

# ISAIAH

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GOD'S ABIDING WORD

# Isaiah

Yahweh Dwells in Zion

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# Getting Started

Isaiah's prophecy has been called "The Fifth Gospel." For churches that use Sunday lectionary readings, Isaiah dominates the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. Nearly one-third of Old Testament readings come from Isaiah! Many of his passages sound familiar to us. But do we understand them in their context or the prophet who recorded them?

## Plan and Purpose

Too often a Christian thinks of the Bible as a collection of one-liners. A person may quote a particular verse or phrase without understanding where it comes from or what it means in context. (Have you ever found yourself saying, "I think that's in the Bible somewhere"?)

This study will not only help you understand Isaiah's greatest one-liners, but also his greater message. It will give you a clear portrait of Isaiah's overall, complex vision that sees the Assyrian and Babylonian eras, the Messiah and His work, and ultimately the new creation. Though this study does not detail every chapter and verse of Isaiah's prophecy, it provides you with guidance for getting the most out of his message. The study begins with an overview of Isaiah's prophecies (studies 1–2) to prepare you for examining, interpreting, and applying specific prophecies in your own life and congregation (studies 3–11). Along the way you will find charts and visuals to help you understand and remember God's message for you. Consider opening each session by praying a passage from Isaiah with your class.

There is much scholarly debate over the authorship of Isaiah. For our purposes, note the significance of Isaiah 1:1. This verse introduced the entire scroll of 66 chapters. It attributes the scroll to Isaiah son of Amoz during the eighth century B.C.

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To prepare for "Overview Part One: Isaiah 1–39," study the visual outline on page 7. As you study Isaiah 1–39, flip through the chapters and read the headers provided in your Bible. This will give you a working summary of the prophet's themes. If you have more time, consider reading chapters 1–39. You should be able to read through them in about three hours.

## 1

## Overview Part One: Isaiah 1–39

In April 1885 Vincent van Gogh painted *Still Life with Open Bible*. In the painting, at the top of the Bible's right-hand page, one clearly reads "Isaiah," the Book of the Bible to which van Gogh had opened. How appropriate that a man deeply committed to social justice, who was also the son of a stern Dutch minister, should open to Isaiah to paint his picture of the Bible. Justice and the sternness of God's Law are important themes in Isaiah.

As you begin this study, anticipate something more than justice and sternness. For amid Isaiah's many concerns, he focuses most intently on God's promise about the coming Savior. Throughout his prophecies Isaiah paints a picture of God's love for us in the Messiah. The Savior would bring more than social justice—He would bring personal righteousness. The Savior would bring more than stern condemnation through the Law—He would bring forgiveness and new life through the Gospel.

Sadly, van Gogh seems to have missed the promise of the Gospel in the pages of Isaiah he painted. Though he remained deeply religious, his life ended in despair. As you turn the pages of this prophet, focus not on despair. Catch Isaiah's words of hope and comfort, especially those that focus on the promises. All these promises find their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth, who is God Incarnate, Israel condensed to One, the Davidic Messiah.

## Historical Setting

God uses Isaiah as His mouthpiece to deliver the message of judgment upon His people. This culminates in a purified *remnant*, and ultimately, a remnant of only one person: Immanuel, the Prince of Peace, the Suffering Servant—Jesus Christ. Throughout Isaiah we learn how God acts at specific times and places, using specific people and things to carry out His plan. The study of Isaiah is important for understanding many aspects of the Christian faith and especially for understanding the person and work of Christ.

1. Briefly share what you hope to learn in this study of Isaiah.

First, let's look at the timing of Isaiah. As you read this section, be sure to look at the charts on pp. 6 and 14 so that you can identify these historic characters and their context. Isaiah's ministry began in c. 740 and lasted possibly to c. 680. These dates are drawn from two historic events recorded by Isaiah. From Isaiah 6:1 we learn that the prophet's ministry began "In the year that King Uzziah died" (c. 740 B.C.). In chapter 37 we are given the latest date recorded in Isaiah—the death of Sennacherib (King of Assyria). Sennacherib is believed to have died c. 681 B.C. during the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah.

