

SESSION #34

ISAIAH

1. Setting

Isaiah is one of the five so-called Major Prophets. His ministry was over a long period of time – 50 years during the reigns of four kings of Judah. On the chart you can see a timeline at the top representing the northern kingdom of Israel, with Amos and Hosea showing up there. Then below that is another timeline representing the southern kingdom of Judah and showing the kings who lived during the time of Isaiah's ministry: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah.

During Isaiah's ministry the Assyrians conquered Israel. They had besieged the capital city of Samaria for three years and then taken the people of the northern kingdom into captivity to Assyria. As a result, the southern kingdom – the only one left now – became a vassal state of Assyria. They weren't subjected to exile but they had to appease Assyria by the payment of annual tribute money just to keep them off their doorstep.

Isaiah is considered to be the greatest of all the writing prophets, perhaps one of the reasons he is quoted more frequently in the NT than any other prophet. In fact, Paul quotes Isaiah 17 times just in his letter to the Romans! Some OT prophets were writing ones, and others were just verbal, like Elijah and Elisha. As a writing prophet Isaiah has no equal. He has been called the Shakespeare of Hebrew literature, and rightly so. He has tremendous facility with language and uses much satire, figures of speech, images, metaphors and so on which are absolutely powerful and memorable. For example, 24:20–*“The earth shall reel to and fro like a drunkard.”* And 12:3, *“Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”*

He was not only powerful in his writing but also powerful in speaking. Isaiah was a strong orator and preacher and often called the “evangelical prophet” because he sets forth the way of the ‘evangel’, the good news of salvation. How do people come into a relationship with God? Isaiah tells us how.

Chapter 55:1 is a great example of an evangelistic invitation: *“Ho! everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”* He’s a Billy Graham of the OT. *“Come, come to God! He has eternal life ready to offer to you.”* Isaiah was certainly an evangelist.

2. Message

The key phrase in his book is *“the Holy One of Israel”*. He uses this phrase 29 times. In all the remaining 38 books of the OT you’ll only find that phrase 7 other times. It dominates Isaiah’s vision of who God is.

Isaiah had a powerful vision of God when God calls him into the prophetic ministry, which he described in 6:3. He sees God *“high and lifted up and sitting on the throne”* surrounded by angelic beings who cry out, *“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts.”* Despite this remarkable vision, it doesn’t mean that Isaiah was detached from the reality of the world in which he lived. He knew what life was like in Judah and Jerusalem. He saw disaster, he saw disillusionment and despair. Yes, he saw all of those realities, but as he states in chapter 6, *“I saw also the LORD”*.

Hebrews 2:8-9 give us a NT picture of this same truth: *“You [God] have put all things in subjection under his [Christ’s] feet”* (quoting Psalm 8). Then the writer to the Hebrews adds, *“For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him.”*

Yes, God made Jesus the supreme Lord of lords but we may not see the reality of that lived out in our daily lives. We certainly don’t see it worked out in our world at large, not yet. Like Isaiah, we see disaster, disillusionment, despair. We see lots of the grim, ugly realities of life.

But that’s not all we see. Verse 9 of Hebrews 2 says, *“But we see Jesus…”* That’s the perspective we need. It’s the perspective Isaiah had. We don’t ignore life’s realities, but we don’t let them overwhelm us because above it all “we see Jesus”.

Possible titles for the book of Isaiah include, “*Jehovah, Supreme Ruler and Only Savior*” or “*the Glorious Throne of Jehovah, the Holy One.*” Both arise out of the life-changing vision of chapter 6 which affected all that Isaiah wrote and preached about.

His major role, like most of the other prophets, was forthtelling – preaching God’s message into the time period of the people of God among whom he lived. His primary role was not predicting future events but telling God’s people now what they need to know. But this doesn’t mean that he had no predictions. In his book, Isaiah obviously sees all of those mountain peaks we noted back in session 30. He sees the next peak, the captivity. He sees the 3rd peak, the first coming of Jesus Christ. And he sees the 4th peak, the second coming of Christ and the new heavens and new earth.

3. Overall Structure

The overall structure of Isaiah is a fascinating one because, as someone put it quite rightly, it’s like a Bible in miniature. There are 66 chapters in Isaiah; there are 66 books in the Bible. 39 chapters make up the first part of Isaiah; and 27 chapters make up the remainder; the same as the Old and New Testaments.

Not only do the numbers line up but the first 39 chapters mirror something of the themes of OT law and the throne of God. The 27 chapters following especially mirror the reality of the NT emphasis on grace and the mercy of God.

In the first 39 chapters it’s the judgment of God which is prominent, as he pronounces God’s judgment against Judah similar to what Amos and Hosea did against Israel. Judgment is coming because God is the Holy One sitting on heaven’s throne who has the right and power to pronounce that kind of judgment. He governs, He is the judge, He is the King. Also in these chapters, the Messiah is predicted.

Then chapters 40 through 66 declare that there is also comfort available because God is a God of grace. And that grace focusses on the reality of the Lamb which God provides. So the Messiah is described in these chapters. Both sections relate to one another and combine together to give a full picture of God’s truth. Isaiah, a Bible in miniature.

4. Detailed Structure

Let's zoom in for just a little more detail of the structure.

The first large section is about the Judgment of God and begins with two sets of discourses. In the first 6 chapters he talks about the "Day of God/Jehovah", a judgment which will come to Judah.

