

**cover to
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Bible Study

7 Sessions for Homegroup
and Personal Use

Isaiah 1-39

Prophet to the nations

John Houghton



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Introduction

Isaiah was an educated man from a noble family and enjoyed close contact with the royal court. His wife was a prophetess and they had at least two sons. A contemporary with the prophets Hosea and Micah, he prophesied in Jerusalem from c.740–680BC, covering the reigns of the Judaeen kings, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah.

The united kingdoms of Judah in the south, and Israel in the north, had split back in 931 BC during the time of King Solomon's successor, Rehoboam. The separation had left a legacy of political tension and sporadic civil war. When Isaiah started prophesying, morally and politically, the northern kingdom was falling apart. With its disastrous idolatry and social injustice, it had only eighteen years left before it would be obliterated for ever by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom was in danger of going the same way.

The Assyrian power, situated in Mesopotamia, west of the Zagros mountains and north of the Chaldean kingdom, had its capital in Nineveh. Its imperial expansion would last from 750–612 BC. Less geographically protected from eastern mountain raiders than the Chaldeans in the south, it embarked on a military expansion to secure its territory and protect its vital trade routes. Having subdued the east, under its vigorous king, Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BC), Assyria began to expand its empire westwards, conquering all the small nations, including Israel and most of Judah. Samaria, the capital of Israel, fell in 722 BC and Jerusalem looked set to be next.

Isaiah foresaw, in spite of evidence to the contrary, that the main judgment on Judah would not come from Assyria but from a resurgent Babylon, some one hundred years later. This has led some to challenge the unity of

the book, suggesting two, perhaps even three, authors of Isaiah. However, there is no compelling reason to do so unless we wish to deny the possibility of predictive prophecy. We have split the book in two simply because of its sheer size and because the break marks a logical transition in subject matter.

The military advance of the Assyrians was seen by Isaiah as the judgment of God. Indeed, God describes Assyria as no less than 'the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath!' (Isa. 10:5). The great sins that brought judgment on Israel, and later Judah, were moral decadence, political corruption, social injustice and spiritual idolatry. All this was masked by outward religious observance. Isaiah's calling was to expose the hypocrisy, but he was promised little success in his lifetime. Prophets are by definition outsiders, heretics, a threat to the establishment, killjoys. All he could hope for was a faithful remnant. Yet, one day from this band of pilgrims would emerge the Anointed One, the Messiah, who would establish His government over the whole world. Even the Gentile nations would come to worship Him – an amazing prediction anticipating the new covenant where there would be 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28). We are seeing this prophecy fulfilled today in the global spread of the gospel.

Isaiah is the Messianic prophet above all others. Often compressing time, and also telescoping immediate prophecies into the distant future, he predicts both Christ's first and second advents. Their remarkable fulfilment in the life of Jesus of Nazareth assures us that the word will prove to be just as reliable when Jesus returns in glory.

Isaiah's message of holiness challenges us personally but it is addressed nationally. Although we cannot simply

equate the unique status of God's Old Testament people with, say, the United Kingdom, or with the national Church, nonetheless, we are an apostolically evangelised nation and it is perfectly legitimate for us to call the nation and its Church back to God's ways. We may have no more success than Isaiah but we must still respond to the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' (Isa. 6:8).

Prophetic perspectives are covenant based. They call us back to our original commitment so that we may go forward, and when they are predictive it is not mere fortune-telling – the prophecies point us to the unfolding of the divine plan for our lives and to the fulfilment of God's covenant promises. Using powerful poetic imagery, the prophet disturbs our complacency and challenges our backsliding. He calls us to repentance and to change our behaviour so that we may re-engage with the redemptive journey that is our pilgrim calling. It is a call to inward separation from the vices of this passing age and a commitment to walk the highway of holiness, not as supercilious, 'holier-than-thou' prigs, but as those who are lovingly, mercifully and diligently engaged with everyday life and society. As Peter puts it: '... you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light' (1 Pet. 2:9).

Finally, although we shall be able to cover the main themes of this great prophecy, we recommend that you read a chapter a day in order to gain the maximum benefit from the study.



WEEK 1

The National Disease

Opening Icebreaker

See how many direct connections you can make between sins and sicknesses and accidents. Remember that sometimes there is no immediate connection to be made, so don't make the infirm among you feel guilty for no good reason!



Bible Readings

Isaiah 1:1–31

Isaiah 53:4–6

Hosea 4:1–3

James 1:27

Isaiah 5:1–12



Key verse: 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow ...' Isaiah 1:18

Focus: Religion is no substitute for true holiness.



Opening Our Eyes

God hates hypocrisy and Isaiah's perspective, as a true prophet, is one that exposes the shocking truth about our human condition. His words are unequivocal, calling heaven and earth to witness: God the Father has raised children who have become rebels. His own people have provoked the Holy One of Israel to anger and are suffering the consequences.