When Hezekiah died, his son Manasseh became king (c. 687 B.C.) during Isaiah's lifetime. However, Manasseh's name does not appear in the list of kings in Isaiah 1:1. We may ask the question, "Why wasn't Manasseh listed with the rest of the kings?"

2. Read 2 Kings 21:1–6, 16. Why might the opening words of Isaiah not mention Manasseh?

Almost 200 years before the time of Isaiah, Israel split into two kingdoms. The 10 tribes of the Northern Kingdom (called Ephraim or Israel) had completely turned their backs on Yahweh. The Southern Kingdom (called Judah), where Jerusalem and the temple were located, still had some people who were faithful to Yahweh.

During the reigns of Uzziah and Jotham of Judah, the kingdom of Assyria grew and soon became the most powerful nation in the Near East. Around 745 B.C. Assyria started sweeping to the west in order to conquer the entire inhabited world.

It was this advancement of Assyria that led Israel's northern neighbor, Syria (Aram), to form a coalition with (Ephraim) Israel. This coalition put pressure on King Ahaz to unite Judah with them against Assyria (Isaiah chapter 7; see map on p. 80). Instead, Ahaz appealed to Assyria, who helped Judah in the short term but continued its sweep to the west, destroying Syria, overtaking the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and eventually driving into Judah itself.

### Sequence of the Syro-Ephraimite War

1. Assyria advances West.	2. Syria and Ephraim form a coalition to stop Assyria.	3. Syria and Ephraim pressure Judah to join their coalition.	4. Judah forms a coalition with Assyria instead.	5. Assyria destroys Syria, Ephraim, and advances on Judah as well.
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Ahaz's lack of faith in God's protection during the Syro-Ephraimite war was simply a reflection of the lack of faith among the people of Judah. The people had for the most part removed their trust in Yahweh and placed it in idols and in themselves.

3. Read 2 Kings 16:5–16. Summarize the role of religion in the rule of the kings of Judah.

4. Discuss the effects of religion and political/military leadership today. Does the devotion of your political leadership reflect your faith? Why or why not?

5. Read 1 Timothy 2:1–3. What responsibility has God given you with respect to political leadership in your nation?

Keep Isaiah's historical and political situations in mind as you begin this overview of chapters 1–66. When you read the recommended passages, think broadly about themes, comparisons, and contrasts. You may feel tempted to delve into details. Please resist this temptation! Remember that studies 3–11 will make very specific interpretation and application of the prophecies.

In the first half of Isaiah, the prophet's vision displays Yahweh's anger at the sinfulness of His people, who have turned away from Him to other gods. Yahweh's judgment will be executed against His people and against all nations. In fact, the judgment will be carried out against all of creation. Through this judgment, the people of God will be purified, and the nations will come to the one true God to learn His ways. A new king, like David, will come to rule in righteousness. Peace will reign and death will disappear during His rule.

### The Opening Prophecy: Chapter 1

Chapter 1 provides a "candy sampler" for the rest of Isaiah's prophecy. The book begins with a discussion of the unfaithfulness of Judah and Jerusalem. Yahweh will act against His people to remove their impurities as in a refiner's fire. Then, they will again be faithful. The Lord's judgment leads to a purified Zion.

6. Read the words of Isaiah in 1:1, 10–17 like a historian. What do they reflect about the historic and economic condition of Judah and Jerusalem at the time Isaiah was writing?

### The End: Chapters 2–6

Chapter 2 begins the body of the book. An opening statement sets off this section of the book like the beginning of chapter 1. Curiously, Isaiah's vision begins with the end. In the last days Yahweh will exalt Zion, and people of all the nations will be attracted to Zion. After this picture, the vision relates what must happen before the end takes place. Yahweh will first humble all those who are proud and exalt themselves. Then, Yahweh alone will remain exalted. Yahweh will begin this process with Judah and Jerusalem as expressed in chapter 3. In chapter 4, the vision returns to the image of the people of Yahweh washed and refined by fire with the protection of Yahweh established around them (see 1:21–26).

