

The Road to Jesus: The Gospel According to Isaiah
Isaiah 1:1-31
Isaiah's Opening Words to God's People

INTRODUCTION:

Isaiah lived during the period of the Assyrian Empire's expansion. He tells us this in verse 1 - during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. This would put Isaiah around the 700s B. C.

Isaiah's call to the office of prophet is recorded in chapter 6, where Isaiah dates his call to the year King Uzziah died. That would be 740 B. C. You were to have read about these kings before tonight, as we will not take the time in class to thoroughly review their reigns and what has happened historically. However, some notes need to be made...

King Uzziah is identified largely as a good king. He conquered the Philistines in the areas of Gath and Ashdod and was paid taxes by the Ammonites on the east. He strengthened the capital city of Jerusalem, militarily, and had a strong army. He also strengthened the land agriculturally. Late in his reign, Uzziah decided to usurp the prerogatives of the priests; he tried to offer sacrifices and God struck him with leprosy until he died. Under Uzziah, Judah saw prosperity like they had not seen since the days of King Solomon about 150 years before.

His son, Jotham, served as a co-regent for a number of years. He also was identified, largely, as a good king. He also kept the Ammonites under submission and fortified the hillside around Judah. But, on the horizon is the nation of Assyria. Their king, Tiglath-pileser III was beginning to expand his reign to the west. Under threat of invasion, the *northern* tribes of Israel, led by their king, Pekah, formed an alliance with the king of Syria, Rezin and pressured Judah and Jotham to join their coalition. This is known as the "Syro-Ephraimite War."

Jotham's son, Ahaz, also reigned for a few years along with his dad. Ahaz is identified as an evil king. In fact, the historian tells us that Ahaz practiced child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3). Not only did Ahaz have to deal with the issue of this alliance with Israel & Syria versus *Assyria*, he also had to deal with raids by the Edomites and the Philistines.

As it was, Ahaz braced for war against Assyria and Tiglath-Pileser III. We will see King Ahaz in Isaiah, primarily in chapter 7. Well, Ahaz decides to form an alliance with Tiglath-Pileser III against his northern brothers. Assyria conquers Damascus, Syria and King Ahaz goes to Damascus, sees a beautiful altar of an idol god there and has plans drawn up for a similar altar in the temple in Jerusalem!

When Ahaz dies, his son, Hezekiah comes to the throne and Hezekiah is one of the very few, very good kings. Hezekiah institutes a restoration movement to go back to the Law of Moses and restore worship as it was supposed to be. So, he expels idolatry from Jerusalem, cleans out the temple and begins offering sacrifices according to the Law. It was during the reign of King Hezekiah that Assyria dominates and decimates the northern tribes of Israel (722 B. C.).

Sennacherib has now become the king of Assyria and tried to rebel against this alliance. Sennacherib threatens to storm into Judaea and take Jerusalem. It's then that Hezekiah prays to God and God answers Hezekiah through Isaiah. We'll see that whole exchange later in the book.

In 701 B. C. Sennacherib will march against Judah and knock on the door of Jerusalem. During that campaign, he will destroy 46 towns and take over 200,000 Jews into captivity. He

will demand Hezekiah pay tribute of 800 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold. This 701 B. C. invasion is *the* national defining moment of Isaiah's ministry.

We will also see during Hezekiah's reign the threat of the Neo-Babylonian Empire on the horizon. Not only will the threat of Assyria serve as a warning to Israel but God will also use this new threat to try to motivate Judah to repent. Of course, they will not and they go into exile for 70 years in Babylon.

Yet, God has a promise to David to fulfill, which we will see recurring throughout Isaiah - and God will bring Judah back home to the promised land. That promise will be fulfilled under the *third* nation in our historical background - the Persians and Isaiah will also foresee the rise of King Cyrus who will begin the restoration of the Jews to their homeland.

Following Hezekiah is his son, Manasseh, who begins quite poorly as a king (spiritually speaking) but later humbles himself before the mighty hand of God. Yet, it is too late to save Judah. They will spiral downward under Manasseh when everything that was evil and ungodly from their past comes roaring back to life again. It is also under Manasseh that Isaiah, according to Jewish history, was put to death, "sawn asunder" if Hebrews 11:37 makes reference to that. What all this means is that Isaiah preached the Gospel between 40 and 60 years.

Hosea, Amos, and Micah are all contemporaries of Isaiah. The two former preached to the northern tribes of Israel while Isaiah and Micah preached to the southern tribes of Judah. It was also during this time that God sent Jonah to the Ninevites.

Judah of Isaiah's day is no different than the church of Christ in our day and every physical, earthly nation such as the United States. Sin is man's biggest problem and there is only one solution: Jesus Christ. So, 700 years before the Son of David is born to the virgin, Isaiah is telling his people they need to listen to God and accept the blessings of God's Son. Let's spend the next six months walking through Isaiah as he leads us to Jesus Christ: The Gospel according to Isaiah.

