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Introduction

Welcome to the second part of Isaiah's great and glorious prophecy! First of all, a bit of history to set the scene. Isaiah lived as a contemporary of the prophets Hosea and Micah. He prophesied about both immediate and imminent events in Jerusalem from c.740–680BC, during the reigns of the Judaeen kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. However, this second remarkable phase of his writings addresses a period over 150 years ahead of his time.

Israel, the northern half of the divided kingdom, had long since collapsed to the Assyrians. Soon it would be the southern kingdom's turn, but Judah would not fall to the Assyrian army. In 586BC, within 100 years of Isaiah's death, the Babylonians invaded the south, conquering Jerusalem and destroying the Temple. Mass deportations followed the carnage and it looked like the end of nationhood for God's people. Eking out a sorry existence in the ghettos of Babylon, they were left to reflect on the sins that had brought them to this pitiful state. Their major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, had spoken the truth. Moses, centuries earlier, had warned them about the consequences of forsaking the living God for the fertility gods of Canaan. Corruption and injustice had become endemic and the prophets were derided and persecuted. It was only a matter of time before they exhausted God's patience, and the punishment, when it came, was just and deserved; God sentenced them to seventy years captivity – a period set to pay off what they owed contractually for all the Sabbaths they had abused and neglected (see 2 Chron. 36:21).

These events must be slotted into the prophetic gap between Isaiah 39 and Isaiah 40. Some have theorised that the change of style and period indicates a different author to Isaiah the son of Amoz and, further, that

chapters 55–66 may have been penned by several ‘Isaiahs’. However, if we accept that the living God knows the end from the beginning and that Isaiah was inspired by the Holy Spirit, there is no serious reason to doubt the unity of authorship, and this is the position that we shall take in these studies.

God speaks, sometimes centuries in advance, encouraging His people to prepare themselves for the future. Such preparation may be a long-term investment that goes beyond our own lifetimes, but the fruitfulness of the future people of God depends significantly on the faithfulness of the present people of God. Isaiah sees beyond the captivity to a time of remarkable restoration. God’s people will return to their homeland; impossible as it might seem, they will rebuild the Temple and re-establish themselves as a nation. They will also rediscover their divine destiny as the Lord’s servant; a destiny that will in due course be enshrined in one Man, Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah and the Saviour of the world.

God is a God of new beginnings, a God of second chances who takes no pleasure in judgment. However, nothing is automatic; deportation may induce remorse and regret but that is insufficient. Profound lessons must be learned if the same errors are to be avoided in the future. Freedom will bring its own challenges; without a change of heart the people could easily fall back into the sins of their ancestors. Isaiah’s prophecy provides the counsel and encouragement that they will need when the Lord restores the fortunes of Zion.

God promises restoration even before the judgment has taken place! In wrath, He remembers mercy (see Hab. 3:2). ‘Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double

for all her sins' (Isa. 40:1–2). These words introduce us to some of the richest and most profound devotional words ever penned. Their local and contemporary setting reveals truths that are universal and eternal – truths that unfold like the sections of a telescope, enabling us to see far beyond the restoration of God's ancient people. Isaiah predicts the nature and the coming of Christ. He teaches us the principles of spiritual revivals, revealing the pattern of God's dealings in our own lives and churches. He even anticipates the second coming of Jesus and the establishment of a new universe.

The whole of this second part of Isaiah is written in poetic form and hardly surprisingly it has inspired many songs and hymns, not least, Handel's *Messiah*. Indeed, the structure of the prophecy, with its various herald voices, lends itself to operatic drama rather than to a linear logical sequence of ideas. This being so, and to help us with the quantity of material, we shall structure our study around the chief characters, the *dramatis personae*.

We are always somewhere on the roller coaster of life, death and resurrection, whether in our personal lives or in our churches. Whatever our situation, Isaiah has a powerful message for each of us, and never more so if we are praying for and seeking revival. 'Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you' (Isa. 60:1). May you experience the reality of those words as you study Isaiah, the prophet of restoration. With this in mind, we recommend that you read a chapter a day during the course of your studies.

WEEK 1

There is Only One God

Opening Icebreaker

If you had to invent a god, what characteristics would you want him to have, and why? Depending on the size of your group, go round choosing one characteristic each.



Bible Readings

- Isaiah 40:12–17, 21–31
- Isaiah 55:6–13
- Isaiah 66:1–2
- John 1:1–3, 14
- John 4:20–24



Key verse: 'I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.' Isaiah 45:5

Focus: There is only one Creator and Shepherd, and He is merciful to those who love Him.



Opening Our Eyes

Isaiah contains more direct self-revelation of God than any other book in the Bible, apart from the Gospels. Here God speaks in the first person, telling us that there is no other God but Himself. He is the Origin and the Originator, the first and the last, the eternal and unbounded Creator of all that is and ever will be. Like a builder He calculates and weighs out His materials, but on a monumental scale. The oceans are cupped in the palm of His hand, the skies are but a hand's span, the earth fits into His measuring bucket and He pops the mountains onto His scales. This God orchestrates the unique combination of elements needed to make a planet capable of sustaining the mystery of life. He creates and sustains the galaxies and stars, organising this impossibly vast and complex structure according to His own plans and intents. No one advises Him; no one hinders Him; no word is a lost echo. He speaks and it happens.

There is little point in trying to compare ourselves with Him. Humans, great or small, come and go like summer grass. Our energies wax and wane, but God is for ever, untiring, unchanged by the aeons. The continents, the nations, the islands, are mere dust to the One who sits above the circumference of the earth. As for the world's leaders, well, they are short-lived plants soon to be blown away by the breath of God. Even those raised up by God, the orchestrator of the constellations, are no more than the clay in the potter's hands. They have no more right to express their opinion, let alone argue about their destiny, than does the half-formed pot on the wheel.

