



# Part I

## INTRODUCTORY MATERIAL

### Getting our Bearings in Isaiah

In a world of preaching 'mini-series' and sound bites, like ours, teaching Isaiah can seem an impossibly difficult task. The book is vast; its structure is complex; the material is often historically remote from our own times. Not surprisingly, contemporary excursions into Isaiah tend to be restricted to the passages predicting the incarnation at Christmas (Chapter 7, 9, 11 and perhaps 35) and the songs of the servant (especially chapter 53) at Easter. But we miss so much, as a result, and we deprive our congregations of so much benefit and nourishment, which we all desperately need.

It is being convinced of the benefits that will motivate the contemporary preacher to put in the hard work which Isaiah's magnificent book will undoubtedly demand. We are unlikely to preach it well 'on the backstroke,' without considerable diligence and effort, because its treasures are not given up easily to the casual observer or skim-reader.



But think of what characteristics you would like to see developed in your church-life and Christian discipleship, and you will find a remarkable match with Isaiah's own concerns. Once that connection is made in your own mind and heart you will need no further persuasion to teach Isaiah.

For example, one of our greatest weaknesses in contemporary Western Christianity is the poverty of our knowledge of God. This is not only doctrinal, in terms of our ability to articulate God's character and attributes, but essentially practical – we do not know this relationally in all the challenges and changes of our lives. Where would you go to strengthen your understanding of God's sovereignty as the ruler of the world he has created, to deepen your understanding of his essential nature as the faithful covenant-keeping God, who promises and fulfils? Where would you find Scriptures which build confidence in God's commitment to his people and the absolute certainty of his eternal kingdom of righteousness and peace? The answers are in Isaiah.

How would you seek to be a faith-builder for your congregation? How would you try to woo them away from the siren voices of our contemporary culture, with its superficial understanding of human nature, glib 'fix it' remedies which cannot mend broken hearts and lives, reductionist and materialist ways of life in this world which fail their adherents over and over again? If you want to encourage faith in God's promises, rather than a desperate resort to human policies, whether political, social, ecclesiastical or personal, you will preach Isaiah.

In a pluralist culture, with its many faiths and ideologies demeaned and reduced to mere variations on an out-of-date

theme, how will you build up your people to believe in and defend the uniqueness of the Lord Jesus Christ as the only son of God, the only Saviour of the world? How will you equip your hearers to share the non-negotiable essentials of the gospel, in a warm-hearted and relational way, with those who do not yet share their faith? What tools will you put in their hands to construct confident structures of faith in the unique accomplishments of the Lord Jesus, and so to give them a strong undergirding for their witness by life, as well as lip, in an unbelieving world? You will need to preach Isaiah.

What ought to be the priorities of the church at this point in world history? How should we regard the competing ideologies of the global village in an age of instant information? If much of what Isaiah prophecies has already been fulfilled, what should be our attitude between the first and second comings of the Messiah? How should we occupy the 'waiting time,' in which we live, looking towards the eschatological completion of God's salvation plan? What are the values that should predominate, both within the Christian community and also in its relationships with others, whether structurally or personally in the light of what we know about the end of all things? These vitally important issues constitute just another reason to preach Isaiah.

So many of our current needs, problems and deficiencies are met in this magnificent book. We shall need to think carefully and prayerfully about how best to divide this word of truth, in view of the uniqueness of the particular congregations we each serve. Short series, with frequent breaks, may well be the answer. But there is a deep mine of theological and practical treasures here to explore, so that

the time and energy put into its study and proclamation will be more than rewarded by its powerful impact on our own lives and on those whom we serve. My hope is that what follows will both strengthen your resolve and equip you with the tools to preach Isaiah.

## 1. Isaiah and His Times

### *Isaiah's place in the Bible*

The book stands at the head of the last major section of the Old Testament, which we call the Prophets, sometimes the 'writing prophets,' or in Hebrew terminology the 'latter' prophets. Of these fifteen books, twelve are grouped together as the 'minor' prophets (Hosea to Malachi), so called because of their shorter length, not their comparative importance. This leaves the three longer or 'major' prophets, led by Isaiah, who comes first in chronological order, followed by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. It is important to see Isaiah's ministry as exercised near the start of the prophetic period, which spanned approximately three hundred years. It acts as something of an overture to the whole, laying out God's agenda for his purposes in the present and immediate future, as well as stretching forward to the Babylonian exile and the return. There is a remarkable sweep of events foretold in Isaiah's prophecy – some of which we have yet to see fulfilled (e.g. 65:17-25).

