

JOHN MACARTHUR

ISAIAH

GOD'S PLAN TO REDEEM HIS PEOPLE

◀ MacArthur Bible Studies ▶

ISAIAH

The Promise of the Messiah

John MacArthur



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

MacArthur Bible Studies
Isaiah: The Promise of the Messiah
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ISBN 978-0-310-12380-4 (softcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-12381-1 (ebook)

First Printing November 2020 / Printed in the United States of America

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INTRODUCTION

Christians in the world today hold the death and resurrection of Jesus as their only hope for salvation from sin and judgment and for their future hope of eternal life. The prophets of the Old Testament also grounded their hopes for redemption on Jesus, whom they knew as the promised Messiah. While believers today look back through faith to the salvation achieved by Christ, the Old Testament prophets looked forward through faith to the fulfillment of God's promised salvation. Perhaps no prophet looked forward with such detail and such beauty as Isaiah.

In these twelve studies, we will explore this book in all its history, prophecy, and laser-focus on the promises connected to the Messiah. We will learn about the prophet who spoke with power to both kings and commoners among God's people. We will hear of God's judgment pronounced against both the nation of Israel and her enemies. We will explore the promise of deliverance for Isaiah's contemporaries, and we will examine the wonderful descriptions of God's ultimate deliverance through the life and ministry of His suffering Servant, the Messiah.

Through it all, we will stay focused, as Isaiah did, on God's incredible promise of salvation for all who believe in Him and call Him their Lord.

TITLE

The book derives its title from the author, whose name in Hebrew means, "Yahweh [the LORD] is salvation." In this regard, *Isaiah* is similar to the names *Joshua*, *Elisha*, and *Jesus*, which carry the same meaning. The New Testament authors quoted passages from Isaiah more than sixty-five times—a greater

number than any other other Old Testament prophet—and mentioned him by name more than twenty times (see, for example, Romans 9:29). In the Gospels, we read that Jesus began His ministry in Nazareth by quoting from the prophet Isaiah (see Luke 4:16–19).

AUTHOR AND DATE

Isaiah, the son of Amoz, ministered in and around Jerusalem as a prophet to Judah during the reigns of four kings of Judah: Uzziah (called “Azariah” in 2 Kings), Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (see Isaiah 1:1), from c. 739–686 BC. Isaiah was a contemporary of the prophets Hosea and Micah, and evidently came from a family of some rank, as he had easy access to the king (see 7:3). Isaiah was married and had two sons: Shear-jashub (meaning “a remnant shall return,” see 7:3); and Maher-shalal-hash-baz (meaning “hastening to the spoil, hurrying to the prey,” see 8:3). When God called Isaiah to prophesy in the year of King Uzziah’s death, he responded with a cheerful readiness, even though he knew his ministry would be one of fruitless warning and exhortation (see 6:9–13). Having been raised in Jerusalem, he was an appropriate choice as a political and religious counselor to the nation. Isaiah the prophet lived until at least 681 BC, as he penned the account of Sennacherib’s death (see 37:38). Tradition states he met his death under King Manasseh (c. 695–642 BC) by being cut in two with a wooden saw.

BACKGROUND AND SETTING

During Uzziah’s prosperous fifty-two year reign (c. 790–739 BC), Judah developed into a strong commercial and military state, with a port for commerce on the Red Sea and many walled towers and fortifications (see 2 Chronicles 26:3–5, 8–10, 13–15). Yet the period also witnessed a decline in Judah’s faithfulness to the Lord and spiritual purity. Uzziah’s downfall resulted from his attempt to assume the privileges of a priest and burn incense on the altar (see 26:16–19). He was judged with leprosy, from which he never recovered (see 26:20–21).

Uzziah’s son Jotham (c. 750–731 BC) took over the duties of king before his father’s death. At the time, Assyria was emerging as an international power under Tiglath-Pileser (c. 745–727 BC), and the nation also began to incur opposition from Israel and Syria to the north (see 2 Kings 15:19, 37). Jotham was a builder and a fighter like his father, but spiritual corruption still existed in the land (see 2 Kings 15:34–35; 2 Chronicles 27:1–2).