GOD WITNESSES AGAINST THE PEOPLE - 1:2-3:

In verse 2, God calls for witnesses against His people - specifically, heaven and earth. The verb translated in the NASV as "Listen" is used in the imperative 31 times (see 1:10). Second, Isaiah calls on Israel to "hear," a cognate word for "ear" (just as in English). This imperative is found 6 times throughout the book (again, see 1:10). The reason God wants the heavens and the earth to listen to His charges is because *Judah is not listening!* Take a look at 6:9-10, passages made famous by Jesus in Matthew 13:14-15 and Paul in Acts 28:26-27. Thus the expression, "The Lord speaks," found three times in Isaiah but the equivalent expression, "the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (vs 20) is found ten times. "...in the unique marvel of revelation and inspiration the words of the prophet are 'verbally inspired', the very words of the Lord" (Motyer, 50).

God's charge is found in verses 2 & 3. First, God calls them "Sons." Israel has been portrayed as sons of God since the birth of the nation. In Isaiah, God refers to Himself as "Father" several times: 9:6; 63:16 (twice); 64:8. You would expect a son to listen to his father, but not Judah. They have "revolted" against God. "All sin, whether the sinner realizes it or not, is ultimately against God" (Young, 39). Oswalt laments: "to refuse to submit to the one who has cared for you is incomprehensible" (86).

This is a behavior in stark contrast to even "dumb" animals. Israel does not know God; she does not "understand." Part of the reason why Israel is ignorant and foolish is because they have given themselves over to idols who, Isaiah charges are also ignorant and foolish! "The

locus of our disloyalty is the mind (*know ...understand*) just as the mind is the focal point of all spiritually” (Motyer, 50). We cannot *live* above what we do not *know* so that when we *know* better, we can live *better*. “...refusal to submit can only result in foolishness (Rom. 1:18-32)” (Oswalt, 86).

“To know” (*yada*) is frequently used to refer to a close, even intimate, relationship. It’s not that Israel doubted the existence of God. They just added Him to their pantheon of idols - one among many. But they *should* have known! As Paul writes in Romans 9:4-5: “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. 5 To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.” Israel was without excuse. So are we; so are Americans.

We see God’s heart break in verse 3 - “My people” is used 23 times in Isaiah.

GOD’S DESCRIPTION OF THE PEOPLE - 1:4-9:

Verse 4 begins with a lament word: “Alas!”

Observe the descriptions Isaiah uses to describe God’s people:

“sinful” (21) and “weighed down with iniquity” (30) as well as “evil doers” (22), “corruptly”, “abandoned” and “despised” as well as “turned away” - verse 4. Incidentally, the designation “Holy One” is found *twenty-five times* in Isaiah; 6 times outside of Isaiah. Why? Because Israel’s sins offended the *holy* nature of God. Sinful man cannot stand in the holy presence of God. “There can be no greater mistake than to minimize the sinful condition of mankind in our Christian preaching and activity” (Young, 47).

Then in verse 5, we have: “rebellion (11),” “sick,” and “faint.”

In verse 6, “nothing sound.” Oswalt points out that these descriptions “describe injuries received in battle” (89).

In verses 7-9, Isaiah describes the land, the results of Israel’s disobedience:

In verse 7, “desolate” and “desolation.”

In verse 8, Isaiah compares Judah to: a shelter in a vineyard, a hut in a cucumber field, and a besieged city. The shelter and the hut might provide protection from the sun, maybe the rain, but they will not provide protection from an invading army like the Assyrians. “The key to national well-being is righteousness, i.e. what is right with God (Prov. 14:34), and in this the prophet records dismal failure” (Motyer, 51).

In verse 9, Isaiah recalls some history from Israel’s past - the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Israel would be just like Sodom and Gomorrah if it were not for a few “survivors” God had allowed to exist. In contrast to Sodom and Gomorrah, in which God could not find ten righteous souls, the reason Israel had not yet been burned to the ground is because of the faithful “remnant,” a term used 14 times in Isaiah. Paul will quote this verse in Romans 9:29. Here is an intimation of *hope*. Thankfully, God is the “Lord of hosts” (49 times) and He has the means to correct the situation, but not without punishing the evildoers.

All of this destruction was promised under the Law of Moses, way back in Leviticus 26:14-29 but Israel did not listen. They did not care.

GOD’S INDICTMENT OF THE PEOPLE - 1:10-15:

Again, God calls on Israel to “hear” and “give ear.” “The imperative implies more than the mere physical act of hearing; it implies a hearing that results in obedience to the thing heard” (Young, 60). The “instruction of our God” is the law of Moses, what should have been governing their worship and their behavior. In this paragraph, God will bring His case against Judah.

