

ISAIAH PART 1 – The God who judges and saves

I love Isaiah. For me, it is the most thrilling of the Old Testament prophetic books. Isaiah's name means *the salvation of Jehovah*, or *Jehovah saves*. In our Bible, God's name, Jehovah (nowadays written as Yahweh), is shown in small capitals as LORD. In this book we read of God's judgment on his people in Judah; we also read of the Messiah who will come.

Who was Isaiah? Chapter 1 records that he was the son of Amoz, not to be confused with the bible book of the same name. He was married, although his wife's name is not mentioned, and he had two sons with significant names. Isaiah was a writer. Not only did God call him for the great task of prophet, he wrote a biography of King Uzziah, and this is noted in 2 Chronicles 26:22. Isaiah seems to have had ready access to the royal house, and some believe he may have been related.

The original text of Isaiah's book displays beautiful and eloquent language that is not evident in our English. Isaiah was highly educated and uses words that no other prophet uses. They often have a double meaning.

You might remember that the kingdom of Israel divided after the death of King Solomon. Nine and a half tribes became known as *Israel* and the remaining two and a half tribes were called *Judah*. Isaiah was born about 760BC, probably in Jerusalem which was the capital of Judah when Uzziah was king of Judah.

It is always important to understand a little of the historical background when looking at the books in the Old Testament.

When did Isaiah begin to prophecy? About 740 BC

To whom did he write? His prophecies are mainly directed to the kingdom of Judah.

What were other nations doing at this time? The nations of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Syria were always relevant in Old Testament history. They were Judah's near neighbours. At the time Isaiah began prophesying, Assyria was expanding and becoming a world power; Israel saw this as a threat; Syria also saw this as a threat; Babylon would be waiting in the wings!

Why did Isaiah write? The people of Judah thought that if they obeyed God outwardly by observing the sacrifices, feasts and other rituals, they would satisfy God and they could live their lives as *they* wanted. But the LORD's response to them in chapter 1 was: *bring your worthless offerings to me no longer. I'm not listening when you pray. You might as well save your breath.*

Isaiah's message to the people of Judah was: Your salvation *always has been, is now, and always will be* found "in God alone." The Lord made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and those promises will be kept. However, if they looked elsewhere

for their salvation in times of trouble, God would abandon most of them to their worst fears.

The book of Isaiah has 66 chapters and breaks into two distinct parts — *chapters 1–39: Yahweh will judge*; and *chapters 40–66: Yahweh will save*. There are God's messages for Isaiah's times, and prophecies yet to come true. So Isaiah's predictions cover a huge time span. God will judge his people. But God will also restore his people. One glorious day God will reign in the new Jerusalem, and all nations will honour Israel.

Many of Isaiah's prophecies are visions. They relate to Judah and Jerusalem. Isaiah deals with the gentile (non-Jewish) nations only as they come into contact with Judah and Jerusalem.

A prophet had to speak God's word to his own people about what was happening at that time. When a prophet spoke about the future, he did not know when his prophecies would come true. Some parts of his prediction might happen in his lifetime. Other parts might take a hundred years. Some parts might be still waiting today. Often Isaiah uses the phrase 'that day' or 'the day'. Sometimes this refers to a day of judgment. Sometimes it refers to a day of hope.

When we begin to read the verses in chapter 1 we see some of the strength of the language condemning the rebellious nation of Judah. Isaiah calls on the heavens and earth as witnesses. If you read Deuteronomy chapter 4 you will see that the heavens and the earth were God's witnesses to promises made when the nation of Israel was formed. Obedience would result in blessing, but disobedience would mean the nation would be removed from the land. Verse 4 of Isaiah 1 is succinct in its meaning:

You are sinful – not a holy nation

You are people of iniquity – crooked and perverse

You are a seed of evil doers – rather than a true seed of Abraham

You are children that deal corruptly – rather than true children of God

You have forsaken the LORD – apostasy in the heart

You have blasphemed the holy one – apostasy in word

You have turned your back on him – apostasy in deed

Isaiah issues God's call to his people: "Come now, and let us reason, says the LORD. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be like wool." The ever-merciful God is extending grace to his people, just as he does to us today.

The first five chapters serve as an introduction to the book. They contain a summary of the major themes developed by Isaiah: the sinfulness of Judah, God's invitation to repentance and predictions of future judgment and restoration. There are messages of a glorious future for Jerusalem in 'the last days'. In between are details of Judah's present sins of arrogance that will result in harsh judgment.

Chapter 6 begins with a verse well known to many; ‘I saw the LORD, seated on a throne, high and exalted ...’the magnificent vision which ends with the call to Isaiah, ‘whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ Isaiah responds, “Here am I. Send me!”

As a prophet Isaiah had two major responsibilities: to be God’s man totally and to speak God’s word truthfully. This meant preaching for forty years to people who heard but never understood; who saw but never perceived the truth (6:9–10). It meant being prepared to appear foolish to get God’s message across. It meant presenting God’s message in a straightforward way: ‘your sins are awful and God’s judgment is certain’. But it also meant preaching a message of hope: Yahweh would save the repentant.