Jotham's son Ahaz (c. 735–715 BC) ruled from age twenty-five to forty-one (see 2 Chronicles 28:1, 8). During his reign, Israel and Syria formed an alliance to combat the rising Assyrian threat, but Ahaz refused to bring Judah into it (see 2 Kings 16:5). As a result, his northern neighbors threatened to dethrone him, and war resulted. In a panic, Ahaz solicited the Assyrian king for help (see 2 Kings 16:7). The Assyrian king gladly responded, sacking Gaza, carrying Galilee and Gilead into captivity, and capturing Damascus (c 732 BC). Ahaz's alliance with Assyria led to his introduction of a pagan altar, which he set up in Solomon's temple. In 722 BC, Assyria captured Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom, and carried many of Israel's most capable people into captivity (see 2 Kings 17:6, 24).

Ahaz's son Hezekiah (c. 716–686 BC) made spiritual reformation a priority when he assumed the throne (see 2 Kings 18:1–2, 4, 22). By this point, the threat of an Assyrian invasion had forced Judah to promise heavy tribute to that eastern power. In 701 BC, Hezekiah became ill with a life-threatening disease, but God graciously extended his life by fifteen years (see 20:1–11). The ruler of Babylon used the opportunity of Hezekiah's illness and recovery to send congratulations to him, likely hoping to form an alliance with Judah against Assyria (see 20:12).

When Assyria became weak through internal strife, Hezekiah refused to pay any further tribute to that power (see 18:7). As a result, the Assyrian king Sennacherib invaded the coastal areas of Israel, marching toward Egypt on Israel's southern flank. In the process, he overran Judean towns, looting and carrying many people back to Assyria. While besieging Lachish, he sent a contingent to surround Jerusalem (see 18:17–19:8). When this side expedition failed, he sent messengers to Jerusalem, demanding immediate surrender (see 19:9). With Isaiah's encouragement, Hezekiah refused to surrender (see Isaiah 37:1–7). Sennacherib's army fell prey to a sudden disaster, and he returned to Nineveh and never threatened Judah again.

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL THEMES

Isaiah prophesied during the period of the divided kingdom, though he directed most of his prophecies to the southern kingdom of Judah. He condemned the empty ritualism of his day and the idolatry into which the people had fallen (see Isaiah 1:10–15; 40:18–20). He foresaw the coming Babylonian captivity because of Judah's departure from the Lord (see 39:6–7).

Some of Isaiah's prophecies were fulfilled during his lifetime, which provided his credentials for the prophetic office. For instance, Sennacherib's effort to take Jerusalem failed, just as Isaiah had said it would (see 37:6–7, 36–38). God healed Hezekiah's critical illness, as Isaiah had predicted (see 38:5). Long before Cyrus, king of Persia, appeared on the scene, Isaiah named him as Judah's deliverer from the Babylonian captivity (see 44:28; 45:1). Fulfillment of his prophecies concerning Christ's first coming have given Isaiah further vindication (see, for example, 7:14). The literal fulfillment pattern of his already-fulfilled prophecies gives assurance that prophecies of Christ's second coming will also see literal fulfillment.

Isaiah provides information on the future Day of the Lord and the time that will follow (see, for example, Isaiah 2:12–21). He details numerous aspects of Israel's future kingdom on earth that are not found elsewhere in Scripture. These details include changes in nature and the animal world, Jerusalem's status among the nations, and the Suffering Servant's leadership.

Isaiah employed a literary device called "prophetic foreshortening" to predict future events without delineating exact sequences of the events or time intervals separating them. For example, nothing in Isaiah reveals the extended period separating the two comings of the Messiah (see Isaiah 61:1–2; Luke 4:17–22). Also, Isaiah does not provide as clear a distinction between the future temporal kingdom and the eternal kingdom, as John does in Revelation (see 20:1–10; 21:1–22:5). In God's program of progressive revelation, the details of these relationships awaited a prophetic spokesman in a later time.

Isaiah, also known as the "evangelical prophet," spoke much about the grace of God toward Israel, particularly in his last twenty-seven chapters. The centerpiece of his book is found in Isaiah 53, in which he portrays Christ as the slain Lamb of God. As Isaiah writes, "But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed" (verse 5).

INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGES

Interpretive challenges in a long and significant book such as Isaiah are numerous. The most critical of them focuses on whether Isaiah's prophecies will receive literal fulfillment or not and on whether the Lord, in His program of the ages, has abandoned national Israel and permanently replaced the nation with the church, so that there is no future for national Israel.

On the latter issue, numerous portions of Isaiah support the position that God has not replaced ethnic Israel with an alleged “new Israel.” Isaiah has too much to say about God’s faithfulness to Israel—that He would not reject the people whom He has created and chosen (see 43:1). The nation is on the palms of His hands, and Jerusalem’s walls are ever before His eyes (see 49:16). He is bound by His own Word to fulfill the promises He has made to bring them back to Himself and bless them in that future day (see 55:10–12).

On the former issue, literal fulfillment of many of Isaiah’s prophecies has already occurred, so it is biblically groundless to contend that those yet unfulfilled will not see literal fulfillment. This fact also disqualifies the case for proposing that the church will receive many of the promises made originally to Israel. The kingdom promised to David belongs to Israel, not the church. The future exaltation of Jerusalem will be on earth, not in heaven. Christ will reign on this present earth, as well as in the future new heavens and new earth (see Revelation 22:1, 3).

1

JUDAH'S SOCIAL SINS

Isaiah 1:1–2:22; 5:1–6:13

DRAWING NEAR

How do you typically respond when you face tragedy or loss?

THE CONTEXT

The nation of Israel reached its peak under the leadership of King David and King Solomon (c. 1005 BC–928 BC). During that time, Israel expanded its territory, wealth, and influence in the region. Tragically, the nation was split in two when Solomon's son, Rehoboam, failed to demonstrate the wisdom of his father (see 1 Kings 12). The result was two nations: the northern kingdom, which retained the name Israel, and the southern kingdom of Judah.

The centuries following this split were marked by serious decline, both politically and spiritually, for each kingdom. The nation of Israel was continually led by a succession of evil kings, who actively pushed God's people into idolatry. As a result, Israel was eventually conquered in 722 BC by the rising nation of Assyria, and its people were dispersed. Judah, the southern kingdom, endured a mix of righteous and unrighteous leaders, yet eventually succumbed to a

similar fate. Babylon conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC, taking the best and brightest of its citizens into captivity.

The failure of each kingdom's political and spiritual leaders during this time gave rise to the prophets. This collection of individuals was called specifically by God to declare His Word to His people. The prophets proclaimed a variety of messages, including words of warning and judgment, which often made them unpopular in their time.

Isaiah's prophetic ministry was mostly confined to the southern kingdom of Judah. He began his work after the death of Uzziah, who had reigned as Judah's king for more than fifty years. Isaiah ultimately spoke on God's behalf in the presence of four kings: Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, and Manasseh. As you will see in this lesson, his work began with a stunning condemnation of Judah's sinfulness as a society and a proclamation of future judgment.

KEYS TO THE TEXT

Read Isaiah 1:1–2:22, noting the key words and phrases indicated below.

A COURTROOM SCENE: The book of Isaiah begins with a courtroom scene in which the Lord is the plaintiff and the nation of Israel is the defendant.

1:2. HEAR, O HEAVENS . . . O EARTH: God intended Israel to be a channel of blessing to the nations (see Genesis 12:2–3), but now He must call the nations to look on Israel's shame. God declares that His "children," the physical descendants of Abraham, have rebelled against Him.

3. THE OX . . . THE DONKEY: Animals appear to have more powers of reason than God's people who break fellowship with Him.

4. THE HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL: Isaiah's special title for God, found twenty-five times in this book, but only six times in the rest of the Old Testament. Isaiah also uses "Holy One" as a title four times (see 10:17; 40:25; 43:15; 49:7) and "Holy One of Jacob" once (see 29:23). In many contexts, the name contrasts the holiness of God with the sinfulness of Israel.

5. WHY SHOULD YOU BE STRICKEN AGAIN?: The nation of Judah, already in ruins because of their rebellion against God, was behaving irrationally by continuing their rebellion.

8. DAUGHTER OF ZION: This phrase occurs twenty-eight times in the Old Testament, six of which are found in Isaiah (see 1:8; 10:32; 16:1; 37:22; 52:2; 62:11). The phrase is a personification of Jerusalem, and here stands for all of Judah.

