

See God’s Royal Salvation Plan!

Isaiah 1-12

Notes for Service Leaders, Preachers and Home Group Leaders

# Introduction

“Welcome to Isaiah! I send you this invitation as one who loves everything about him – the way he writes, his mastery of words, the rhythmic beauty of his Hebrew and, above all, the magnificent sweep of his messianic vision, taking in the glory of Jesus as God and King, the wonder and fullness of the salvation he accomplished, and the shining hope of his coming again. I want to share all this with you so that you may become as indebted to Isaiah as I feel myself to be. His book is as much the crown of the Old Testament as the Epistle to the Hebrews is of the New Testament – and for the same reason. Isaiah saw the coming King, Saviour and Conqueror; Hebrews knew him as Jesus. May the Lord God bless you richly as you read this tremendous portion of his Word.” – **Alec Motyer**

**Sum of the book:** Through the suffering servant, the eyes of the self-blinded will be opened, and the unrighteous will be made righteous, and will be established, undeservedly, in a new heavens and new earth.

# Context

Isaiah 1-12 forms part 1 of the 66 chapter long book of Isaiah. It is a rich book, and our section particularly will remind us that the Lord is King. It may seem rather daunting. Every preacher has at least one Bible book that they are afraid to touch with a bargepole. I’ll admit, mine was Isaiah!

But do remember 2 Timothy 3:16-17: **“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”** This is a great relief! *All* scripture, including Isaiah, is spoken by God for us- for our good and for our growth. As a church we are all about growing people in Christ. As we were encouraged to grow in what we know from Colossians, delving deeper into the beautiful text of Isaiah will be I’m sure a great benefit to us all. My prayer for us all is that as we study Isaiah together, we are all convicted of our sin and rebellion and come to depend more and more on our King- the one who, as Isaiah will famously later write: **“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,** **yet we considered him stricken by God,** **smitten by him, and afflicted.** **But he was pierced** **for our transgressions,** **he was crushed** **for our iniquities; the punishment** **that brought us peace** **was upon him, and by his wounds** **we are healed.** **We all, like sheep, have gone astray,** **each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**2.1 Genre**

Isaiah is a prophet. In short, a prophet’s job in the Old Testament was to tell people what God said. Instead of the written word we have today, God spoke to His people through the prophets.[[2]](#footnote-2)

A prophet was God’s spokesman. At first, their primary audience was the kings of the land,[[3]](#footnote-3) whereas Isaiah and prophets after him were speaking to the people as a whole. Different prophets spoke in different ages and stages of Israel’s life. Their paradigm or model was Moses, the first prophet. God tells the people back in Deuteronomy 18: The LORD said to Moses: **“I will raise up for them a prophet** **like you from among their brothers; I will put my words** **in his mouth,** **and he will tell them everything I command him.** **If anyone does not listen** **to my words that the prophet speaks in my name,** **I myself will call him to account.”**

God raised up prophets to speak for Him – and they must be listened to.

**2.2 Historical Background**

Isaiah 1:1 gives us a historical window to the book: **“The vision** **concerning Judah and Jerusalem** **that Isaiah son of Amoz saw** **during the reigns of Uzziah,** **Jotham,** **Ahaz** **and Hezekiah,** **kings of Judah.”**

Isaiah lived during the reigns of four kings. These were kings of the Southern Kingdom. Israel was once one kingdom under God’s King David. However, David’s son Solomon rebelled against God so that in 1 Kings 11, people rise up and the kingdom splits into two: the northern kingdom (also confusingly called Israel – later Samaria, where interestingly the Samaritans in the NT are based), and the southern kingdom, also called Judah.

What follows is a run of kings. In the south, some are good, some are bad. In the north, pretty much all of them are bad. The south includes the city of Jerusalem, where God’s temple was- the symbolic dwelling place of God.

The north turns completely away from God and the south does not do much better. Both kingdoms have prophets from God warning them to repent, but their message falls on deaf ears. Finally, the northern kingdom is taken over by Assyria in 722BC and exiled, never to return. The southern kingdom follows in 586 BC. All of this is bound up in God’s covenant promise with his people.

After God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, through the blood of the Passover Lamb, they are heading towards God’s promised land, as God’s promised people. On the way, God makes a covenant with them. This covenant is a response to rescue, and therefore lists the ways the people are to live, because they have been rescued.