7. In the last days, who will worship and follow the Lord according to 2:2–3? What will happen before that takes place? See 2:17–18.

8. What hope can you draw from 4:2–6?

Chapter 5 continues the Lord's judgment against Israel and Judah (The Song of the Vineyard, vv. 1–7) and against several evils as addressed in a series of six woes. A seventh woe is addressed in chapter 10, setting off this subsection of Isaiah. Chapter 5 also includes a warning about an army that is coming. Chapters 1–5 have shown the need for the Lord's message to be delivered to Israel. Chapter 6 relates the call of Isaiah and his mission. The mission begins in chapter 7 with a visit to King Ahaz during the Syro-Ephraimite war with Assyria.

### Assyria and Messiah: Chapters 7–12

King Ahaz faces a dilemma. Should he join an anti-Assyrian coalition, appeal to Assyria, or trust in the Lord? King Ahaz chooses to appeal to Assyria, and God's judgment is set in motion. The army from chapter 5 is identified as Assyria, and the impending invasion is further described in chapter 8. Redemption is proclaimed in chapter 9 through a Davidic king who will establish peace and reign in righteousness. Assyria is judged in chapter 10 because of its arrogance in not recognizing the One who raised Assyria up as an instrument of judgment. Further, a remnant of Israel will be restored, and a righteous branch from Jesse (David's father) will be established to rule according to the sevenfold Spirit portrayed in chapter 11. This section of the prophecy closes with a magnificent doxology expressing thanks and trust in the Lord for salvation.

9. What theme runs through the following verses: 5:16; 6:3; and 8:13? What does this mean for the people of God?

10. Look at 9:6–7 and 11:1–5. What are the characteristics of the ruler that will be established by the Lord?

11. What attributes of God might people today most need to understand? How might you share this message with them?

### Judgment and Hope: Chapters 13–27

Chapter 13 begins a new section, as demonstrated by the similarity of its opening statement with chapters 1 and 2.

1:1	2:1	13:1
The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.	This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:	An oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw:

12. What verb appears in each of these sections? What does this tell you about the prophet's experience and ministry?

Once again this section of the book begins at the end. An oracle is given against Babylon that assumes that Babylon has come and captured Judah and Jerusalem (see chapter 39), but other events will occur before that happens. Chapters 14–23 show what will take place before the fall

of Judah in 586 B.C. and include oracles against several of the enemies (including Jerusalem) of God's people. God's plan of judgment against the nations is laid out in these oracles and leads into His ultimate judgment against the entire earth as exhibited in chapter 24.

In ancient times, people thought of gods as local. A god could only influence its specific region. In contrast, Isaiah shows that the God of Israel is Lord over all nations and uses them for His purposes. Though Yahweh will judge the other nations, ultimately He will bring salvation to them as well as Israel. The Book of Isaiah shows that God's plan is worldwide in scope.

13. Isaiah lists several nations as most important to his prophecies about Judah. What nations would you list as most important for the future of your nation?

14. Discuss your personal prayers and the prayers spoken in your congregation. Do they reflect the worldwide understanding of God's plan or local interests alone?

Chapter 25 begins a section displaying God's plan for the future. Isaiah sings a song of praise and exaltation for the Lord and sees what the Lord will do. Then, the vision returns to the mountain of the Lord that was seen in chapter 2. Now, there is a great feast for all nations on the mountain. Death and sadness have been wiped out. A song of praise is given in chapter 26 that is to be sung by the people of the Lord at that time, and chapter 27 continues the picture of the last days with the promise of redemption for God's people.