9. LORD OF HOSTS: Isaiah used this title, or the similar "LORD God of hosts," sixty times. It pictures God as a mighty warrior, a leader of armies, who is capable of conquering all of Israel's enemies and providing for her survival.

REMNANT: Sometimes rendered "survivors," this term designates the faithful among the Israelites. Paul later cited this verse to prove the ongoing existence of faithful Israelites, even in his day (see Romans 9:29). Such a remnant will constitute the nucleus of returning Israelites in the nation's regathering when the Messiah returns to earth.

SODOM AND GOMORRAH: The prophet applies the names of the sinful cities to Judah and Jerusalem, decrying their empty formalism in worship.

10. RULERS OF SODOM . . . PEOPLE OF GOMORRAH: God rained brimstone and fire on these two Canaanite cities because of their aggravated sinfulness (see Genesis 18:20; 19:24–28). The two cities later became a proverbial expression for the ultimate in God's temporal judgment against any people (see, for example, Jeremiah 23:14; 49:18; 50:40; Matthew 10:15; 2 Peter 2:6). Had God's grace not intervened, He would have judged Israel in the same way.

11. I HAVE HAD ENOUGH . . . I DO NOT DELIGHT: God found all sacrifices meaningless and even abhorrent if the offerer failed in obedience to His laws (see 1 Samuel 15:22–23). Rebellion is equated to the sin of witchcraft and stubbornness to iniquity and idolatry.

13–14. NEW MOONS, THE SABBATHS . . . ASSEMBLIES . . . APPOINTED FEASTS: These were all occasions prescribed by the law of Moses (see Exodus 12:16; Leviticus 23; Numbers 10:10; 28:11–29:40; Deuteronomy 16:1–17).

14. MY SOUL HATES: It is impossible to doubt the Lord's total aversion toward hypocritical religion. Other practices God hates include robbery for burnt offering (see 61:8), serving other gods (see Jeremiah 44:4), harboring evil against a neighbor and love for a false oath (see Zechariah 8:16), divorce (see Malachi 2:16), and those who love violence (see Psalm 11:5).

16. **PUT AWAY THE EVIL:** The outward evidence of the emptiness of Jerusalem's ritualism was the presence of evil works and the absence of good works.

17. **THE FATHERLESS . . . THE WIDOW:** Illustrative of good works and deeds done on behalf of those in need. "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27).

18. **SCARLET . . . CRIMSON:** These colors speak of the guilt of those whose hands were "full of blood" (verse 15). Fullness of blood speaks of extreme iniquity and perversity.

WHITE AS SNOW . . . AS WOOL: Snow and wool are substances that are naturally white and, therefore, portray what is clean—the blood-guilt having been removed. In this way, the Lord promises to pardon and cleanse those whom He saves. (This section previews the last twenty-seven chapters of Isaiah, which focus more on God's grace and forgiveness than on judgment.)

19. **WILLING AND OBEDIENT:** While Isaiah is a prophet of grace, forgiveness is not unconditional. It comes through repentance. In this regard, the prophet offers his readers the same choice that God gave Moses in Deuteronomy 28: a choice between a blessing and a curse. They may choose repentance and obedience in order to reap the benefits of the land, or they can refuse to do so and become victims of foreign oppressors.

19–20. **EAT . . . BE DEVoured:** God uses the same Hebrew word in these verses to accentuate opposite outcomes. On the one hand, the people can choose to eat the fruit of the land. On the other hand, they can choose to be eaten by conquering powers.

THE DEGENERATE CITY: These verses recount Jerusalem's disobedience, with an account of God's future actions to purge her of sin.

21. **A HARLOT:** In the Old Testament, spiritual harlotry was often used to depict the idolatry of God's people. However, in this instance, Jerusalem's unfaithfulness incorporates a wider range of wrongs, including murders and general corruption. As Isaiah prophesies, ethical depravity has replaced the city's former virtues.

24. **THE LORD . . . THE LORD OF HOSTS, THE MIGHTY ONE OF ISRAEL:** This threefold title of God emphasizes His role as the rightful Judge of His sinful

people. “The Mighty One of Israel” occurs only here in the Bible, though “the Mighty One of Jacob” appears five times (see Isaiah 49:26; 60:16; Genesis 49:24; Psalm 132:2, 5).