In Leviticus 26, and Deuteronomy 28, God lists the blessings and curses of this covenant. If they keep the covenant, they will be blessed. But if they rebel against God, tell Him to get lost and live how they like, He promises this: **“I will scatter** **you among the nations** **and will draw out my sword** **and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste,** **and your cities will lie in ruins.”[[4]](#footnote-4)**

The exile happens because of sin. God’s people have thrown his rescue back in his face and gone their own way. In our context of Isaiah 1-12, this exile is coming one day.

So, we know the spiritual state of the people that Isaiah is talking to. They are rebels against God who turn to idols instead of him. They ignore God and try and go their own way, despite the promises He has made to them. We also know what Isaiah’s job is as a prophet: to tell the people what God has said. Isaiah then is warning them to repent, or they will face judgement.

But also, and this is the remarkable thing, Isaiah also promises hope: “Out of the ashes of Israel’s failure, God will rescue and renew an obedient people for Himself, through the coming of the Messiah.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Throughout the book, there is a promised rescuer coming. He is given many names in the book: Immanuel (chapters 7-12), the Suffering servant (chapters 42-53) and finally the Messiah (chapters 59-60). He is the one who will rescue God’s people. He is God’s Promised King, David’s greater son, the one who Isaiah later writes was **“pierced for our transgressions.” (Isaiah 53:5)** This is Jesus. This is hope. What a wonderful thing to be teaching one another!

**2.3 Isaiah’s background**

When it comes to teaching prophecy, it is very common to find a chapter within a prophetic book of God’s ‘calling’ of the prophet. This chapter often summarises the entire book. So, for us, Isaiah 6 is the place to go.

**“In the year that King Uzziah died”** is when Isaiah’s prophetic ministry begins. In a time of political turmoil, the young man sees a vision of God. This God is the greater King that Uzziah was not. Isaiah catches a stunning glimpse of his perfect creator and Lord; seeing God as holy and set apart.

Isaiah of course thinks he has had it, because of what he has seen. But, v6: **“Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal** **in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips;** **your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.****" Then I heard the voice** **of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send?** **And who will go for us?****" And I said, "Here am I.** **Send me!"”**

God makes Isaiah right with him. And sends him to speak to the people. The following verses summarise his entire message: **“Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.”**

Isaiah’s message will fall on deaf ears; it will go in one ear and out the other. This is tragic and a sign of judgement- not even the warning will be understood. Isaiah is to do this, right up until the coming exile. So, as we consider our own teaching ministries, are we prepared for Isaiah’s level…of failure? We live in times where the word of God falls on deaf ears, and no amount of us shouting will get the message through. Before I preach, I read the words of Murray McCheyne that I have sellotaped in my bible: “It is God’s word, not our comment upon it, that saves souls.”

Isaiah will speak judgement until the day Israel is taken into exile. But the exile, as we know, is not the end of the story. V13: **“But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.”** Despite exile, there is a remnant. There is hope. This stump of a tree will sprout again, through the righteous branch who washes sinners clean, who turns them from red to white, Jesus Christ. This is the book in a nutshell.

**2.4 Notes on teaching prophecy**

Prophecy isn’t just about predicting the future; it’s relaying what God has said to his people. Some of the things Isaiah predicts will not happen in their most literal sense. Fulfilment of prophecies are not always bound up in a single moment. For example, chapter 2 talks about ‘the day of the LORD.’ Other parts of the Bible help us see that this is a day that has not yet come.

There is plenty of imagery in Isaiah. As we teach it, we need to be sensitive to it and try and get our heads around it. Hopefully these notes will help! Of course, there is a plethora of resources out there, including many by our dearly remembered brother Alec Motyer.

Also, don’t be tempted to jump straight to Jesus when it comes to prophecy. Of course, he is the centre of the Bible. **“For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.”[[6]](#footnote-6)** But there will be some fulfilment in the OT along the way. Plumb the depths and the richness of scripture as well as pointing out how Christ fulfils ultimately God’s promises.

# Structure

Though we’re only covering chapters 1—12 for now, I’ve included a structure for the whole book of which our section is only part 1.