They may have been worshiping in the *externals* but their hearts were far from God. What good is worship if obedience is not behind it? What good is worship if humility is not the driving force? “The kernel of every national problem is how people relate to God. They cannot be right anywhere if they are wrong here. Religion determines everything” (Motyer, 51).

So, God says in verse 15, even though you multiply prayers, I’m not going to listen. You are not listening to me; I’m not going to listen to you. “Fervor and zeal in prayer are not substitutes for obedience” (Young, 69).

Over and over again, the prophets point out that worship without obedience is pointless: 1 Samuel 15:22; Jeremiah 6:20; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21-24. “Worship in contravention of God’s commandments is no true worship, and a sacrifice offered without faith is a hollow mockery” (Young, 62-3). Compare Col. 2:23. “Only that worship is acceptable to Him which is in exact conformity to His will, which neither adds thereto nor detracts therefrom” (Young, 67).

GOD’S SOLUTION FOR THE PEOPLE - 1:16-20:

This paragraph (vss 16-17) highlights what God expects from Judah, in *nine imperatives!* These commands are not so much following through with rituals commanded in the Law of Moses as they are *repenting from the heart* (cf. Oswalt, 98; Young, 70).

Then the next paragraph (verses 18-20) show what can be done if Judah will respond to God in faith. But, God also points out what will be the end result of a lack of faith which would result in a lack of obedience. “Obedience is a serious matter... They must ‘obey willingly’ (be *willing and obedient*), not just offer conformism” (Motyer, 54). Incidentally, this word “obey” here is the same word translated “listen” in verse 2 and “hear” in verse 10. In other words, to *listen* is to *obey*. To *obey* is to *listen*.

The cleansing of sin will be effected only through the coming Son of David, the lamb led before the slaughter (cpt 53). Isaiah does not know that but you and I do. Verse 18 is our first picture of a Redeemer.

Can you count on God to fulfill His promises of blessing or cursing? “Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken” is used *ten times* in Isaiah.

GOD’S LAMENT OVER THE PEOPLE - 1:21-26:

Isaiah returns to the sinful condition of the people of Israel. At one time, Jerusalem had been “faithful” but now she has acted as a “harlot.” Not only has God used the “Father/son” analogy to picture the relationship between Him and Israel but He has also used the “Husband/wife” analogy - particularly 54:5. Hosea (cpt 2) and Ezekiel (16) both picture Israel as a faithless wife to the God of heaven. Jerusalem was unfaithful as a wife might be to her husband (only in 23:15-18 does Isaiah use the same imagery). At one time, Jerusalem was full of justice and righteousness but now, she is full of murderers.

Not only that, but their leaders are corrupt and disrespectful of orphans and widows (vs 22-23).

But, God will punish those who refuse to submit to Him - whether those adversaries and foes are Israelites or Gentiles (vss 24-25). “Mighty One” is a title used of God five times in the book, to emphasize that God was “mighty to save.” We like to say, “God hates the sin but loves the sinner.” That sounds precious except the Bible portrays the sinner as being God’s enemy, His adversary, not just here but in Romans 5 as well. “Sin sets God at variance with the sinner. But sin also invites divine retribution” (Motyer, 56).

To purify metals, you heat the metal to the boiling point. The impurities would come to the top and could be removed. I understand that a pure metal will reflect the image of the metalworker (Beyer, 44). Lye is a chemical that could help with the purification process. So it is with God; when the impurities of our own sins are removed, we reflect the image of God clearly. That’s what God will do with Israel.

In the end, God will reestablish His people as a people governed by righteousness and God's people will be called a "city of righteousness," a "faithful city."

GOD'S PROMISE TO HIS PEOPLE - 1:27-31:

Finally, as far as chapter one is concerned, God reiterates His promise to His people. If you repent, you will be blessed. If you persist in your disobedience, you will be punished.

Zion (Jerusalem; 47 times) can be redeemed (cf. 1:18) if she will return to God. The concept of "redemption" may very well bring to mind the exodus from Egypt when God redeemed Israel through the death of the sacrificial lamb.

But, and Isaiah spends more time on the rebellious ones, transgressors and sinners will be crushed. The reference to the "oaks" (*terebinths*) refers to the idol worship that occurred in the trees, in the woods. Motyer (57) suggests it is because trees were symbolic of undying life and fertility.

Ultimately, they will be ashamed of their idol worship, their oaks and their gardens. Thankfully, in Jesus Christ, Paul says, our "hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Romans 5:5).

No man will be able to save Israel from the wrath of God (vs 31). "The strong [man, NASV]" can refer to the oak, under which idol worship was conducted or it could refer to the worshiper himself.

Does Israel need a Savior? "Uzziah, Ahaz, Hezekiah, and the people of Judah had to make these same choices. ...Would people trust God and exalt his righteousness or would they exalt themselves?" (Smith, 117). Indeed! Christ is the only solution to their problem.

Next week: God's Call to Live in Light of the Future - 2:1-22: The path to Jesus!