

Isaiah

The Lord is Salvation

By: Matthew Allen

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Getting Into Isaiah

Why Isaiah, and Why Nine Months

Most people who set out to read Isaiah quit somewhere around chapter 15.

That's an equipment problem. By chapter 15 the reader has been handed a courtroom scene, a vineyard song, a throne room, a war he can't place, a virgin's son, a fallen morning star, and a funeral song for a country he has never heard of. No dates. No map. No idea who half these people are. The language is magnificent and he has no notion where he is standing.

This book exists to fix that. Thirty-four lessons, all sixty-six chapters, straight through in the order Isaiah wrote them, from the courtroom in chapter 1 to the new heavens in chapter 66. Nothing skipped. Nothing rearranged.

Why give nine months to one prophet? Because the New Testament does. Outside the Psalms, no Old Testament book turns up in the New more often than this one. Matthew reaches for Isaiah to explain the virgin birth and the ministry in Galilee. Paul reaches for him to explain the remnant, the stone laid in Zion, and the mission to the nations. Peter reaches for him to explain the cross. When Philip climbed into the Ethiopian official's chariot, the man was reading Isaiah 53, and Luke tells us what came of it: *Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning with that Scripture*, Acts 8:35. Isaiah is where the first preachers started.

There's a second reason, and it's the one that will matter most. Isaiah's question is a practical one. Whom will you trust when everything you can see says otherwise? Ahaz faced it with two armies on his border. Hezekiah faced it with an enemy officer shouting insults at his wall. You'll face it this year over a diagnosis, a layoff, or a son who has quit coming. The circumstances change. The question doesn't.

The Man and His Times

His name means "the LORD is salvation," and that sentence is the argument of the entire book.

The opening verse is the closest thing to a calendar Isaiah gives us: *The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah*, Isa 1:1. Four kings. Uzziah died about 740 BC, and the throne room vision of chapter 6 is dated to that year. Sennacherib's army camped outside Jerusalem in 701. That's close to forty years of preaching we can put on a calendar, and there was almost certainly more on both ends, since Chronicles credits Isaiah with writing the official record of Uzziah's reign and of Hezekiah's, 2 Chr 26:22; 32:32.

He lived in Jerusalem and he had the run of the palace. He meets Ahaz on a road outside the wall and tells him what to do about a war. He walks into Hezekiah's sickroom with a death sentence and comes back with fifteen more years. Kings send for him when they're afraid. That access matters. He says out loud what the palace only whispers.

He was married, and his wife is called *the prophetess*, 8:3. Two sons are named in the book and both names are sermons. Shear-jashub means "a remnant will return," and Isaiah takes the boy along when he

goes to confront Ahaz, 7:3. Maher-shalal-hash-baz means "speeding to the plunder, hurrying to the spoil," and that name went up on a placard before the child was conceived, 8:1–3. His own children carried his message around with them.

Three dates matter. In 722 BC Assyria took Samaria and the northern kingdom of Israel stopped existing. In 701 BC Sennacherib surrounded Jerusalem, and one morning the army was gone. In 586 BC, more than a century after Isaiah died, Babylon burned the temple and marched Judah into exile. He saw that coming, and he preached comfort into it before it ever arrived.

One paragraph on a question you may hear raised somewhere else. Isaiah son of Amoz wrote all sixty-six chapters. Critical scholarship has divided the book for two centuries, largely because chapters 40–66 address exiles who hadn't yet been born and name Cyrus of Persia a century and a half before his birth, 44:28; 45:1. The apostles knew nothing of that division. John quotes chapter 53 and chapter 6 within three verses of each other, credits Isaiah with both, and then says, *Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke about him*, John 12:41. Luke calls the chapter the Ethiopian was reading *the prophet Isaiah*, Acts 8:30. That's enough for our purposes here. The scholarship is in the notes.¹

How to Read a Prophet

Five things. Learn them once and you won't be lost again.

A prophet is a preacher before he is a predictor. Most of what Isaiah says is about his own century, spoken to people standing in front of him about decisions they were making that week. Prediction is in this book and it matters enormously. It's still the smaller part. When you hit a passage and want to know what it predicts, ask the earlier question first: what was he telling *them* to do?