26. I WILL RESTORE: God’s judgment of His people has future restoration as its goal. Ultimately, the people were restored from Babylonian captivity, but this promise has in view a greater and more lasting restoration. It anticipates a complete and permanent restoration, which will make Jerusalem supreme among the nations.

27. ZION: Originally a designation for the hill Ophel, this name became a synonym for the entire city of Jerusalem. Isaiah always uses it this way. The remnant of this city who repent of their sin will find redemption in conjunction with God’s future restoration of Israel’s prosperity.

28. TRANSGRESSORS . . . SINNERS: Concurrent with the future blessing of the faithful remnant, God will relegate the unrepentant to destruction. This is the only way Zion can become pure.

29. TEREBINTH TREES . . . GARDENS: These were settings where Israel practiced idolatrous worship. God had chosen Israel, but some of its people had chosen the gardens. When God calls them to account for their rebellious choice, they will be ashamed and embarrassed.

31. WILL BURN . . . NO ONE SHALL QUENCH: Both the rebellious and their works will perish. This is final judgment, not merely another captivity.

THE FUTURE HOUSE OF GOD: The prophet Isaiah provides a picture of Zion (or Jerusalem) as a “house of God” to depict her future exaltation.

2:2. IT SHALL COME TO PASS: The prophet Micah includes this portion of Isaiah’s prophecy in his book almost word for word (see Micah 4:1–3), which indicates that this younger contemporary might have obtained the words from Isaiah. Both passages present a prophetic picture of Zion in the future, messianic kingdom when all people will recognize Jerusalem as the capital of the world.

2. IN THE LATTER DAYS: The latter (or last) days is a time designation that looks forward to the messianic era (see Ezekiel 38:16; Hosea 3:5; Micah 4:1). The authors of the New Testament applied the expression to the period beginning with the First Advent of Christ (see Acts 2:17; 2 Timothy 3:1; Hebrews 1:2).

Old Testament prophets, being without a clear word regarding the time between the Messiah's two advents, linked the expression to the Messiah's return to establish His earthly kingdom (that is, the millennial kingdom spoken of in Revelation 20:1–10).

3. THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LORD'S HOUSE: Mount Zion, the location of the temple in Jerusalem. The expression occurs two other times in the Old Testament (see 2 Chronicles 33:15; Micah 4:1). Isaiah frequently calls Mount Zion the "holy mountain" (see, for example, 11:9; 27:13; 56:7).

4. SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES . . . SPEARS INTO PRUNING HOOKS: With the Messiah on His throne in Jerusalem, the world will enjoy uninterrupted peaceful conditions. Warfare will continue to characterize human history until the Prince of Peace returns to earth to put an end to it.

ANOTHER REBUKE: After providing this glimpse of Judah's glorious future, the prophet returns to the present, offering a scathing rebuke of the people's idolatry and the judgment of God it will evoke.

6. THEY ARE FILLED WITH EASTERN WAYS: An influx of religious superstitions had filled Jerusalem and its environs through caravans from the East. In this manner, through verse 9, Isaiah states the Lord's formal charge against the people of Jerusalem.

8. FULL OF IDOLS: Jotham and Ahaz, two of the kings under whom Isaiah prophesied, had failed to remove the idolatrous high places from the land (see 2 Kings 15:35; 16:4).

10–22. ENTER INTO THE ROCK: This section pictures conditions during the future Day of the Lord. While some elements fit what Judah experienced during the Babylonian captivity, the intensity of judgment predicted here could not have found fulfillment at that time. The Tribulation period before Christ's return will be the time for these judgmental horrors.

12. THE DAY OF THE LORD: This phrase appears nineteen times in the Old Testament and four times in the New Testament to express the time of God's extreme wrath. It can refer to a *near* future judgment or to a *far* future judgment. At times, the near fulfillment prefigures the far fulfillment (see Joel 1:15; 3:14); on other occasions, both kinds of fulfillment are included in one passage (see Zephaniah 1:7, 14). Here, Isaiah looks to the far fulfillment at the end of the time

of Jacob's trouble (see Jeremiah 30:7). Two "Day of the Lord" expressions remain to be fulfilled: (1) at the end of Daniel's seventieth week (see Joel 3:14; Malachi 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:2); and (2) at the end of the Millennium (see 2 Peter 3:10).