In chapters 7 – 12 he widens the geographic focus now to include Israel which had not yet fallen to Assyria. As it was for Judah, here now he speaks of the "Day of Jehovah" in judgment against Israel.

This is followed by a second set of discourses. The first of these is in chapters 13 to 23 where the subject is still the "Day of Jehovah" but now judgment is pronounced upon all the nations surrounding Israel and Judah, much like Amos did.

Then in chapters 24 to 27 the geographic scope gets expanded yet one more level. Now, the "Day of Jehovah" includes the entire world. These chapters have been called a "little Apocalypse" – tremendous, cataclysmic judgment.

Following these two sets of judgmental discourses, in chapters 28 – 35 Isaiah gives various warnings and promises. Some "woes" are pronounced against Jerusalem because this city of highest privilege is the city of heaviest responsibility. As Jesus said in Luke 12:48, *"to whom much is given, much shall be required."* It's a truth throughout all of history.

Then in chapters 34 and 35, not only is there going to be woe and judgment against Jerusalem, but as we saw before, a positive note: there will be restoration in the longer term. The end of God's history for the human race and God's people is not going to end in judgment; it is going to go beyond judgment, beyond woes, to end in restoration.

Chapters 36 – 39 provide an historical transition between part one and part two of Isaiah's prophecy. Here he reviews Hezekiah's reign in Jerusalem.

A major highlight was Hezekiah's response to the Assyrian king when he threatened Jerusalem with destruction. Hezekiah spread Sennacherib's letter out before the Lord

and prayed. Isaiah came and encouraged him with a word from the Lord. Hezekiah in turn encouraged the people saying, *“there are more with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the LORD our God”*. In answer to their prayers and faith, God sent an angel and destroyed the Assyrian army overnight.

Are you faced with a large problem? Spread it before the Lord. Pray. And remember that *“He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world”* (1 John 4:4).

Back to Isaiah. In these final chapters of the first section, Isaiah also notes the political transition from Nineveh (capital of the empire of Assyria) to Babylon, the next major power to arise in the region.

Then the second major section of his book, chapters 40 – 66, concern the Comfort of God. The division into these two major sections may seem artificial but there is a definite contrast between them. So much so that some biblical scholars in days past thought there had to be two different authors. However, one author – Isaiah – seems to be well supported. He used one style in the first part and a different style in the second.

When you look at the first chapter in this second section, chapter 40, you will see that it begins with the theme of “comfort”. Verse 1: *“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” says your God.*” Verse 2: *“Speak comfort to Jerusalem...”*

Then verse 3: *“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”* What does that remind you of? Who is the “voice in the wilderness” who has precisely that message in the NT? John the Baptist, of course. How does the NT begin? It begins with the ministry of John the Baptist who is the voice in the wilderness, and then moves from John to Jesus Christ and His ministry. So the NT begins there. And this NT-like section of Isaiah begins in exactly the same way.

These 27 chapters are unusual, not just because of their NT-like theme, but because of the way these 27 chapters are structured. No wonder this section is written in a different manner than the first 39 chapters. These 27 chapters are very carefully structured into 3 sections of 9 chapters each. And every one of those sets of 9 are a poem, a complete poem dealing with the Messiah.

The center of the middle set of chapters is chapter 53. And the middle verse of this middle chapter is verse 7. When you read this verse you will see there can be no doubt as to what the overall theme is for this 3-part Messianic Poem: *“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.”*

To further underline the focus on the Lamb of God, the middle word in Hebrew of all these 27 chapters is the word for “sheep” in this middle verse 7 of the middle set of chapters. The center of this wonderful poem, then, is God’s provision for mankind’s sin – His Son, the Messiah, the Lamb of God.

The first poem, chapters 40 – 48, proclaims the Supremacy of Jehovah, the greatness of God. He is supreme over all false gods, supreme in attributes, in redemption and in punishment.

The next set of chapters, 49 – 57, focus on the grace of God and the Lamb of God who is the expression of that grace. At first he identifies Israel as the Servant of Jehovah, but ultimately points to Christ as the true Servant of Jehovah.

The final set of chapters, 58 – 66, focus on the Glory of God, challenging God’s people to recognize His glory and to return to Him. Chapter 60:1 says, *“Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you.”* The final restoration of God’s people is described in these final chapters.

Here’s another way to look at these poems. The first one tells us that redemption is promised. Redemption is provided by the Lamb in the middle poem. Then it is realized in the final set. The overall theme in this 3-part poem clearly involves redemption.

How can a sinful people like Israel, like Judah, like you, like me – how can we ever live with a holy God? The only way, as seen throughout the entire biblical record, OT and NT, is if a lamb pays the ultimate price by dying and shedding its blood for our sin. That’s the focus of this Messianic Poem and especially chapter 53.

The two parts of Isaiah focused on a throne and on a lamb. It’s interesting that when you get to the last book in the Bible, Revelation, you have the very same two focal points: a throne and a lamb. Revelation chapter 4 focuses on a throne and the throne room of

God. Chapter 5 focuses on the Lamb who comes and opens the scroll, the only One who is worthy to break the seals of the scroll. Then in chapter 7 of Revelation, John sees the Lamb now on the throne! The two major images or themes are brought together in this final book of the Bible. The Lamb belongs on the throne because He alone has redeemed all humanity to God the Father by His own death. As the evangelistic prophet of the OT, Isaiah makes that great truth abundantly clear.

Our next book will be Micah, a contemporary prophet with Isaiah, whose book could be called "Isaiah in Miniature".