### *Isaiah's place in his time*

The heading of the book (1:1) dates Isaiah's prophetic ministry to the reigns of four kings of Judah – Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah – a period spanning about one hundred years, from the 790s to the 680s BC. Historical detail can be found in both Kings and Chronicles, which

helpfully explains the background to Isaiah's work. After his calling in 740 BC, the year that Uzziah died (6:1), Isaiah's early ministry focused on the hidden, unacknowledged sins of Judah at the end of a long reign of peace, prosperity and security. (See 2 Kings 15:1-7 and 2 Chron. 26:1-23 for the details of Uzziah's 52-year reign.) For the last eight years of his life he was a leper, and his son, Jotham, ruled as regent, after which he succeeded his father for a further eight years (see 2 Kings 15:32-38 and 2 Chron. 27:1-9). Most of Isaiah's ministry was exercised in two contrasting reigns: Ahaz, who 'walked in the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, following the detestable ways of the nations' (see 2 Kings 16:1-20 and 2 Chron. 28:1-27), for sixteen years; and Hezekiah, who 'did what was right in the eyes of the LORD just as his father David had done' (see 2 Kings 18-20 and 2 Chron. 29-32), for twenty-nine years. Both Ahaz and Hezekiah feature in historical events in the first half of Isaiah's book, which the history writers fill out in further detail. Isaiah's own ministry may well have spanned fifty of those hundred years, from 740 BC onwards. Hezekiah's death is usually dated in 687/6 BC.

### *Isaiah's place in the world*

What was going on in the wider world during that century had a profound effect on Isaiah's message, as it was destined to do on the whole nation of Judah. To tell the story in one word, it was Assyria. With the accession of Tiglath-Pileser III (Pul) in 745 BC, the nation began to stir itself, solve its internal problems, build up its formidable war-machine and, under its able and powerful leaders, fill the power vacuum in the whole region. The glory days of comparative prosperity and independence enjoyed by Israel

and Judah, along with all the other smaller nation states, were numbered. Menahem, king of Israel, became Assyria's vassal (2 Kings 15:17-20), as did Ahaz, king of Judah (2 Kings 16:7-9), in events which Isaiah deals with in chapter 7 of the book. But this was only the beginning. Assyrian incursion into Israel increased during the reigns of Pekaliah (Menahem's son), who was assassinated by the usurper Pekah, who was himself killed and usurped by Hoshea (see 2 Kings 15:29). In 722 BC, after a three-year siege, Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, fell to Shalmaneser (2 Kings 17:3-6), and the northern kingdom was finished. 2 Kings 17:7-23 provides a very important theological perspective on this enormous tragedy.

But Isaiah's primary concern was of course with the southern kingdom, Judah, and its capital Jerusalem. Here too the Assyrian incursion would be felt, in all its remorseless, invasive power. Isaiah warns of 'the mighty floodwaters of the River—the king of Assyria with all his pomp. It will overflow all its channels, run over all its banks and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it, passing through it and reaching up to the neck' (8:7-8). This culminated in the attack on Jerusalem by the armies of Sennacherib in 701 BC, recorded in some detail in chapters 36-37 of Isaiah's prophecy. Yet as 39:6 makes clear, immediately after that account, it was not Assyria that Jerusalem and Judah needed to fear, but Babylon. God miraculously delivered Jerusalem from the Assyrians (37:36-37), but an equally terrifying conqueror was waiting in the wings, albeit over one hundred years still distant.

The second half of the book, from chapter 40 onwards, has its focus firmly on the Babylonian exile, which took place in stages, but climaxed in the destruction of the

temple and city and the mass deportation of the people in 587 BC. Nevertheless, Isaiah predicts a political deliverance when proud Babylon will bow to the conquering forces of the Medo-Persian armies, under their leader, Cyrus, whom God identifies as 'my shepherd' (44:28–45:4). The restoration of at least a remnant of the people to the land is clearly prophesied, but a greater servant-shepherd dominates these chapters as the political rescue of Judah pales alongside the spiritual rescue of a righteous remnant, from all over the world, created and redeemed by the work of God's suffering servant-Messiah.

## 2. Isaiah's Prophetic Purpose

We must not divorce Isaiah's unified book from the biblical genre of prophecy, of which he is arguably the leading exponent. So, it may be helpful to remind ourselves of the purpose of prophecy in the Old Testament. Today, prophecy is mainly thought of as prediction of the future. God inspires the prophet to see and speak the future realities of his plans and purposes, whether for his covenant community and/or for the whole human race and the cosmos he has created. These may involve judgement and salvation, which are often viewed as the two sides of the same coin, predicting God's intervention in the history of planet earth. But at the same time it is important to remind ourselves that the prophets also look back to what Yahweh has already revealed in the Torah, the instruction that constitutes the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses (Genesis–Deuteronomy) and which is the seed bed for everything else in the rest of the Bible.