13. CEDARS OF LEBANON . . . OAKS OF BASHAN: The cedars and oaks were objects of great admiration to people in Old Testament times. Yet even these impressive created objects will face destruction because of human rebellion.

19. HOLES OF THE ROCKS . . . CAVES OF THE EARTH: John uses this passage (and verse 21) to describe humanity's flight from the terrors of Tribulation during the period before Christ's return to earth (see Revelation 6:12, 15–16). This reveals that the final fulfillment of this prophecy will be during Daniel's seventieth week.

22. SEVER YOURSELVES: This calls readers to stop depending on other humans and to trust only in God, who alone is worthy.

Read Isaiah 5:1–6:13, noting the key words and phrases indicated below.

A DISAPPOINTING VINEYARD: The conclusion of the prophet's extended discourse (first begun in Isaiah 2:1) comes by way of a comparison of God's people to a vineyard that He cultivated but which did not bear fruit.

1. MY WELL-BELOVED: The Lord is the friend who is well-beloved by Isaiah. The vineyard belongs to Him.

2. GOOD GRAPES . . . WILD GRAPES: The owner made every conceivable provision for the vine's productivity and protection, illustrating the Lord's purely gracious choice of Israel. Justifiably, He expected a good yield from His investment, but the vine's produce was "sour berries," inedible and fit only for dumping.

5. IT SHALL BE BURNED . . . TRAMPLED DOWN: As punishment for her unfruitfulness, Israel would become desolate and accessible to any nation wishing to invade her. This happened in the Babylonian invasion of 586 BC, and it will happen repeatedly until her national repentance at the second coming of the Messiah.

8. WOE TO THOSE WHO JOIN HOUSE TO HOUSE: The prophet will now (through verse 23) pronounce six woes or judgments against the unresponsive

people of Israel. The first woe is against real estate owners because of their greedy materialism. God gave the land to the Israelites with the intention that the original allocation remain with each family. By Isaiah's time, land speculators were putting together huge estates, and the powerful rich were using legal processes to deprive the poor of what was rightfully theirs.

10. ONE BATH . . . ONE EPHAH: God judged the greedy rich by reducing the productivity of their land to a small fraction of what it would have been normally. One bath was roughly equivalent to six gallons. About onehalf bushel would be produced from about six bushels of planted seed. Such amounts indicate famine conditions.

11. Woe to those who rise . . . that they may follow intoxicating drink: The second woe addresses the drunkards for their neglect of the Lord's work of judgment and redemption, and for their devotion to pleasure.

14. SHEOL: This term, in this context, pictures death as a great monster with wide-open jaws, ready to receive its victims. Such is to be the fate of those who perish in the captivity that God will send to punish the people's sinfulness.

18. WOE TO THOSE WHO DRAW INIQUITY WITH CORDS OF VANITY: The third woe is against those who defied the Lord and ridiculed His prophet.

19. LET HIM MAKE SPEED: The taunting unbelievers said, in effect, "Where is the judgment of which you have spoken? We will believe it when we see it." This challenge for God to hasten His judgment represents their disbelief that the Holy One of Israel will judge the people.

20. WOE TO THOSE WHO CALL EVIL GOOD, AND GOOD EVIL: The fourth woe condemns the reversal of morality that dominated the nation. They utterly confused all moral distinctions.

21. WOE TO THOSE WHO ARE WISE IN THEIR OWN EYES: The object of the fifth woe relates to the people's arrogance. "Pride goes before destruction" (Proverbs 16:18).

22–23. WOE TO MEN . . . WHO JUSTIFY THE WICKED: The sixth woe points to the unjust sentences passed by drunken and bribed judges.

26. NATIONS FROM AFAR: The conclusion of the discourse announces God's action in sending a mighty army against Judah to conquer and leave the land in darkness and distress. Principal among these nations were Assyria, which conquered the northern kingdom in 722 BC, and Babylon, which completed its invasion of Jerusalem in 586 BC and destroyed the temple.

30. **DARKNESS AND SORROW:** God's wrath against the people was intended to eliminate light (see Isaiah 8:22; 42:7), but His promised deliverance of the remnant will ultimately turn that darkness into light at the coming of the Messiah (see 9:2; 42:16; 58:10; 60:2).

