on a curve for religious sincerity. External religion without internal surrender does not produce a diminished offering — it produces an abomination. This is the verdict not only on ancient Israel's cultic practice but on every form of religious self-management. The person who attends, gives, serves, and conforms outwardly while having never yielded the governing center of their life to God is not in a safe middle position — they are in the position described in verses 3–4. The application is not to produce more intense religious performance but to ask whether the whole life, including the parts hidden from other worshipers, has been surrendered to the One who sees the heart.

3. If you mourn over the brokenness of the church and the world, Isaiah 66 is addressed specifically to you — and its word is comfort. (*Affections/Worship*)

Verse 10 calls those who “love Jerusalem” and “mourn over her” to rejoice. Verse 13 promises that the LORD Himself will comfort His grieving people the way a mother comforts her child. This passage speaks directly to the person who carries a deep, unresolved grief over the gap between what the church is and what she should be, between the world as it is and what God has promised it will be. The application is not to manufacture optimism about present conditions but to bring that grief directly before the LORD, who is not unmoved by it. He names those who mourn over Zion as recipients of His specific comfort. Your sorrow over the state of things is not evidence of weak faith — it may be evidence of a heart attuned to His own.

4. The LORD's universal purpose — to be worshiped by all nations — is not a future event to observe but a mission to participate in now. (*Will/Behavior*)

Verses 18–21 describe survivors sent to the ends of the known world to declare God's glory to those who have not heard — and the result is that all nations come to worship. The New Testament makes explicit what Isaiah anticipates: this is the church's mission in the present age. The application is concrete: you are a living participant in the Isaiah 66 fulfillment. The question is not whether you agree with the theology of mission but whether your actual life — your prayers, your giving, your relational investments, your vocational choices — reflects participation in a God whose purpose is to gather worshipers from every tongue, tribe, and nation. What specific action would it require of you this week to bring your life into alignment with this God and His global purpose?

5. The final verse of Isaiah is not a footnote — it is a warning that demands a decision. *(Will/Behavior)*

Isaiah 66:24 is the verse the book chooses to end on. The worm that does not die and the fire that is not quenched are Jesus' own language for the destiny of those who are not with Him (Mark 9:44–48). Every person reading or hearing this chapter is one of two kinds of people: one who trembles at His word, or one who chooses their own ways. There is no third category. The chapter does not end with this verse to produce terror for its own sake but to make the stakes of the choice inescapably clear. The application is the oldest and most urgent in Scripture: choose now, while there is a “now” to choose in. The God of new heavens and new earth, who comforts His mourners and gathers all nations, does not leave the rebels in an ambiguous position — and neither should the preacher.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance:

Isaiah 66 teaches that God is absolutely sovereign over worship — He is not dependent on human construction, confined to sacred spaces, or obligated to receive any offering merely because it follows the correct form. The passage establishes that the LORD's criterion for acceptable worship is not ritual precision but heart posture: humility, contrition, and trembling reverence for His word. This is not an incidental observation but a fundamental disclosure of God's character — He is the one whose glory fills heaven and earth, who is moved by the broken and contrite, and who will not be satisfied with any external substitute for genuine surrender. The chapter also reveals God as the one who will accomplish His universal purposes without failure: the birth metaphor insists that what God begins He finishes, and the eschatological vision of all nations worshiping before Him discloses that the scope of His redemptive purpose was never Israel alone but the whole of creation from the beginning.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance:

Isaiah 66 is one of the Old Testament's most concentrated expressions of the Reformation's central insight: that external religion without a regenerate heart is not merely insufficient but offensive to God. The passage anticipates the Reformers' critique of works-righteousness not by abolishing ceremony but by insisting that ceremony detached from a contrite, surrendered heart is precisely what God rejects. The chapter's closing vision — all nations gathered, some from among them taken as priests and Levites, the new heavens and new earth as the permanent dwelling of God's people — grounds the Reformed understanding of covenant fulfillment in Christ: the promises made to Israel find

their eschatological fulfillment in a new humanity drawn from every nation, constituted not by ethnicity but by trembling faith in the God who spoke through Isaiah. The final verse's portrait of unending judgment, read canonically through Mark 9, also grounds the Reformed insistence on the eternal consequences of unbelief — the gospel must be preached urgently because the alternatives are not equally livable.

Main Takeaway

The God who fills heaven and earth is not looking for your religious résumé — He is looking at your heart, and He has told you exactly what He sees there that pleases Him: humility, contrition, and a trembling regard for His word. This chapter ends Isaiah with a final, undeniable binary: those who have that posture will be comforted, restored, and gathered into a new creation that never ends; those who substitute their own religious self-management for genuine surrender will face a judgment that also never ends. The chapter asks every reader the same question it has been asking for twenty-seven chapters: which kind of person are you — and if you are not yet sure, why are you waiting?

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Treating verses 1–2 as a rejection of institutional worship.** The passage is frequently cited to justify a vague “spiritual” Christianity that distrusts corporate worship, liturgy, or church structures. This is not what the text says. The LORD is not abolishing temple worship — He is insisting that the worshiper's heart posture is the precondition of acceptable worship. The Reformation principle *semper reformanda* (always being reformed) applies here: not the abolition of form but its constant reformation under the pressure of genuine surrender. Preachers must not use this text to undermine ecclesiology.
- **Softening the two-group structure into a general call for sincerity.** The chapter is relentlessly binary: those who tremble and those who choose their own ways; servants and enemies; those who are comforted and those who are judged. This binary is not a rhetorical device to be softened into a general appeal for more authentic faith. Preaching that loses the binary loses the chapter's claim. The congregation must be confronted with the question: which group are you in?
- **Skipping or softening verse 24.** Ending a sermon on Isaiah 66 with the beauty of verses 22–23 (new creation, universal worship) without engaging verse 24 is a pastoral failure. The book of Isaiah deliberately ends on this verse, and Jesus deliberately cites it more than once as His own description of eternal judgment. A sermon that does not land on verse 24 with the solemnity it demands has not

preached this passage. The goal is not to produce fear but to deliver the warning with the same urgency and love the passage itself embodies.

- **Over-applying the birth imagery to modern Israel without canonical grounding.** Verses 7–9 are often cited in support of a specific dispensational reading of modern Israeli statehood. Preachers working in Reformed contexts should acknowledge the national-restoration dimension of the passage without either dismissing it (as if it had no particular reference to Israel) or restricting it to a specific modern event that the text itself does not identify. The canonical fulfillment — new creation, universal ingathering, the new Israel in Christ — should govern the application.
- **Reducing applications to general moral improvement.** Because verses 1–4 use the language of heart posture and humble contrition, there is a homiletical temptation to resolve the passage into a call for “more genuine, heartfelt religion.” This falls into the Clowney trap: moralistic application (“be more sincere”) rather than gospel-grounded application (“the God who demands contrition is the same God who provides it in Christ; the worm that does not die is why Christ went to the cross”). Applications must be rooted in what God has done and is doing, not merely in what the hearer needs to do better.
- **Treating the universal mission vision (vv. 18–21) as merely descriptive rather than prescriptive.** Preachers sometimes present the eschatological ingathering as a comfort — God will accomplish it — without pressing the participatory dimension. Verses 19–20 describe survivors *sent* as messengers. The church is not merely a witness to God’s universal purpose; it is the instrument through which He is currently accomplishing it. Applications must move the congregation from observation to participation.