In their excellent introduction to biblical interpretation, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart have a wonderful description of the

prophets, whom they define as ‘covenant enforcement mediators.’<sup>1</sup> They become prophets through the Word of the Lord which comes to them, not so much to reveal hitherto unknown facts about his character, but to apply revelation already given with divinely granted insight and penetration to the situation of their contemporary hearers. They are preachers of the covenant: its terms, its blessings for obedience and curses on disobedience (see Deut. 28:1-14 and 15-68). They are sent as God’s mediators, to explain the often perilous situation of the covenant people in their unfaithfulness and rebellion, to summon them to repent and renew their trust. They come to reiterate, apply and enforce the covenant relationship, with all that it involves, to the people who belong to Yahweh because of his steadfast faithfulness and loving kindness.

Isaiah provides a major example of this ministry. He comes to a people who are relatively prosperous, at the end of Uzziah’s long reign and who by the end of his ministry are again increasing in prosperity under Hezekiah (2 Chron. 32:27-29), having survived the crisis days of attack and invasion during the rule of Ahaz and the earlier part of Hezekiah’s reign. But prosperity is not necessarily a sign of God’s pleasure, not least because much of the wealth is in the hands of an increasingly rich elite, who oppress and exploit their fellow citizens, whom they should regard as their covenant brothers.

Isaiah is shown the inevitable outcome of this course of action, in considerable detail, by the Lord whose wrath against sin and rebellion must express itself in judgement. He is sent, therefore, to summon Judah to fresh repentance

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1. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, USA: Zondervan, 2003), p184



and renewed faith, but with the chilling knowledge that there will be no mass repentance (6:9-10).

We might say that the prophet's role is to warn of an impending disaster, an accident of huge proportions just waiting to happen, and to call people to hear, to heed and to act now, while there is still time. But in addition we are to see the 'accident' not as the random product of historical forces outside of Judah's control, but as the predetermined plan and purpose of the God who rules the whole of his creation according to the counsel of his will and the perfection of his character.

The prophet speaks from God to his covenant people to inform them of what God is going to do, whether in the immediate or more distant future, and to call for amendment of life in the present. God yearns jealously over his people and loves them so steadfastly that he cannot allow them to sin with impunity or to rebel and get away with it.

For those who lived as Isaiah's contemporaries during the known historical parameters of his ministry, from the death of Uzziah (740 BC) to the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib's armies (701 BC), the message is plain and urgent. Assyria, the rod of God's anger, is being raised against Judah's rebellion, not yet in a terminal sense, but as a fearful prototype of an even more devastating future judgement in the coming exile at the hands of the Babylonians. But Isaiah's focus does not end there. Chapters 40-55 deal with the period 605-538 BC, when the Babylonian attack and destruction of Jerusalem and the temple led to the exile actually happening. This material was designed as a warning to Isaiah's first hearers and to their succeeding generations, whether in Judah or later in Babylon. Not only does it affirm the truth of God's Word, but also looks beyond the events

themselves to a more glorious fulfilment of God's promises, in the universal salvation procured by the suffering servant. This would be a source of great strength to the believing 'remnant' through all those intervening years, as they held on to the sure and certain hope culminating in new heavens and a new earth (65:17).

There is, however, a third setting which is the major focus of the final section of the prophecy, chapters 56-66. This deals with the period following the restoration to the land at the hand of Cyrus (538 BC), and could be characterised as 'the waiting time'. It looks forward not only to the replanting of a faithful covenant people in Israel, but beyond its borders, geographically and ethnically, to the gathering-in of believers in the Lord and his salvation, from across the world: 'all mankind will come and bow down before me, says the LORD' (66:23). Since that day is still future for us too, this final section has a particularly direct application to our 'waiting time', living, as we do, between the first and second comings of Christ, in what the New Testament calls 'the last days'.

As we discern Isaiah operating in these three distinctive contexts, we begin to see that we too need to keep three horizons, or points of reference, in view when we come to teach this material. This will help us to 'cut with the grain', to use Scripture for the purposes God intends, not trying to make it do something for which it was not given.

As always, in biblical interpretation, we need to go back to the original writer, hearers and their context – 'them and then' – before we can move with confidence and integrity to our own very different situation – 'us and now'. However, we must never preach this in a detached, merely academic

way, as though its purpose is simply to present us with interesting historical background information.