ISAIAH'S CALL: The Lord, in calling Isaiah to be the prophet who would proclaim the coming judgment, gave him a vision of His majestic holiness so overwhelming that it devastated Isaiah and made him realize his own sinfulness.

6:1. **KING UZZIAH DIED:** After fifty-two years of rule, Uzziah succumbed to leprosy in 739 BC. Isaiah began his prophetic ministry that same year. He received the prophecies recounted in Isaiah 1–5 after this call, but here he returns to authenticate what he has already written by describing how he was called.

I SAW THE LORD . . . HIGH AND LIFTED UP: The prophet Isaiah became unconscious of the outside world and, with his inner eye, saw what God revealed to him. The throne he saw was greatly elevated, emphasizing the Most High God. This experience recalls the experience of John's prophetic vision in Revelation 4:1–11.

TRAIN: This refers to the hem or fringe of the Lord's robe that filled the temple.

TEMPLE: Isaiah may have been at the earthly temple, but this vision transcends the earthly. The throne of God is in the heavenly temple (see Revelation 4:1–6; 5:1–7; 11:19).

2. **SERAPHIM:** The seraphim are an order of angelic creatures who bear a similarity to the four living creatures of Revelation 4:6, which in turn resemble the cherubim of Ezekiel 10:1.

SIX WINGS: Two wings covered the faces of the seraphim because they dared not gaze directly at God's glory. Two covered their feet, acknowledging their lowliness, even though engaged in divine service. With two, they flew in serving the One on the throne. Thus, the four wings relate to worship, emphasizing the priority of praise.

3. **ONE CRIED TO ANOTHER:** The seraphim were speaking to each other in antiphonal praise.

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY: The primary thrust of this threefold repetition of God's holiness (called the *trihagion*) emphasizes God's separateness from and independence of His fallen creation, though it implies secondarily that God is three persons.

FULL OF HIS GLORY: The earth is the worldwide display case for God's immeasurable glory, perfections, and attributes as seen in creation. Fallen man has nevertheless refused to glorify Him as God (see Romans 1:20, 23).

4. **SHAKEN . . . SMOKE:** This symbolizes God's holiness as it relates to His wrath and judgment (see Exodus 19:16–20; Revelation 15:8).

5. **UNCLEAN LIPS:** If the lips are unclean, so is the heart. This vision of God's holiness vividly reminded the prophet of his own unworthiness, which deserved judgment. Job and Peter came to the same realization when confronted with God's presence (see Job 42:6; Luke 5:8).

6. **COAL . . . ALTAR:** The hot coal taken from the altar of incense in heaven is emblematic of God's purifying work (see Revelation 8:3–5). Repentance is painful, and this vision has made Isaiah painfully aware of his own sin. In this way, God has prepared him for his commission.

7. **TAKEN AWAY . . . PURGED:** Spiritual cleansing for special service to the Lord, not salvation, is in view here.

8. **Us:** This plural pronoun does not explicitly prove the doctrine of the Trinity, but it does strongly imply it (see Genesis 1:26).

HERE AM I! SEND ME: This response from Isaiah reveals his humble readiness and complete trust in God. Though he was profoundly aware of his sin, he was available.

9. **DO NOT UNDERSTAND . . . DO NOT PERCEIVE:** Isaiah's message was to be God's instrument for hiding the truth from an unreceptive people. Centuries later, Jesus' parables were to do the same (see Matthew 13:14–15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10).

11. **HOW LONG?:** The prophet Isaiah, knowing the people's rejection of the Lord, asks how long he should preach this message of divine judgment. God replies that it must continue until the cities are desolate and the people have gone into exile.

13. **A TENTH:** Though most will reject God, the tenth (also called "stumps" and "holy seed") represents the faithful remnant in Israel who will be the nucleus who hear and believe.

UNLEASHING THE TEXT

- 1) How would you describe the overall tone of Isaiah's prophecy in these opening chapters?

- 2) What are some of Judah's specific sins that caught your attention? Why?

- 3) What are some of the judgments or punishments described in these opening chapters?

- 4) What can you learn about God from Isaiah's call to be a prophet in chapter 6?