The nation is sick from head to toe. Morally and spiritually, it is an untreated putrefying mess. Divine judgment that should have brought about repentance has left the nation in economic ruin and its cities destroyed. Politically, Jerusalem is reduced to a hut in a field, isolated and alone.

Yet religious activity continues as though nothing were amiss. Offerings are given, sacrifices are made, festivals celebrated, prayers offered as if unrighteous behaviour didn't count, or sin could be offset by ritual observance. This is sheer hypocrisy. 'I am sick of it!' says the Lord. 'What is the point or value of religious ritual without a pure heart and a holy life? I never asked for this nonsense, so don't think it will cut any ice with me. I won't listen to your prayers until you reform your behaviour and cleanse yourselves from your sins!'

Top of the sin list is political, social and economic injustice. Laws favouring the rich had led to the deprivation of the poor and the appropriation of their land and property by the rich and powerful. Bribery and corruption had become endemic, with government and business people alike negotiating dishonest deals with rogues and gangsters. Widows and orphans were being swindled for the benefit of crooks. Good is called evil, and evil is called good.

A celebrity culture of self-centred hedonism with an obsession for fashion and partying had created a superficial consumer society indifferent to anything of real value or importance. The cult of the body had replaced the growth of the soul. Heroism was now measured by the ability to mix and drink cocktails! Alcohol abuse had become so endemic that even the priests and prophets were slouched drunk in their own vomit.

If that were not enough, eastern occultism had infiltrated the popular consciousness. Fortune-telling was rife and a brisk trade in idols had polluted the pure worship of God. Once-holy Jerusalem had become a brazen prostitute, as vain and callous as Sodom and Gomorrah. God's chosen people had made themselves His enemies.

The scene is set for further judgment. God is determined to purify His people, for it is in them that His salvation purpose for the whole world is invested. Although the judgment will be severe, there will be survivors who will heed the word of the Lord. From a faithful remnant will one day come the Messiah, the Servant of the Lord, who will offer Himself as the redemptive sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Zion will be redeemed and will be renamed 'the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City', surely a pointer to the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1–2).

Who constitutes this remnant? All those who respond to a remarkable and gracious offer of divine mercy. The Lord invites His people to the conference table and offers them a deal. If they repent and reform their ways, their sins, even though inflamed scarlet, can be made as white as snow. Those who are willing to cleanse themselves and re-educate themselves in goodness and truth will be blessed. Those who don't will be destroyed by a fearful war of judgment.



Discussion Starters

1. What parallels can you draw between the state of Isaiah’s nation and that of our own today? What should we do about it?

2. Those who draw near to God must do so with clean hands and a pure heart (Psa. 24:3–4). What does this mean in practical terms?

3. Isaiah’s perspective was not popular in his day, but it proved to be true. How do we expose sin and speak of the judgment of God without simply being obnoxious?

4. We are told to wash ourselves and to reform our ways. What steps would you take should you need to respond to this?

- 5.** Jesus died to heal us from our sins and sicknesses. How would you share this good news with your friends, colleagues, family and neighbours?

- 6.** Faithful remnants can easily become quirky groups and communities that have little connection with society. How can we live as God's holy people and yet still interact with the world around us?

- 7.** Political, social and economic justice is high on God's agenda. How can we best engage in the political process to bring this about in our society and beyond?



Personal Application

It is all too easy to attend church, participate in the services, and yet be far from the Lord in our own hearts. This may be because of known sin, or it may be because our minds are distracted by the cares and vanities of this world, or we may simply have grown indifferent through force of habit. Isaiah issues us with a wake-up call. Consider your ways. Commit yourself afresh to a life dedicated to the Lord who gave His life for you. You belong among His faithful remnant – those who choose to pilgrim on the fresh-air highway of holiness rather than to wallow in the stinking swamps of sin. Be who you were called to be!



Seeing Jesus in the Scriptures

The most shocking truth in Scripture is that Christ, the Sinless One, became sin for us. Bearing the judgment of God on our behalf, He embodied on the cross all that is corrupt in human nature, so much so that Isaiah says ‘... his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness ...’ (Isa. 52:14). Murder, anger, lust, deceit, greed, pride – and every other sin; cancer, diabetes, skin diseases, heart disease, brain damage, plague – and every other sickness; all this fell on Jesus. These are our sins, our sicknesses: surely ‘the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all’, and ‘by his wounds we are healed’ (Isa. 53:5–6).

To ignore this is to reject our one hope of salvation. To accept it surely demands ‘my soul, my life, my all’ (Isaac Watts, 1674–1748).



WEEK 2

The Day of the Lord

Opening Icebreaker

Create a law court scenario with one member of the group assuming the role of judge. The other members are the prosecuting counsel bringing charges against the world. In turn, 'I charge the world with ...' How many different major crimes can you come up with?



Bible Readings

Isaiah 2:1–22

2 Peter 3:10–13

Isaiah 34:1–4

Revelation 21:1–5

Luke 21:23–28



Key verse: “He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” The law will go out from Zion ...’
Isaiah 2:3

Focus: The day of judgment will also be the day of redemption.