We relate to the original context in at least two basic ways. Firstly, because the biggest picture of the Bible is that God is preaching himself to us, we recognise that everything the unchanging Lord reveals of his nature and character in the Old Testament text is still true for us as its twenty-first century readers. Secondly, because human nature does not change, we can only too easily see ourselves reflected in the deceitful hearts of the people of Judah and learn from their mistakes how our own divided hearts may equally lead us astray. All of this stems from careful reading of the text and sensitive immersion of ourselves in the circumstances and world-view of Isaiah's original hearers.

But we are not in the same position as they were. Our second reference point must be the great divide of human history, in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, to bring about God's great rescue plan. It was Christ himself who told his disciples, 'Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms' (Luke 24:44). His post-resurrection ministry was characterised by his appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, when, 'beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (Luke 24:27).

The text of Isaiah has more specific references to the Messiah than any other Old Testament prophet, but what was future to him is past to us, so that we must always view his message through the lens of Christ's person and work. Theologically, the expositor must consider carefully where there are points of continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants, and especially where our position

as members of the universal church, indwelt by God's Spirit, differs from that of the physical sons of Abraham living as members of a theocratic nation-state.

Our third point of reference will be future for us too, in that it will embrace the 'eschaton', the culmination and fulfilment of all God's promises and purposes in the eternal kingdom, at the end of time. As Isaiah's hearers waited for the first coming of the Messiah, so the prophets themselves 'searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow' (1 Pet. 1:10-11).

Similarly, we await his second coming and will learn from Isaiah many lessons about how to live in the waiting time. Indeed 'waiting' is a widespread theme throughout his book. In any specific passage we preach from Isaiah, we shall need to apply the three horizons or reference-points in our preparation, so as to hear his intended message clearly for our generation and then be able to preach it to ourselves and to others with integrity and clarity.

### 3. Isaiah's Theological Agenda

Paying attention to the historical context will always mean that the theological purpose becomes clearer, which, in turn, matters very much if the living Word of Scripture is going to impact our lives today. We have noted that Isaiah's time was one of immense political upheaval across the ancient near east, when all the traditional spiritual and moral values were being questioned and reassessed. The long period of peace and prosperity under Uzziah began to break up after his death, and new challenges faced the kings of the Davidic dynasty – Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah – in Jerusalem.

Judah had always been a comparatively small nation, forced to depend on Yahweh for her security. Indeed, she was always strongest when she was most dependent. But with the people of the land increasingly exploited by the rich elite, and the rulers consumed with greed and self-seeking in both the religious and political life of the community, the challenge of Assyrian domination of the area posed serious questions. Though these issues were often viewed as essentially political or social, Isaiah's ministry uncompromisingly defined them as spiritual. What will Judah, the people of the covenant, ultimately put their trust in? Where will they look for help? On what will they base their confidence? The question is posed in precisely those terms in 36:4, at the climax of the first section of the book. However, it is asked numerous times in various forms throughout the prophecy, and its realities are never very far away.

The choice is a stark one. Will Judah follow the ways of the nations all around her, trusting in diplomacy and alliances, relying on her own political wisdom and shrewd policies to preserve her status and security? Or will she rely on the promises of her sovereign Lord, Yahweh, bound to her by covenant oath, and so put her confidence in God alone? It is a choice with which every Christian is familiar, whenever life becomes challenging, whether at a personal level, or in a congregation, or on a national or international scale. Whom will we trust – God or ourselves?

Isaiah has often and rightly been designated the Old Testament prophet of justification by faith, the gospel prophet. We tend to narrow such a reference down to the proclamation of God's justifying grace on the basis of the substitutionary atonement of the suffering servant (e.g. Isa. 53:4-6). That is of

course the heart of the doctrine, as it is the heart of God's great rescue plan, and Isaiah expounds it with great clarity as he calls for the response of repentance and faith. But we should also remember that justification by faith is a way of life, since being a justified sinner, a Christian believer, consists in a single and exclusive reliance upon the promises of God for the whole of one's earthly existence.

The way into the Christian life is also the way on. The title of Scott Hafemann's study *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith*<sup>2</sup> sums it up so well, and the book itself is a magnificent whole Bible exposition of this great theme. So, this was the lifestyle question Judah had to face, as do we all. Are the promises of God a true and reliable foundation for life in this world (and the next), or do we have to look elsewhere for our confidence and security? In a nutshell, the choice is between divine promises and human policies.

