

## Isaiah – Introduction Part 1

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We've spent four lessons building our foundation for studying Isaiah, covering the narrative plan of God, how the New Testament uses this book, the concept of prophetic foreshortening, and the legal framework of God's lawsuit against Judah. Now, we begin our journey into the book itself by dealing with pre-text work, which will give us the historical and cultural background.

We'll piece together Isaiah's life as chronologically as we can, drawing first and foremost from the biblical record. We aim to see Isaiah's life, his work as a prophet, the core of his message, and the results it produced in his time.

We'll use approximate dates based on the reigns of the kings mentioned in Isaiah 1:1, which span from about 740 BC to at least 686 BC. These come from aligning the biblical accounts with historical records of Judah's monarchs. Let's start with Isaiah 1:1 to set the stage: "The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah."

### I. Background and Early Life (Before 740 BC)

We know little about Isaiah's early years from the Bible, but what we have paints a picture of a man prepared for a difficult calling. His name, Isaiah, means "YHWH saves" or "salvation of YHWH," which fits the redemptive theme running through his prophecies. He was the son of Amoz, mentioned in Isaiah 1:1, 2:1, 13:1, and elsewhere. Amoz isn't identified further in Scripture, but some Jewish traditions, like those in the Talmud, suggest he was related to the royal family, perhaps a brother to King Amaziah, Uzziah's father. If that's the case, and it's not biblical, just a traditional inference, it might explain Isaiah's access to the kings and his familiarity with court life. We can't confirm it, but it aligns with how freely he moves in royal circles. Tradition also surnames Isaiah, the Prince of the Prophets.

Isaiah likely grew up in Jerusalem or nearby, given his focus on Judah and the city. He was married to a woman Scripture calls "the prophetess" in Isaiah 8:3, implying she had a prophetic role or gift herself. They had at least two sons, whose names were symbolic, as we'll see later. Some scholars infer that Isaiah may have been a priest or had temple access, since his vision in Isaiah 6 has the temple in it. The text doesn't state this outright, but we will investigate it when we get to Chapter 6.

His ministry began during Uzziah's reign, which lasted from about 792 to 740 BC. Uzziah was a strong king who expanded Judah's borders but later suffered leprosy for pridefully entering the temple to burn incense, a priestly duty (2 Chronicles 26:16-21). Jotham, his son, co-ruled as regent from around 750 BC due to Uzziah's illness. The Bible doesn't detail specific events from Isaiah's work under Uzziah or Jotham, but chapters like Isaiah 2-5 may reflect warnings during their time, addressing injustice and idolatry creeping into Judah. The

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message here was already one of coming judgment if the people didn't return to the Lord, setting the tone for Isaiah's lifelong call to faithfulness amid corruption.

The result? We see no major national revival recorded under these kings, though Jotham is described as doing right in God's eyes (2 Kings 15:34). Yet the groundwork of sin was laid, leading to the crises Isaiah would face later.

### II. The Call to Ministry (Around 740 BC)

Isaiah's prophetic call came in the year King Uzziah died, which historical timelines place at 740 BC. This is detailed in Isaiah 6:1-13:

In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.' And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. Then I said, 'Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.' Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Then I said, 'Here am I. Send me!' He said, 'Go, and tell this people: "Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand." Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, And their eyes dim, Otherwise they might see with their eyes, Hear with their ears, Understand with their hearts, And return and be healed.' Then I said, 'Lord, how long?' And He answered, 'Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant, Houses are without people And the land is utterly desolate, The Lord has removed men far away, And the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, And it will again be subject to burning, Like a terebinth or an oak Whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.'

This vision reveals Isaiah's work: to proclaim God's holiness and Judah's sin, even knowing the people would harden their hearts. The message is judgment leading to exile, but with a remnant preserved; the "holy seed" as a stump, pointing to future restoration. Notice the Hebrew word for *holy* here, קָדוֹשׁ (qadosh), repeated three times for emphasis, underscoring God's absolute purity against human uncleanness. Interestingly, this is repeated in Revelation 4:8—

And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, "HOLY, HOLY,

HOLY is THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME."

The immediate result? He accepted the call humbly, despite foreknowing the rejection. This sets up his ministry as one of persistence in the face of unresponsiveness.

### III. Ministry During the Reign of Ahaz (Around 735-715 BC)

Ahaz took the throne around 735 BC, a weak and idolatrous king who allied with Assyria against threats from Israel and Syria (the Syro-Ephraimite War).

The Syro-Ephraimite War, also called the Syro-Ephraimite Crisis, unfolded around 735-732 BC during the reign of Judah's King Ahaz. This conflict is detailed in Isaiah 7:1-17, 2 Kings 16:5-9, and 2 Chronicles 28:5-21. At its core, it involved an alliance between Rezin, king of Aram (Syria), and Pekah, king of Israel (often called Ephraim in prophecy, referencing its dominant tribe). Their aim was to invade Judah, depose Ahaz, and install a puppet ruler, likely the "son of Tabeel" mentioned in Isaiah 7:6. Scholars suggest this was to force Judah into a coalition against the rising Assyrian Empire.