So, what of our efforts to localise God and bring to Him our religious offerings? Heaven is His throne, the earth is His footstool. How will you fit Him into a house, even if it be the most grandiose in all the world? The trees and livestock of a whole nation would scarcely make a noticeable offering. How would mere mortals hope to impress the Holy One who inhabits eternity?

These lofty revelations might easily induce despair. Such a God is unknowable; His law is implacable; He has no interest in our puny lives so we must do the best we can without Him. We are impressed, sometimes scared, but not comforted.

However, this is not the whole story. This same almighty God is also the Shepherd of His people. He understands our frailty and treats us as gently as new-born lambs. Our lives may be short, but He promises to carry us from birth to old age. He might inhabit eternity but He also dwells intimately with those who respect His Word with a humble and contrite heart. Rather than standing at a distance in mere admiration, or with false humility turning away muttering that God has no place for us, we are urged to seek God. This is outrageous grace at its best; the One who has no need of us invites us to find Him. If we turn from our evil thoughts and perverse ways, God will freely forgive our wrongdoings. Should we object to this, the Lord reminds us that He doesn't think or act like us. If He says this is how it is then we had better believe it! Joy and peace replace fear and suspicion, and nature itself joins in the applause!



Discussion Starters

1. Part of the spiritual despair in the British psyche is based upon the belief that a personal knowledge of God is impossible to achieve. How would you address this?

2. Politically correct modern-day Pharisees object to Christians' exclusive claims about God or salvation. In what ways do Isaiah's revelations of God strengthen our position?

3. God is revealed as the unaided Creator of the universe. How do you answer those who have been taught that evolution disproves the existence of God?

5. What comfort do you take from the fact that the fate of the nations and the activities of their rulers is in the hands of God? How should we pray, and what should we do?

- 4.** God's word always comes to pass. What testimonies do you have to illustrate this truth? How do you respond when the promise appears not to be fulfilled?

- 6.** Comparing John 4:20–24 with Isaiah 66:1–2, how would you describe the house of God? See also Ephesians 2:19–22.

- 7.** What do you think it means to live in a 'zone of grace'? What is actually involved in having a humble and contrite heart? (See Personal Application below and Leader's Notes.)



Personal Application

It is sometimes alleged that God is not God enough, or not good enough to meet our human needs. He is either too small or too distant, or both. Yet God most high is also God most nigh. He is powerful enough to run the universe and close enough for us to experience His personal love and care.

The people who understand and experience this are those who, with humble and contrite hearts, respect God's Word (see Micah 6:8). Humility is often the missing element in our lives and its absence leaves us struggling between the poles of God's justice and His mercy. Once humble ourselves, the two poles become a tri-polar zone of grace, where we find the promised joy and peace that transforms resentment into rejoicing.



Seeing Jesus in the Scriptures

John's Gospel opens with the revelation that the eternal Word through whom the universe was made is also the One who became a human being named Jesus (see John 1:1–3,14). He who created the laws of the universe chose to become subject to those laws so we might know God for ourselves. We cannot reach God, but God has reached us. In Jesus, we see the justice, the mercy and the humility of God; it is pure grace reaching out and touching our lives with the Good Shepherd's love.

John could only marvel. '... we have heard ... we have seen with our eyes ... our hands have touched ... the Word of life' (1 John 1:1). May we similarly, through faith, worship the One and Only, who is at the Father's side.

WEEK 2

Tottering Idols

Opening Icebreaker



Draw up a 'name and shame' list of popular idols in our contemporary world. Write each one on a slip of paper. Gather these and 'ceremonially' destroy them – through the shredder, in the fireplace or simply screw them up and put them in the rubbish bin.

Bible Readings



- Isaiah 40:18–20
- Isaiah 41:7,21–24
- Isaiah 44:9–20
- Isaiah 45:20–21
- Isaiah 46:1–7

Key verse: 'All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless.' Isaiah 44:9

Focus: Keep yourselves from the superstitious folly of idols. Trust in the Lord, instead.



Opening Our Eyes

A man is a fool if he claims to be a god. How much more a fool if he claims that something he has manufactured with his own hands is a god. This is Isaiah's telling point. There is only one living God, the Creator and Redeemer of the entire universe, yet people worship idols of their own making and expect these objects to speak to them, to guide and protect them, to grant them a large family and big harvests. How crazy can you get?

In a scathing satire on idols and their worshippers, Isaiah sets out to demonstrate the powerlessness and futility of polytheism. With no regard for political correctness, he debunks the mumbo-jumbo with ice-cool logic. For a start, there are two kinds of idols, those the rich can afford, and those the poor can afford. So, it's a business, nothing more. The rich get the silver ones; the poor get the wood. There is no magic or mystery about idols; making them is just another job for the blacksmith or carpenter – four horseshoes, one latch, oh and a couple of idols! And when delivery takes place the idol has to be nailed down to stop it falling over. These 'gods' can't even stand on their own two feet!

Ah, but aren't the craftsmen inspired? Hardly. The blacksmith receives no supernatural aid. He grows just as thirsty making an idol as he does beating out a frying pan. The carpenter uses the same calculations and tools for the shaping and construction of an idol as he does for making a chair.

Surely then the materials are special, holy in some way? Observe, says Isaiah. Visit the forest. The woodsman fells a tree. Half of it he uses for firewood to cook a meal and to keep himself warm. The other half he carves into an idol and then he calls it his god! Has everyone switched their brains off? You are asking a block of wood to save you! What utter folly.