By way of illustration, we can note that in the part of the book devoted to Isaiah's own context (1–39) there are two parallel historical incidents, each given considerable coverage, which illustrate the issues facing the king of Judah and his people. They are dealt with in two diametrically opposite ways. The first comes from the reign of Ahaz and is the content of chapter 7. Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel had formed a coherent policy against Assyria in the form of an alliance that they wanted Judah to join. Her refusal led to a determined attempt to liquidate Judah as an independent dynasty, to topple the Davidic line and impose the son of Tabeel as a puppet king, draining all of Judah's considerable resources into the alliance (7:1-6). Ahaz faces a very powerful force and is staring his own downfall in the

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2. Scott Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith* (New York, USA: Crossway Books 2001).

face. But he is given a word from the Lord through Isaiah: 'keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart... It will not take place, it will not happen' (7:4-7).

As with every word of God, there comes a great accompanying challenge. Will Ahaz believe it and so act upon it, or not? The issue could not be expressed more clearly than by Isaiah's statement on behalf of God in 7:9b (which might be a strong candidate for the big idea of the first part of the prophecy), 'If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.' Faith is the only way to be established.

Ahaz, however, has already rejected the way of faith and is not going to turn back now. 2 Kings 16:5-9 tell us that he ignored God's gracious promises and chose instead to commit himself to Tiglath-Pileser, the king of Assyria, as his vassal, using the silver and gold from the Lord's temple to buy his assistance. It could hardly be clearer. He rejects the covenant Lord of his fathers, in order to submit himself to a pagan overlord. Judah can only suffer terribly as a result.

Ahaz even refuses God's gracious offer of a sign to strengthen his faith (7:10-13), but by embracing Assyria as his help he has invited in a swarm of bees to ravage every part of the land, 'to shave your head and the hair of your legs, and to take off your beards also' (7:18-20) – total humiliation and subjugation. The history of the reign of Ahaz is the commentary on this text.

In contrast, Hezekiah, his son, later faces an Assyrian invasion of even more terrifying proportions, mopping up the fortified cities of Judah and advancing on Jerusalem itself (36:1-2). He too receives a gracious word from the Lord, 'Do not be afraid of...those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me.'(37:6) Instead,

God promises deliverance and the imminent assassination of Sennacherib, Hezekiah's tormentor (37:6-7).

We know from chapters 30 and 31 that Hezekiah has been dabbling in an attempted alliance with Egypt, disparagingly referred to by Isaiah as 'Rahab the Do-Nothing' (30:7), in order to attempt to extricate himself from being Assyria's vassal. But now, to his great credit, he believes God's promise and affirms his faith by laying out the whole perilous situation in prayer (37:15-20). In response, God gives more detailed promises, a sign to strengthen faith and a clear divine affirmation, 'he will not enter this city...I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant' (37:34-35). And he does! 'Then the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp' and Sennacherib returned to Nineveh where his sons cut him down with the sword in the temple of his god (37:36-38).

In this way, Isaiah presents the central theological issue facing him and his hearers at the very heart of his prophecy. But we must also note that from the beginning to the end, this particular historical event is set in the wider context of God's promises and purposes for his people, not just in the restricted environment of Jerusalem in the eighth century BC, but universally and eternally.

Isaiah 1 presents us with a summary of the situation in Judah, both as to its symptoms and causes. There is corruption in every area of her national life: political, religious and social. 'Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted' (1:5b). The climax of this devastating exposé is its focus on Jerusalem as representative of the whole



people of Judah. 'See how the faithful city has become a harlot!' (1:21).

Unfaithfulness to her covenant obligations will produce two divine responses. The first is, 'I will turn my hand against you,' but that is immediately shown to initiate a purging away of dross and removal of all impurities. 'Afterwards you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City' (1:25-26). Here are the two cities, the unfaithful and the faithful city, so that one way of understanding the theological agenda of the prophecy is to trace its answer to the question, 'How is the faithless city to become the faithful city?' Or, on the broadest canvas, 'How is the earthly Jerusalem to become the New Covenant?' One Bible study book on Isaiah's prophecy is entitled *Two Cities* for very good reasons.<sup>3</sup>

It will take the whole of the Bible to spell out God's detailed answers to that question, but it is all here, in embryonic form at least, in Isaiah's amazing book. The immediate answer is only by a miraculous intervention of God's compassionate grace, which centres on the Messianic figure, who dominates the whole book, as Immanuel, the suffering servant and the conquering warrior.

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Reid and Karen Morris, *Two Cities: Isaiah* (St Matthias Press, 1993).