EXPLORING THE MEANING

God is our righteous Judge. The action in Isaiah takes off right at the start. In Isaiah 1:2, the prophet proclaims, "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: 'I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me.'" He goes on in the remainder of the chapter to list the ways that God's people have fallen short of His standards.

In opening his book this way, Isaiah quickly and clearly displays God's authority not only over the people of Judah but also over the entire world. ("Hear, O *heavens*, and give ear, O *earth!*") The people of Isaiah's day believed they retained a degree of autonomy over their everyday lives. They acknowledged God's existence and even worshiped Him through sacrifice, yet they chose to live in habitual disobedience to His will. Isaiah's immediate focus on God as the righteous Judge over all the earth is a reminder that He has both the power and the authority to stand in judgment over humanity. He knows all things and is well able to provide correction when people reject Him—both on the individual and the national level.

Even so, God reveals His love for His people by highlighting the possibility of forgiveness: "Come now, and let us reason together," says the LORD, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (verse 18). Like so much of Isaiah's prophecy to the people of Judah, these verses point forward to the coming salvation purchased by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

God will one day fully execute His authority as Judge. God is both just and merciful, which means He is patient and loving with His people even as He punishes their sin. Throughout the Old Testament, God interacted with the Israelites in much the same way that parents show love and discipline to their children. Namely, God exhibited an extreme amount of patience in the face of rejection and rebellion. After all, He wanted His people to turn back to Him. When He did bring judgment, such as the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, His actions always pointed ahead to future grace and restoration.

However, there will come a time when God's full wrath against sin will be revealed. In Scripture, this is often called "the Day of the Lord," and it refers to the end of history when God will fully root out the corruption of evil and sin from His creation. Isaiah refers to this coming day several times in his prophecies, including in Isaiah 2: "For the day of the LORD of hosts shall come upon everything proud and lofty, upon everything lifted up—and it shall be brought low. . . . The loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day" (verses 12, 17).

The language Isaiah uses to describe that day is both striking and terrifying. "They shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth,"

he writes, “from the terror of the LORD and the glory of His majesty, when He arises to shake the earth mightily” (verse 19). He describes people running “from the terror of the Lord” and God arising “to shake the earth mightily” (verses 21–22). In short, the Day of the Lord will be a time of judgment unlike anything ever seen. Yet for God’s people, it will also lead to a time of rejoicing, because God will finally remove the stain and corruption of sin once and for all.

Serving God is an awesome responsibility. In Isaiah 6, the prophet recalls the moment when God appeared to him in a vision called him into His service. “I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’” Many readers of the Bible are inspired by Isaiah’s quick response: “Here am I! Send me” (verse 8).

However, it’s important not to miss Isaiah’s earlier interaction with God at the beginning of the chapter. After the death of King Uzziah, Isaiah supernaturally witnessed a vision of God’s heavenly throne room. The sight was both awesome and terrible, causing Isaiah to cry out, “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (verse 5).

Isaiah’s cry mirrors Peter’s after he recognized Jesus as the Messiah and exclaimed, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” (Luke 5:8). In fact, throughout the Bible, people almost unanimously fall to the ground and worship in fear whenever they come into God’s presence. Those of us who serve as disciples of Jesus today will do well to remember that our Savior is also the supreme Lord and Judge of the universe. Our service to Him is not a casual commitment but rather an awesome responsibility.

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

- 5) How do you typically respond to passages about judgment and punishment in the Bible? Why do you respond that way?

6) Why does Scripture include the terrible imagery connected with “the Day of the Lord”?

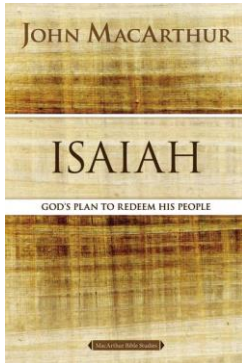
7) When confronted with the greatness of God, have you ever felt a sense of fear or wonder? Explain.

8) What is the proper way to understand God’s mercy balanced with His justice? How can you reconcile the apparent tension between those two?

PERSONAL RESPONSE

9) What steps can you take this week to reflect on God’s presence and worship Him?

10) Where do you currently have an opportunity to tell someone about the reality of God’s future judgment?



ISAIAH

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