

Introduction to Isaiah

Isaiah is one of the most important voices of the Old Testament. The book that bears his name contains key revelations of God's character and unveils an unparalleled portrait of the coming Messiah. One of the first things that will impress the reader is the sheer magnitude of the prophecy. The concepts, ideas, and range of time are large as well. It is here in the book of Isaiah that all of the threads of the big picture of God's purposes for His people and for His world come together—forming a magnificent tapestry that enfolds both time and eternity.

Isaiah was an eighth-century prophet of Judah who faithfully delivered God's messages to the people of his generation. His public ministry began the year that King Uzziah died and continued on through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Isaiah lived in the city of Jerusalem where he was a prominent figure for close to 50 years. He was married to a prophetess (Isaiah 8:3) and had two sons whose names illustrated his message to the nation (7:3, 8:3). According to Jewish tradition, Isaiah's father Amoz (not Amos the prophet) was a brother of King Amaziah. This would make Isaiah a first cousin to King Uzziah, and of royal blood.

Isaiah's call to prophetic ministry is vividly described in chapter six. Through a vision, the young Isaiah was given a life-changing encounter with the Holy God. Isaiah's whole prophetic ministry shows the effect of this experience. He had seen the 'Holy One of Israel' and he would never be the same. He had seen human sin for the appalling thing it is, and he would never forget it.

An appropriate key verse for the book is "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." (6:3) NIV

The prophecies of Isaiah can be divided into two major sections. Chapters 1-39 speak of God's *judgment* and portray man's great need for salvation. Chapters 40-66 announce God's *comfort* and reveal His great provision of salvation. Through Isaiah, we learn that a holy God is both *just* and *merciful*. His altogether holy character demands that sin and rebellion be judged. But what God's Holiness demanded—His mercy and love provided in His Son Jesus Christ. The message of the book is even evident in Isaiah's name, which in Hebrew means "the Lord saves."

The Immediate Setting: The Kingdom of Judah was at a significant turning point when Isaiah's work began. The year was 740 B.C. The nation had generally enjoyed peaceful and prosperous times during the long reign of King Uzziah. But during the closing years of his rule, many began to pull away from God and turn to pagan idolatry. Under his successors the nation continued in spiritual decline and slowly plummeted towards collapse and ruin. God warned the people (through Isaiah) to repent and return to Him. Still, God's gracious invitation was ignored. The evil empires of Assyria and Babylon became the instruments God used to purge His people.

Even in this dark moment of history, hope springs forth from God Himself. The One who cares enough for them to be their judge will also provide for them a Savior. The final outcome will be not just a new people, but a new city and a new universe (65:17-19). Even the Gentiles will come into His light, and all nations will be blessed through the Messiah.

Isaiah committed his vision to writing some time between 740 and 681 B.C. Isaiah was a man of wisdom and eloquence; his work is beautifully communicated. Of all the writing prophets Isaiah is considered the greatest. His prophecy is quoted in the New Testament more than all the other prophets combined. Most of all, Isaiah was a man of great spirituality and strong faith in God. When the occasion demanded, he was stern and uncompromising; yet he was a man of compassion. He warned of judgment because he loved his people.

The lessons that Israel and the surrounding nations went through in the eighth century are the same lessons that individuals and nations must go through in our day. As we study Isaiah, we will be able to understand God better, see the unfolding of His purposes through the Savior, and have a confident hope for the future.

Invitation to Pray: Our most holy and merciful God, as we pore over Your words to us in Isaiah, give us eyes to see *You* ... ears to hear *You* ... hearts that desire to obey *You* in all things.

1. With which aspects of God's character are you the most familiar? The least familiar?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson our objective is to gain a broad overview of the book of Isaiah. The best way to begin studying a book is to read it all the way through. However, very few would be able to read all of Isaiah in one week, so our approach will be as follows:

Slowly scan the book of Isaiah several times, chapter by chapter. You might want to keep the following analogy in mind. *"A book is like a single house. It is a mansion having many rooms, rooms on different levels, of different sizes and shapes, with different outlooks, with different uses. Also, a good book, like a good house, requires an orderly arrangement of parts. Each part is connected and related to the other parts and contributes to the overall unity of the book."* (Mortimer J. Adler)

As you page through Isaiah try to get a sense of what the book is about. Approach it in terms of the big picture. Observe chapter titles and headings. Notice the overall structure, the main divisions and the main subjects. Watch for changes in subject or thought. Pay attention to the repeated words and phrases and to the various titles given to God. (Underlining may be useful.) Ask God to enable you to do this and to give you a glimpse of Himself. Record your observations and first impressions.

Now, glance through Isaiah one more time. Direct your attention to the two major divisions of the book. Look for the sub-sections, main points, ideas and possible applications within each division. Record your findings. (Answers will vary.)

Chapters 1-39 Book of Judgment

Chapters 40-66 Book of Comfort

An easy way to remember the broad organization of Isaiah by chapters is:

- Isaiah has sixty-six chapters. The Bible has sixty-six books.
- Isaiah has two main divisions: the first division has 39 chapters, the second division has 27 chapters.
- The Bible has two main parts: the Old Testament has 39 books and the New Testament has 27 books.

Map/Timeline: While studying a book of the Bible it is helpful to have a mental picture of the places and locations that are being discussed. Use the map of the Near East to reacquaint yourself with this region of the world. Locate Judah, Jerusalem, and the various nations Isaiah prophesied against. The *Timeline* will provide a quick reference to the key historical events of this period.

Further insights into the times in which Isaiah lived can be gained by looking at the reigns of the four Kings of Judah, mentioned in Isaiah 1:1. A summary of their rule has been preserved for us in 2 Chronicles chapters 26-32.

2. **Read** the section associated with each king and note whether he was generally a “good king” or a “wicked king.” Then note the events in the life of each king that contributed to the decline and eventual downfall of the nation.

Uzziah – 2 Chronicles 26:1-22

Jotham – 2 Chronicles 27:1-9

Ahaz – 2 Chronicles 28:1-26

Hezekiah – 2 Chronicles chapters 29:1-11, 32:24-33 (Also 2 Kings chapter 20)

3. Many lessons can be drawn from the lives of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. State the truth that you think God wants you to apply. What reorientation will your life require to reflect God's perfect righteousness?

4. Take a few minutes to review your completed lesson. What do you yearn for God to do in your life through the study of Isaiah?

For all of us who desire to know God in a deeper and fuller way, the Book of Isaiah holds great promise. We will meet God in a special way in this book, and will come to appreciate Him deeply as we study.

“.....Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” (Isaiah 2:3) NIV

Isaiah Timeline

745	Tiglath-pileser of Assyria begins his reign	742	Micah becomes a prophet;	740	Isaiah becomes a prophet;	735	Ahaz begins his co-regency with Jotham	734	Northern Israel falls to Assyrians	732	Jotham king of Judah dies	729	Hezekiah begins co-regency with Ahaz	722	Samarita falls to the Assyrians (Deported)	713	Assyrians destroy 48 walled cities of Judah	701	Sennacherb surrounds Jerusalem	629	Jeremiah becomes a prophet
697	Manasseh begins his co-regency with Hezekiah	697	King Hezekiah dies	697	Isaiah's ministry ends	649	Cyrus founds the Persian Empire	539	Babylon overthrown by Cyrus Medes/Persians	539-445	Cyrus issues a decree: The remnant returns	612	Babylon overthrows Assyrian Empire	605	Jerusalem partly destroyed by Babylon	597	Jerusalem further devastated (Deported)	597	Jerusalem burned and desolated (Deported)		

There is not complete agreement among scholars on the above dates.

The Near East, 800-500 BC