By 734 BC, and recorded in chapter 7, Assyria was becoming more and more powerful and a threat to smaller nations. Judah’s northern neighbours, Israel and Syria decided that the best way to survive was to force Judah to help them rebel against Assyria. So the king of Syria and the king of Israel attacked Jerusalem. Not only did they want to overpower the city, they also wanted to install another king. If that happened, the line of David – the royal line – the line from whom Messiah would come - would be replaced.

Judah’s king, Ahaz, did not want to give in to Syria and Israel. So he thought about asking Assyria for help and protection. But God instructed Isaiah to take his son, Shear-Jashub whose name means *only a remnant will return*, and meet King Ahaz, giving him a message: *don’t be afraid and don’t lose heart. The Sovereign Lord will not let Syria and Israel succeed. All is in God’s hands. Ahaz, ask the LORD for a sign.*

But, Ahaz pretended it was not proper to ask God for a sign; a cover-up, really because he did not want to change his plans. Isaiah was frustrated. So he announced God’s sign himself. A young woman would conceive and have a son. His name would be Immanuel; this means ‘God with us’. Before this son was twelve years old, these nations would no longer be a threat.

Many commentators believe this prophecy has two levels. First there would be a child conceived during the time of Ahaz. If such a child was born, this sign would have been confronting for Ahaz — a living reminder of the king’s refusal to trust God’s saving presence.

Today we know that this sign had a primary meaning fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ. Matthew takes up Isaiah’s words and identifies both the virgin and the child. Mary is the virgin and Jesus, her son, is Immanuel: God with us!

In chapter 8, Isaiah is instructed to take a large scroll and write the name Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz on it, meaning *quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil*. This will become the name of Isaiah’s second son. Before this child reaches a specific state, what has been prophesied will come to pass. The name sends a message. Both kingdoms threatening Ahaz will be out of the picture.

God knew the people would disregard the sign, however, and he told Isaiah the consequences. The King of Assyria would come and destroy Israel and Syria. Judah also would suffer but would be protected by Immanuel. Judah's enemies might be able to devise plans and strategies, but they would fail because God's plans would ultimately succeed "for God is with us".

Many familiar scriptures are found in Isaiah. Our understanding is broadened and enriched when we place them in context. To those who believe, Immanuel is a sanctuary. The Davidic covenant will not be violated. For those who don't believe he will be a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence. 'A stone that causes men to stumble' has its primary application to the Jew.

There is a warning against the occult in this chapter. Isaiah and God's people were also to focus on the word of God, not on mediums and spiritists. For those who depend on the occult for guidance, there is no future — "they have no light of dawn" (8:20) — and distress, darkness and gloom await them.

The media is full of horoscopes and fortune telling. We need to avoid them for they offer no light or help for our daily living. The Bible is the place where we will find the insight and direction we need.

Many will instantly relate these words - *The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined* - to Handel's Messiah. They are from Isaiah 9, and the wonderful prophecy of the child who will be born follows soon after. The message is glorious; the Person is Immanuel. He will be the fulfilment of the Davidic Covenant. There will be no end to his reign. The effects of his reign will be peace; the means of his reign: justice and righteousness.

The words that follow in the same chapter, however, are strong in their judgment of Israel, the northern kingdom. The people are proud and arrogant. Their homes and crops have been destroyed yet they refuse to see this as God dealing with their sin. The leaders and prophets fail to speak God's word. All levels of society are corrupt. Isaiah challenges the people:

- What will you do in the day of desolation?
- To whom will you run for help?
- Where will you deposit your glory (your ill-gained wealth). There will be no place to hide.

Over and over God uses gentile nations to carry out judgment against his people. But, always there will be a remnant, that is, some remaining. In the midst of judgment there is hope. Although Israel will be judged harshly, a remnant will survive. They will return to the LORD in faith and repentance.

Isaiah chapter 11 tells us of the branch that will come from the stump of Jesse. We have a beautiful description of Messiah with the Spirit of the LORD resting on him. His

delight is in the fear of Yahweh. He will not judge by outward appearances. He will judge on the basis of righteousness. He will judge the earth. He will slay the wicked.

Chapters 13-23 are prophecies against Judah and ten surrounding gentile nations. Isaiah continues to warn Judah – do not put your trust in other nations. The LORD will deal with those nations, and you will be punished for abandoning your God. The final chapters in part 1, which concludes at chapter 39, give us a greater world-view. The Sovereign LORD will both judge and bless the entire world.

If you love to select verses or passages that compare and contrast, please look at the vineyards of chapter 5 and chapter 27. The language is poignant and beautiful. The vineyard in chapter 5 is planted in love and tenderly cared for. But, this vineyard yields bad fruit and wounds the heart of God. It will incur judgment. There is a far better outcome for the vineyard in chapter 27. The Lord is watching over it and watering it continually. Verse 6 says: *in days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom and fill the entire world with fruit.* There will be a glorious outcome.

The messages, warnings and prophecies of Isaiah are for us today. We are just like the people of Judah in their sinfulness. We do the same things. Our idols may assume a different form, but they are still idols. Isaiah's message is directed at us also! We need the history lesson, the warnings, the reassurances, the promises, and the marvellous hope as much as the people of old.

Keep in mind, as you study:

- the prophecies span from times past to a time yet to come
- the Lord who judges, also blesses; he is the God of righteousness
- the Messiah has come and, one day, will reign gloriously

Enjoy Isaiah!