**1. The judgment of Israel, with salvation prophesied (chs. 1-39)**

A. Judgment through Assyria, restoration under David in Zion (chs. 1-12)

 B. Judgment against foreign nations, hints of restoration (chs. 13-23)

 B. Cosmic, world-wide judgment and complete restoration in Zion (chs. 24-27)

A’. God’s strange work of simultaneous judgment and salvation of Zion in the Assyrian onslaught (chs. 28-35)

1. Historical postscript: Hezekiah’s faith and faithlessness (chs. 36-39)

2. **Comfort, my people: Yahweh’s return to Zion (chs. 40-66)**

A. Yahweh and Israel’s return to Zion from Babylon (chs. 40-55)

B. The final restoration of “returned” sinful Zion (chs. 56-66)

Do note that the prevalent theme in our section is one of judgement. This will make us feel uncomfortable and will be misheard by many. Yet, for salvation to be as good news as it is, there is of course the judgement every one of us deserves. Even in our section, God speaks hope into this judgement: it is not the end of the story.

**3.1 Chapter summaries:**

1: Isaiah speaks to a rebellious, corrupt, prostituted nation who deserve judgement, yet they can be washed from red to white, and their virginity be given back to them by God.

2: Humanity exalt themselves with idols –worshipping self with created saviours – but the greater God will be exalted, and we will flee!

3: Jerusalem and Judah, like Sodom, will be judged – finery gives way to despair – identity is lost – under disgrace.

4: But Yahweh will restore, wash clean, protect and be among His people in Zion, under the righteous Branch [who is Christ].

Summary of chs. 2-4: God is going to perfectly restore his promised people in his promised place, and they will therefore worship him rightly. This people include all nations. Yet before this, it will take a purifying judgment (4.2-6), world-wide abasement of all idolatry (2.6-22), and the judgment of his own people (3.1-4.1), which is coming about even now. Together with ch. 1, Isa 1-4 are the overture to the book’s “opera.”

5: The vineyard of Yahweh [Israel] yields only bad fruit [injustice] so they will be exiled – they will be dust –this is bleak!

6: In the year the rubbish King Uzziah dies, Isaiah sees vision of God, high and exalted, the sovereign bigger and better king, who sends Isaiah on a suicide mission: to preach the truth to perpetually deaf ears **[spiritual blindness**]– yet there is a holy seed in the stump.

7: In fear, Ahaz goes to Assyria for help rather than trust Yahweh [**Don’t let fear determine how you act!]** so Assyria will be God’s instrument to judge the house of David – faith in Yahweh, in Immanuel, is the only way to survive.

8: It’s getting bad to worse – but there is hope – Immanuel – God is with them – for some a refuge, to others a stumbling block – the truth is sealed – and people walk in darkness cursing God.

9:1-7: **BUT** – those same people walking in darkness will see a great light – there will be peace – receiving light as sinners – through a child given to them: God Himself – everlasting King [**Be shocked at how good God is!]**

9:8-10:4: God will judge His people, by knocking down their safe place, cutting off their leaders, burning their people, so that nothing will be left. “Yet for all this, his anger has not turned away, his hand is still upraised.” (This is repeated 4 times).

10:5-34: God will use Assyria to judge Judah, but will judge Assyria as the king sees himself as I AM – there will be a small remnant left.

11-12: A branch from Jesses, the Servant of the LORD will restore God’s people, there will be perfect peace, and the nations will be drawn in, a highway for the nations. Zion can shout for joy in praise to the LORD.

Summary of Isaiah 5-12: Due to the failure of the House of David (7.1-25) and the nation generally (5.1-30, 8.1-22), Yahweh is going to destroy his people through the Assyrians; Isaiah’s ministry will harden his audience until they are beyond repentance (6.1-13).