### Deliverance of Jerusalem: Chapters 28–39

In chapters 28–35, the pattern of judgment on all nations (including God's people) continues with God's promises interspersed. Chapters 36 and 37 serve as a contrast with chapters 7 and 8. Again, a dilemma is faced by the king, this time King Hezekiah. Hezekiah puts his trust in the Lord, and miraculously the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. Jerusalem was saved—for the moment. Then in chapter 38 King Hezekiah falls ill and is near death. Again, he puts his trust in the Lord. Amazingly, the Lord grants him 15 more years of life and gives Hezekiah a sign of the promise—the shadow of the sundial is turned back 10 steps. This section closes in chapter 39 with an ominous visit by a group from Babylon. Isaiah predicts that Babylon will come back as an enemy; they will take everything.

15. God issues judgment against several nations, against His own people, even against the entire creation. What characteristics of God does this judgment display? Read Isaiah 34:1–4.

16. God also issues promises of future redemption for all nations. What characteristics of God do these promises display? Read Isaiah 35:1–10.

17. From this overview of Isaiah, summarize God's plan of salvation.

### Words to Remember

Yes, LORD, walking in the way of Your laws, we wait for You; Your name and renown are the desire of our hearts. Isaiah 26:8

To prepare for “Overview Part Two: Isaiah 40–66,” review the visual outline on page 7. As in the previous study, flip through chapters 40–66 and read the headers to get a summary of the themes. If time permits, read chapters 40–66. This should take you just over two hours.

# 1. Overview Part One: Isaiah 1–39

## Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, participants will (1) identify their interest and expectations for the class; (2) learn the historical background and setting for the Book of Isaiah; and (3) learn the main message of Isaiah.

## Law/Gospel Focus

The Lord will act against His corrupt people in judgment to purify them and restore them to righteousness.

1. Answers will vary. Take note of your class's specific interests and concerns so you can tailor this study to their needs.

2. Isaiah's public ministry probably stopped at the time Manasseh came to power. Isaiah may have worked underground and put together the final edition of his book—a book put together over 60 years of ministry. (This would help explain stylistic differences in parts of the book.) Tradition holds that Isaiah was killed during Manasseh's rule, having been sawed in half for disobeying the king.

3. The kings of Judah were deeply religious. They had long involved themselves directly in the affairs of the temple and guided the nation spiritually. Of course, this was great when the king served Yahweh. When he did not, the consequences were disastrous.

4. Answers will vary. The religious faith of leaders may not dominate today as it did in ancient times. Yet leaders today set important examples and apply the laws that affect our national beliefs and values.

5. God calls you to pray for your leaders so that we may live quiet and peaceful lives.

6. Judah enjoys a regular succession of kings. They are economically well off, able to bring numerous offerings to the temple. However, there is a breakdown in social justice.

7. In the last days, all the nations will worship and follow the Lord. Before this happens, all humanity will be humbled and idolatry demolished.

8. For those who have been cleansed by the fire of the Lord, the Lord will create a refuge.

9. The Lord of hosts is holy. The people of God should fear the Lord because in His presence they will certainly die. Holiness is an attribute of God that Isaiah emphasized in contrast with the unholy activities of the people of Judah.

10. The ruler will reign in justice and righteousness. His plans are perfect, and His power will allow Him to carry out those plans.

11. Answers will vary. Certainly God's love and mercy in Christ. However, remember that many people take these blessings for granted. They also need to hear the message of God's holiness so that they understand their need for repentance.

12. The key verb is *saw*. Apparently the Lord didn't just speak to Isaiah, the prophet saw something (whether actual future events or symbols of those events) and described what he saw.

13. Answers will vary.

14. Encourage participants to broaden their prayers to include people in other nations and mission work around the world.

15. God is holy and cannot stand sin. He will not allow it to continue, and He takes action to eradicate sin.

16. God loves His creation and His people. Through this love, He extends His grace to purify creation so that people are again able to be in His presence.

17. God will act against fallen creation in judgment in order to purify it. Then, with impurities removed, people will be faithful and glorify God. The Lord accomplishes this through His chosen Servant, the Messiah.

Close with prayer.