Isaiah writes poetry, and Hebrew poetry rhymes thoughts rather than sounds. A line makes a statement and the next line comes at it again, restating it, reversing it, or pushing it one step further. *The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's feeding trough, but Israel does not know; my people do not understand*, 1:3. That's one accusation hit twice, and it isn't a lesson about livestock. Read the halves together and let the second one interpret the first.

The book is not in chronological order. Chapter 6 happened before chapters 1–5. Chapter 13 announces Babylon's fall while Babylon is still a minor power and Assyria is the threat at the door. Chapters 36–39 double back to events that precede chapter 40 by a lifetime. This is the single biggest reason readers get lost in Isaiah, so every lesson in this book opens with a short block giving you the year, the king, and the crisis. Read it before you read anything else.

A prophecy can land twice. Isaiah 7:14 was a sign given to a frightened king about a war that would be finished inside a few years. Matthew says it was fulfilled when Mary bore a son, Matt 1:23. Both of those are true. A prophecy can have a near horizon and a far one, the way a mountain range looks flat from a distance until you walk into it and find two ridges with a valley in between. So we'll say what a passage meant to the people who first heard it before we say a word about what it means now.

Apocalyptic language is language. Stars going dark, the sun failing, the heavens rolled up like a scroll. *Indeed, the stars of the sky and its constellations will not give their light. The sun will be dark when it rises, and*

the moon will not shine, 13:10. That's chapter 13, and chapter 13 is about the fall of Babylon, which happened inside history in 539 BC when a Persian army walked into the city. Isaiah is reaching for the biggest words available to describe the collapse of a world power. When this language turns up again in chapters 24 and 34, remember chapter 13.

One more term and then we're reading. Chapters 13–23 are a run of messages about foreign nations, and most of them open with the same heading: *A pronouncement concerning Babylon*, 13:1. The Hebrew word behind it means something close to a burden, a load laid on the prophet that he has to carry to its address and set down. That's what those eleven chapters are.

The Kings and the Nations

Isaiah names a great many countries, and it costs the reader almost nothing to learn who they were. Keep a finger on this page through chapters 13–23.

The Four Kings of Judah

Uzziah. Died about 740 BC after a long and prosperous reign. Struck with leprosy when he went into the temple to burn incense himself, 2 Chr 26:16–21. The vision of chapter 6 is dated to the year of his death.

Jotham. Co-regent from about 750 BC while his father was quarantined, then king in his own right to about 735. A good king over a corrupt people. Isaiah barely mentions him.

Ahaz. About 735–715 BC. The king who wouldn't ask for a sign. Attacked by Syria and Israel, he hired Assyria for protection and made Judah a vassal in the process. Chapters 7–8 are his.

Hezekiah. About 715–686 BC. The reformer. He tore out the idols, outlasted Sennacherib, and prayed the finest prayer in the book. Then he showed a Babylonian delegation everything he owned. Chapters 36–39 are his.

The Nations

Assyria. The superpower of Isaiah's lifetime, capital at Nineveh on the Tigris in what's now northern Iraq. It broke conquered peoples by deporting them. It took Samaria in 722 BC and came within a wall of taking Jerusalem in 701.

Israel. The northern ten tribes, capital at Samaria. Isaiah often calls the whole kingdom Ephraim, after its largest tribe. Gone by 722 BC.

Syria. Judah's neighbor to the northeast, capital at Damascus, also called Aram. Allied with Israel against Judah about 734 BC.

Babylon. Downriver from Assyria on the Euphrates, and only a second-rate power in Isaiah's day. It became the empire that burned Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Persia. The empire that took Babylon in 539 BC. Its king Cyrus is named twice in this book, and he sent the exiles home.

Egypt. The old power to the southwest, weak in this period, and still the alliance Judah kept reaching for.

Cush. The kingdom on the upper Nile south of Egypt, in what's now Sudan. It ruled Egypt for part of Isaiah's ministry.

Philistia. The coastal plain southwest of Judah. Ashdod, Ekron, and Gaza are its cities.

Moab. East of the Dead Sea, in modern Jordan. Chapters 15–16.

Edom. Southeast of the Dead Sea. Descended from Esau, and the bitterest of Judah's neighbors. Chapters 34 and 63.

Tyre. The Phoenician port up the coast, in modern Lebanon. Shipping and money. Chapter 23.

Five Threads to Watch

Long books are held together by repetition, and five things run the whole length of this one. Watch for them. Mark them in your Bible. By the end of this study, you'll have read Isaiah the way Isaiah asks to be read.