Yet from the ashes of this destruction will come a Davidic ruler through whom Yahweh will save his people, establish justice and righteousness, draw in the nations, and renew creation (6.13, 8.23-9.7, 11.1-12.6). Yahweh’s fighting against his own people is, paradoxically, a means of saving it—can’t enter into salvation without going through the fire. Isa 1-12 trying to make Yahweh unavoidable to people who sin and are then not even aware that Yahweh is judging them, nor aware that they need to turn to him when he strikes them—trying to get through to people who will otherwise misunderstand descriptions both of judgment and restoration

Do note then, the big themes present in the book so far:

* Spiritual blindness
* Right and wrong kingship
* Judgement
* Unfruitfulness
* Hope in the new creation
* The allusions to Christ

# Christ

One of the chief purposes of the Old Testament is to point forwards to the New. All the promises, allusions and plans presented in Isaiah find their fulfilment in Jesus Christ. It is he who Isaiah refers to as the righteous branch, the child born who is wonderful counsellor, mighty God, prince of peace, the true King Immanuel.

As we prepare to teach from the Old Testament, we note where it is in terms of the big story of the Bible, and we also note the distinctive place it has. Isaiah is not just a well written diving board from which we leap into the depths of Christ. We must ask: how does *Isaiah* point to Jesus? How does this passage do that? As well as this, we note what the original hearers would have heard, and not just leave them behind.

# Series breakdown

Starting in November, Isaiah 1-12 will take us right up to Christmas and beyond till February. Here is a breakdown of which sections we will cover.

1. Isaiah 1 (All Age)
2. Isaiah 2-4
3. Isaiah 5
4. Isaiah 6 (All Age)
5. Isaiah 7
6. Isaiah 8:1-9:7

CHRISTMAS

1. Isaiah 9:8-10:4
2. Isaiah 10:5-34
3. Isaiah 11-12

# Applications

* 1. Our utter depravity

One of the biggest factors in my acceptance of the Christian faith was just how much the Bible ‘gets’ people. In that it is realistic about our own inability to follow God; for we are too weak, powerless and ungodly. The sobering judgement that is to fall on Israel is the same judgement that should fall on us; the spiritual blindness that they suffer from is the same condition we are in. Our eyes have been opened – they have not opened themselves. One big take away point from Isaiah is a sobering reorientation of our senses. We are that bad, and we will not understand the grace of God without understanding our need.

* 1. Our joyful hope

Sobering judgement helps us see just how good the good news is. It is often assumed that the Old Testament is books of rules, judgement and failures, and it takes the New Testament to come in and sort it out. This couldn’t be far from the truth! Isaiah is in many ways so similar in genre to the Gospels, it is in its own way “the fifth gospel.” This is because it is saturated with glad tidings of great joy. Unto us, a child is born, the righteous branch come to sweep us up into the eternal international worship of our incomparable sovereign God. This is undeserved grace and mercy, and unobtainable by our effort. That is the gospel, and Isaiah expounds it well. Isaiah is meant to fill us with joy anew at the gospel. It will indeed help us to grow in what we know.

* 1. Our royal Saviour

Our rescuer is royalty. He is the one born for us, Immanuel: the prince of peace who will reign on David’s throne. In the run up to Christmas, Isaiah beautifully readies us throughout advent, as we await to celebrate the incarnation of the eternal God. Have we prepared him room in our hearts and in our lives? One thing that has convicted me lately is just how over-familiar I am with the gospel. Isaiah will help us all to rediscover what we believe.

* 1. Our future worship

The immediate scope of Isaiah is of course the geographic nation of Israel, but that is not its only scope. Isaiah’s vision of our future is one where people from every tribe, tongue and nation, gather together as God’s people, in his place, under his rule and blessing. This is a glorious vision, that helps us see the scope and goal of mission. Mission exists, where worship doesn’t. Our mission is of course to our parish, but also beyond it: our diocese, our nation, our continent, our world. Isaiah will help us look forward to our future that is made possible in God, and will help us pray for his mission, both here and abroad.

* 1. Our current gathering

Our church is of course going through a time of transition. We may feel unsettled, or uncertain, as to what the future holds for us. Yet Isaiah helps us fix our eyes on our ruling, sovereign saviour. God is our legal and effective Lord: that is, he is in charge, and he is at work. Nothing can compare to him. Instead of the judgement we deserve, he will show us mercy, through the suffering servant Isaiah will famously write about in chapter 53. As we delve deeper into the gospel, Isaiah will comfort us during our times of change.

1. Isaiah 53:4-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Hebrews 1:1-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Elijah and Elisha, and Samuel [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Leviticus 26:33 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See David Jackman’s introduction to Isaiah in *The NIV Proclamation Bible* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 2 Corinthians 1:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)