Ahaz, facing siege in Jerusalem, panicked despite Isaiah's assurance from God: "It shall not stand nor shall it come to pass" (Isaiah 7:7). Instead of trusting YHWH, Ahaz appealed to Assyria for help, offering tribute and declaring himself a vassal: "I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Aram and from the hand of the king of Israel" (2 Kings 16:7). Assyria responded by conquering Damascus in 732 BC, killing Rezin, and deporting much of Israel's population, fulfilling prophecies of judgment on the Northern Kingdom.

This war highlights themes of the promises of God through the prophet versus fear. Isaiah's interactions here are vivid. In Isaiah 7:1-17, God sends Isaiah and his son Shear-jashub (meaning "a remnant shall return") to meet Ahaz at the aqueduct. The message: Trust YHWH, not foreign powers. Ahaz refuses a sign, so Isaiah gives one anyway, the virgin birth prophecy: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). This points to the Messiah, shrouded in what was thought to be a prophecy about their current situation.

Soon after, around 734 BC, Isaiah fathers another son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Isaiah 8:1-4),

- Maher (מָהָר): From the root mahar, meaning "to hasten" or "make haste." It's an imperative form, like a command to hurry.
- Shalal (שָׁלָל): This is a noun from the root shalal, referring to "spoil" or "plunder," as in the booty taken in war.
- Hash (חַשְׁ): From the root chush, also meaning "to hasten" or "hurry," similar to Maher but with a nuance of urgency or quick action.

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- Baz (בָּז): A noun from bazaz, signifying "prey" or "booty," emphasizing what is seized or despoiled.

Put together, the name conveys "Hasten to the spoil, hurry to the prey" or "Swift is the booty, speedy is the plunder." It foretold the rapid Assyrian conquest of Aram (Damascus) and Israel (Samaria) during the Syro-Ephraimite crisis around 735-732 BC, where their wealth would be carried off quickly, before the child could even speak basic words. His son was a living prophecy warning Judah against alliances and urging trust in the promises of YHWH alone (Isaiah 8:11-22). The swift fulfillment reinforced God's curse on the Northern tribes.

Results - Ahaz ignored Isaiah, leading to Assyrian dominance and more idolatry, including child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3). Yet the prophecies came true: Assyria crushed the northern threats but then oppressed Judah.

Around this time, Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign against Egypt and Cush (Isaiah 20:2-4), around 711 BC, though still under Ahaz's later years or early Hezekiah. This act of obedience showed his commitment, warning of Assyrian captivity.

### IV. Ministry During the Reign of Hezekiah (Around 715-686 BC)

Hezekiah's reign brought reform, and Isaiah played a key role. In 701 BC, during Sennacherib's invasion, Isaiah assures Hezekiah of deliverance (Isaiah 36-37; 2 Kings 18-19). The angel strikes the Assyrian camp, saving Jerusalem, a direct result of Hezekiah's prayer and Isaiah's prophecy.

Earlier, around 711 BC, Hezekiah fell ill. Isaiah announces his death but, after prayer, extends his life 15 years, with the sun's shadow retreating as a sign (Isaiah 38; 2 Kings 20:1-11). Later, after the invasion, Babylonian envoys visit, and Isaiah warns of future exile to Babylon (Isaiah 39; 2 Kings 20:12-19), foretelling the shift from Assyrian to Babylonian threat.

Isaiah's message evolves to comfort in exile and promise of restoration (Isaiah 40-66), likely composed during this period. Results: revival under Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 29-31), but the warnings foreshadow incomplete reform, leading to later judgment.

### V. Later Years and Legacy (After 686 BC)

The Bible doesn't detail Isaiah's end, but his book implies ministry into Hezekiah's time. Tradition from the Talmud and early Christian writings, like the Ascension of Isaiah, says he was martyred under Manasseh (Hezekiah's son, reigning 686-642 BC), sown in two inside a hollow tree for rebuking idolatry. This may echo Hebrews 11:37—"they were sown in two."

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It's not Scripture, but a longstanding Jewish and Christian tradition, possibly reliable as oral history.

If true, Isaiah's death around 681 BC underscores the cost of his message, rejected by a wicked king, yet his words were preserved for future generations. Isaiah likely went from the halls of the palace to a martyr's death, but his work remained. He was commanded by God to "write it on a tablet... that it may serve in the time to come as a witness forever" (Isaiah 30:8). We are the beneficiaries of that witness today.

### Conclusion

Isaiah's life spanned over 50 years of turbulent history, from Uzziah's prosperity to Hezekiah's reforms and beyond. His work proclaimed judgment on sin, the coming Messiah, and ultimate restoration. The results varied: ignored by Ahaz, somewhat by Hezekiah, but ultimately leading to exile as foretold. Yet his message endures, pointing us to Christ, as the apostles showed.