The Holy One of Israel. This is Isaiah's own name for God. It shows up twenty-five times in these sixty-six chapters and only a handful of times in the entire rest of the Old Testament. It's born in the throne room of chapter 6, where the seraphim cry out that God is holy and Isaiah comes apart. Watch what he does with the title after that. The same holiness that makes judgment certain is what makes salvation possible, and nobody presses that as hard as Isaiah does.

Trust, and where it gets placed. Assyria. Egypt. Chariots. Alliances. Idols. Treasure. This book is a long argument about where a frightened man looks for help. Isaiah put it to Ahaz in a single line that turns out to be the hinge of the whole first half: *If you do not stand firm in your faith, then you will not stand at all*, 7:9.

Blind eyes and deaf ears. The commission God gives Isaiah in 6:9–10 sounds like a sentence passed on the nation, and that's exactly what it is. Keep your eye on it, because it gets reversed. Look at 29:18, 32:3, 35:5, and 42:7. The God who closed those eyes is the one who opens them.

The Servant. Israel is called God's servant and proves unable to do the work. Then a Servant steps out of the text who can. There are four songs, at 42:1–9, 49:1–13, 50:4–11, and 52:13–53:12, and the identity narrows with each one until chapter 53 leaves only one man standing.

Zion, and the road to it. The city is judged, besieged, comforted, renamed, and finally filled with people who were never born there. Running alongside it is a highway: 11:16, 19:23, 35:8, 40:3, 62:10. Watch who ends up walking on it.

One Verse to Carry

Isaiah 12 is a short song of six verses sitting at the end of the book's first great section. Verse 2 is the sentence everything hangs on.

Indeed, God is my salvation; I will trust him and not be afraid, for the LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my song. He has become my salvation.

Isa 12:2

Read it the first week. Come back to it in November when the class reaches chapter 12 and you can see what eleven chapters of judgment and promise cost to get there. Read it once more when you reach the end of the study. It's the prophet's own name turned into a confession, and it's what he wants left in your mind.

How to Get the Most Out of This Study

Read the passage first and read it cold. Every lesson closes with the assignment for the following week. Sit down with your Bible and read those chapters straight through with no commentary, no study notes, and this workbook shut. Twenty minutes. Let Isaiah confuse you a little before anybody explains him.

Then read the lesson. It opens with a short block that gives you the year, the king, and the situation. That block is your map, and it's there because Isaiah moves around in time without warning you.

Mark your Bible as you go. Five threads, five colors, or five symbols in the margin. Circle every "Holy One of Israel" you find. As we go through the book, the pattern will be visible on the page.

Write out the questions before class. There are six each week. Two of them you can answer straight from the chapter. The rest are harder on purpose, and one of them most weeks will be uncomfortable. Write something down anyway, even if what you write is that you don't know.

Come when you are behind. Nine months is a long haul, and nobody keeps a perfect record. A week you didn't prepare for is still a week you were in the room. Isaiah preached for forty years to people who mostly wouldn't listen, and he kept showing up too.

¹ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1:8. Young states his position at the outset: Isaiah himself wrote the entire book, committed it all to writing, and gathered his own messages into the volume that bears his name. He adds that he will point out the inner unity of its sections as he goes rather than argue the case for unity and authorship until the commentary is finished. J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 20 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 33. Motyer traces the fragmenting of Isaiah to a nineteenth-century rationalism that ruled predictive prophecy out in advance, and observes that once prediction is readmitted the question shifts from whether Isaiah could foresee the exile and the return to whether he would. Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 60. Gary Smith surveys the modern compositional theories and judges that they go far beyond the evidence, dissolving the literary and conceptual continuity of the chapters and handing the book's prophetic authority over to unknown editors.

PART ONE

The Vision

What does the Holy One see when He looks at His own people?

Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke about him. — John 12:41

Isaiah 1–12 sets every term the rest of the book will use. A courtroom opens in chapter 1 and God calls heaven and earth as witnesses against children He raised. A vineyard gets every advantage and yields sour grapes. A young man sees the Lord high and lifted up in the year a king dies, and comes away commissioned to preach to people who will not hear him. Chapter 6 takes two weeks here, the throne room and then the commission, because everything the book does later leans on both halves of it. Then Assyria comes, Ahaz refuses the sign God offers him, and the section that began with rebellious children ends with a shoot growing out of a stump that everybody had written off.