

Unit 1 Introduction

The Book of Isaiah

The book of Isaiah is often referred to as the fifth gospel due to its message about God's intended salvation and redemption for His people. As a prophet, Isaiah is called to speak a message on behalf of God. Throughout the Old Testament, God calls prophets, whom He sends to proclaim His vision for the world to His people. The prophet's primary goal as God's messenger is to exhort and correct the people. Thus, the Old Testament prophets share a common theme: calling the people back to God. This theme is summarized well in Malachi 3:7b "'Return to me, and I will return to you,' says the LORD Almighty." Like his fellow prophets, Isaiah too seeks to call the people back to God.

Historical/Literary Context

Since Isaiah speaks to a particular people in a particular time it is important to understand the historical and literary context of the book. Most scholars agree that the book of Isaiah has three parts: Isaiah 1—39; 40—55; 56—66. The first part, Isaiah 1—39, contains mostly narrative writing with clear historical markers, setting this section in the southern kingdom of Judah during the years 740–695 BC. At this time in Judah's history, the Assyrian Empire was on the rise. Assyria controlled most of the surrounding area and was rapidly expanding its territory. This left Judah with a choice to make, should they be pro-Assyria or anti-Assyria? At the root of this dilemma was the question, "Whom should we trust?" Do we trust in Assyria's military might or do we trust in God?

The second section, Isaiah 40—55, differs in tone and message. It contains a message of comfort and salvation for those in exile. Judah was taken into exile by the Babylonian Empire in 587 BC. During the time of exile, most of the Judean residents were taken captive and relocated to Babylon. In Isaiah 40—55, Isaiah makes it clear that God is both able and willing to deliver His people, and he proclaims that deliverance will come through the faithfulness of God's servant who will lead the people back to God.

The final section, Isaiah 56—66, contains a message centered upon the themes of sacrifice and Sabbath. Isaiah describes what the new community of faith will look like once God delivers them from exile. This new community will be comprised of people from every nation and they will be servants of God alone.

Themes of Warning and Judgment

A main component of Isaiah's message is a warning of coming judgment. How we perceive the judgment of God in the book of Isaiah depends upon how we perceive sin. For Isaiah, sin is rebellion

against God in the form of a refusal to accept God's fundamental lordship. Sin is then an expression of human pride as people try to place themselves over God. Therefore, God's response to sin is to irradicate it. However, God's goal in removing sin is not destruction; His goal is to establish His lordship and His covenant with His people.

Under the leadership of Moses, God established a covenant with His people, which contained both vertical and horizontal obligations. The people are vertically obligated to God, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2–3). Horizontally, the people are obligated to those around them. The covenant sets out stipulations to care for the vulnerable members of the community and God calls the people to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). Isaiah's message of judgment for Judah demonstrates that they have failed to uphold their covenant obligations.

As Isaiah confronts the people who are unsure where to place their trust, he reminds them that through the covenant God has called them to serve and trust Him alone. However, the priests and kings who were supposed to lead the people in covenant faithfulness failed to serve God alone. As the people of Judah faced punishment for their infidelity, in the form of rising empires, Isaiah reminds them that only God can deliver them. To the leaders and people in Judah, it looked like there were many potential deliverers around them, but only God would bring true deliverance. The people had been trusting in the wrong thing, as Isaiah states, "In that day the people who live on this coast will say, 'See what has happened to those we relied on, those we fled to for help and deliverance from the king of Assyria! How then can we escape?'" (Isaiah 20:6). But God wanted His people to trust only in Him, "This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: 'In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength'" (Isaiah 30:15).

Isaiah's message of warning is also connected to the horizontal obligations of the covenant. As God's covenant people, Israel and Judah were called to care for the vulnerable in their community, referenced in Deuteronomy as the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner. The covenantal obligations proclaim that God cares about the vulnerable members of the community; therefore, His people should care about them too. Isaiah proclaims that Judah has failed to do this, "Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1:16–17).

Along with calling the people back to both their vertical and horizontal covenantal obligations, Isaiah also reminds Judah of the God they serve by describing the character of God as the one who is high and lifted up. Isaiah calls God “the LORD Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel” (Isaiah 1:24) and “the Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 17:7). These two phrases capture God’s divine nature as ruler. A major theme introduced in the opening chapters of Isaiah is the exaltation of God and the humiliation of human pride. Through Isaiah, God informs His people that He alone will be exalted. Then, He will lift up the lowly and cast down anyone who has pridefully placed themselves above God, “The eyes of the arrogant will be humbled and human pride brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day” (Isaiah 2:11).

Themes of Hope and Redemption

Alongside the themes of judgment and warning are rich themes of hope and redemption. In Isaiah, God’s judgment is always for the purpose of restoration. God’s goal is to restore the covenant relationship with His people. For this reason, the messages of judgment and hope are interwoven with one another throughout Isaiah. A clear example of this is in the metaphor of refinement, “I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge [refine] away your dross and remove all your impurities. I will restore your leaders as in days of old, your rulers as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City” (Isaiah 1:25–26). Through the judgment and harsh punishment of exile that the people of Judah experienced God was refining His people in order to make them pure and reorient them back to the covenant.

Isaiah uses the image of the Righteous, Faithful City in Isaiah 1:26 to illustrate what God’s people could be once they are restored and transformed through refinement. Isaiah describes this restored city as a place where God will dwell and reign, which will attract the attention of the surrounding nations because of the peace and justice that will be found there, (see Isaiah 4:2–6; 25:6–10; 35:1–10; 60:15—61:4).

Before this restoration can take place, however, there is a time of judgment via exile. But Isaiah is clear that the exile will not last

forever. Isaiah proclaims that the end of the exile is near and he describes this salvation from exile with language that echoes the exodus. Just as God once led His people out of slavery and into the Promised Land, so too will He come to lead His people out of exile and bring them back home, Isaiah says, “A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God’” (Isaiah 40:3).

The vision of restoration described by Isaiah includes more than just bringing the exiles home. His vision includes the establishment of justice and righteousness in the world so that everything is ordered according to God’s plan. In the Faithful City that God establishes there will be peace so that the people will, “beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4). Through the covenant restoration of His people, God will fill the people with joy instead of sorrow and death will be defeated (see Isaiah 25:6–10; 35:8–10).

Messiah

One other theme that is present throughout the book of Isaiah is servanthood. Through the covenant, Israel and Judah are called to be servants of God. However, as Isaiah points out they have been incapable of serving God, so Isaiah speaks of a servant who will be the perfect servant. This servant is typically described as “suffering servant” in what scholars call the servant songs; Isaiah 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13—53:12. This servant will demonstrate to the people what it looks like to faithfully serve God. Alongside this servant, Isaiah also talks about a king whose rule will establish God’s justice and righteousness so that the kingdom of God will be realized on earth (see Isaiah 9:1–7; 11:1–9). The New Testament makes clear that Jesus is both the servant and the king of whom Isaiah was speaking. Jesus demonstrates to us what it looks like to faithfully serve God and He rules as the king who establishes God’s kingdom on earth, bringing justice, righteousness, and peace.

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