

Prophets: Isaiah

INTRODUCTION

Isaiah is the most quoted Old Testament prophet in the New Testament, quoted or referred to over 85 timesⁱ and mentioned by name 21 times.ⁱⁱ Isaiah is one means by which God reveals His plan of grace for a rebellious people: a plan that would reveal the glory of God through the story of Israel, and a plan that eventually would be fulfilled through the life of Jesus Christ.

Many of the prophecies in Isaiah point to the existing circumstances of the people of God. It would be a mistake, however, to think that Isaiah only had relevance for its audience at the time. Because many New Testament authors, and even Jesus Himself, quoted Isaiah, we know that Isaiah has relevance even today. The whole book portrays God's plan as not just significant in those times, but as a continuous story that is headed somewhere—namely, toward the coming of the final heir of David who would bring light to the entire earth. At the heart of Isaiah is a message of God's grace toward sinners, and it acts as evidence for God's sovereign might and power over a sinful world.

IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

A wildfire is a very destructive thing—at least in the short term. Dry or dead trees and grass provide fuel for the flames, leaving behind a blackened landscape. But in the aftermath, new life soon springs up. With the former covering of dead or diseased plants removed, seeds receive full sunlight and have plenty of room to grow. The land after a fire becomes greener and more full of life than it was before.

Isaiah contains prophecies of judgment for Israel, but it also has hopeful messages and clear promises of the coming Messiah. God knew everything that would happen in both the short-term and long-term. It was all part of His plan to provide salvation for His people. Even in the midst of His discipline and the immediate consequences of sin, hope is available through Jesus.

BOOK ORGANIZATION

ISAIAH: Suffering Servant + Holy, Holy, Holy

Chapters 1-12: Judgment and hope for Jerusalem

Chapters 13-27: Judgment and hope for the nations

Chapters 28-39: The fall of Jerusalem predicted

Chapters 40-48: Hope after exile

Chapters 49-55: The suffering servant king

Chapters 56-66: The hope of new creation

JESUS IN THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

In Luke 4:16-19, Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah and reads the beginning of Isaiah 61. Then, in Luke 4:21, Jesus says to the congregation at the synagogue: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Isaiah 61 is one of many passages that points to the coming of Jesus Christ. Other passages in Isaiah are similar. Isaiah 7 talks about Jesus being the Messiah that will be born of a virgin and who will be called Immanuel. Isaiah 53 points to Christ as a suffering servant, meant to bring righteousness to the people of God. Isaiah 56 points to how Christ will bring salvation not just to Israel, but also to the Gentiles. Isaiah 62 points to Christ as the bridegroom to the people of God, the Church, His bride.

Christ is magnified throughout Isaiah just as much as God is exalted. It's through the writings of Isaiah that God's plan was revealed and then later fulfilled through Jesus. The message that Isaiah preached is the same gospel that Jesus preached during His ministry on earth: that through faith in Him, we can find salvation from our sins and receive new life in Him for all of eternity.

BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW TO APPROACH THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

OBSERVATION

- The book was written by Isaiah. Some scholars think it may have had multiple authors, with Isaiah just writing part of the book, but it has always existed as a single work with a stated author of Isaiah.ⁱⁱⁱ As you study, make sure to note when Isaiah is speaking God's message. Frequently ask yourself, "Who is speaking in this instance?"
- Isaiah is primarily a book of prophecy, but much of Isaiah's writing is in poetic form. Instead of viewing all the passages as one cohesive narrative, view them as a collection of individual compositions that may or may not be related to one another. Additionally, it can be helpful to note what literary devices are being used in the poetic writing. Is it a metaphor? Simile? Etc.

INTERPRETATION

- Historical Context: Isaiah prophesied "in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" (Isaiah 1:1). His call to ministry came in "the year that King Uzziah died" (Isaiah 6:1), which was around 740 B.C., and he recorded the death of Sennacherib, which was in 681 B.C.^{iv} During his time, the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians, although God saved Judah from the Assyrian army (Isaiah 36-37). As you read, make sure to note *when* words are being spoken. The chronology of Isaiah can often be confusing. A good study Bible may come in handy!
- Remember that while Isaiah is primarily prophecy, much of it *tells forth* God's message towards the people of Israel at the time without necessarily *foretelling* the future. However, many of these passages give insights into God's character and can also be lessons on how we should live our lives in relationship with God.

APPLICATION

- The prophecies in Isaiah were written centuries before Jesus was even born. With that in mind, what does Isaiah teach you about God's sovereign power?
- Isaiah famously responded to God's call by saying, "Here I am! Send me" (Isaiah 6:8). Are you open to God's call on your life? What might He be asking you to do?
- While Isaiah was writing to a specific people group at a specific time, the character of God is unchanging. Look for aspects of God's character to reflect on throughout your study.

PRAYER

- Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand the meaning and significance of these passages.
- Pray for a willing heart to follow God's direction and share His good news with others. Tell God, "Here I am! Send me."
- When we read books like Isaiah, it can be hard to stay focused and keep track of what's happening. It's okay to be honest with God about our confusion or struggles when reading the scriptures. If you find yourself feeling this way, spend some time talking to God. Confess and ask for help.
- Remember, the goal is to read for connection rather than completion. If you find that your reading or study is leaning incredibly intellectually and you aren't connecting with the God of the Bible as you read the Bible, try picking just one verse from that day's reading to meditate on and pray through.

CHURCH HISTORY: WHAT HAS CHURCH HISTORY SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF ISAIAH?

"Isaiah exercised his prophetic ministry at a time of unique significance, a time in which it was of utmost importance to realize that salvation could not be obtained by reliance upon man but only from God Himself. For Israel it was the central or pivotal point of history between Moses and Christ. The old world was passing and an entirely new order of things was beginning to make its appearance. Where would Israel stand in that new world? Would she be the true theocracy, the light to lighten the Gentiles, or would she fall into the shadow by turning for help to the nations which were about her?" – Edward J. Young,^v 1972

“God does not deliver His servants so that they can revel in the experience of sharing His glory (cf. chs. 60—62). Rather, He delivers them so that they can be witnesses of that glory to the world (cf. 6:1-10). ... This book is not about the vindication of Zion, but about the mission of Zion to declare the God whose glory fills the earth (6:3; 66:18) to all the inhabitants of that earth (12:4; 51:5; 60:9; 66:19).” - John N. Oswalt,^{vi} 1986

“Stated briefly, the purpose of Isaiah is to display God's glory and holiness through His judgment of sin and His deliverance and blessing of a righteous remnant.” – Charles H. Dyer,^{vii} 2001



ⁱ https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1051&context=will_know

ⁱⁱ <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Concordance/Names/c-Isaiah-1.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/who-wrote-the-book-of-Isaiah.html>

^{iv} <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/introduction-to-isaiah/>

^v Edward J. Young (1972). *The Book of Isaiah*. 1:4-5.

^{vi} John N. Oswalt (1986). *The Book of Isaiah*. p. 684

^{vii} Charles H. Dyer (2001). *The Old Testament Explorer*. p. 527