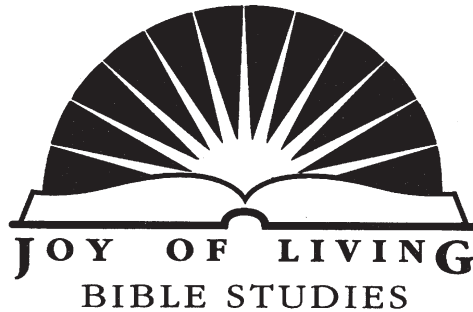


Isaiah Lesson 1



Introduction

Welcome to a challenging Bible study of the book of Isaiah. As you go into this study may your prayer be that of the psalmist who said, "Open my eyes to see the wonderful truths in your law" (Psalm 119:18, NLT).

Have you ever considered what life would be like if you did not have a Bible or if God had never spoken through His Word? What if we could learn to know God only from His creation around us? What a blessing that He did speak and that His Word has been preserved for us through the ages.

The Bible says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways" (Hebrews 1:1). Isaiah is one of the prophets through whom God spoke. Hebrews 1:2-3 goes on to say that now God has spoken to us by His Son. God's message comes by Jesus Christ, both by what He teaches and by who He is. That message is a stronger and far more inclusive word than God ever spoke through the prophets. There is more! Through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ all believers have the Holy Spirit dwelling within (see John 14:17), and He will "guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). As you begin each lesson, ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and mind to hear God's message to you.

Meet Isaiah

The little that is known about Isaiah is found in the book that bears his name, plus brief references in 1 and 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. He was born around 765 B.C., about the middle of the eighth century. From Isaiah 1:1 we learn that the prophet was the son of Amoz (not to be confused with the prophet Amos). It is believed Isaiah lived in Jerusalem.

According to Jewish tradition Isaiah was a man of royal blood. From various references it is obvious Isaiah had easy access to the reigning kings— King Ahaz (see Isaiah 7:3) and King Hezekiah (see Isaiah 38:1). Isaiah also had a voice in the affairs of state and perhaps even held a position in the capital. It would appear he was a very busy man. Among his many talents he was a poet, a statesman, a reformer and an orator. He used his talents to record events of Uzziah's reign (see 2 Chronicles 26:22) as well as important events of King Hezekiah's accomplishments (see 2 Chronicles 32:32). The prophet's elo-

quent, beautiful writing style is well known, and his education was the best in the land.

Isaiah was not only a prophet, he was married to a prophetess (see Isaiah 8:3). He had at least two sons, both of whom had symbolic names: Shear-Jashub, meaning "a remnant will return" (see Isaiah 7:3) and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz meaning "quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil" (see Isaiah 8:1,3).¹ The two names speak of the nation of Israel's judgment and restoration, two important themes in Isaiah's prophecy.

The prophet's ministry extended through the reign of four kings of Judah (the southern kingdom of a divided Israel)— Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah— although he did not begin his work until almost the end of Uzziah's reign (see Isaiah 1:1). Isaiah, considered to be one of the greatest theologians of all times, was definitely a man of great courage and deep faith. He confronted kings with the message of God even when public opinion was against him. Although his name means "the Lord saves" or "salvation of the Lord," he also has been given nicknames that speak of his character and work, such as "the evangelical prophet" and "St. Paul of the Old Testament."

Isaiah was a man of integrity who despised sin and hypocrisy. You will soon discover his favorite name for the Lord was "the Holy One of Israel." In pointing out the sins of Judah he said, "they have spurned the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 1:4). Isaiah was very patriotic and dearly loved the nation Israel and his people to whom he referred as "my people." Sometimes he went to extreme measures to get them to listen and heed God's warnings. According to Isaiah 20, Isaiah wore only a loin cloth for three years to dramatize the danger of Assyria's victory over Egypt. He wanted his people to realize the danger Judah faced by depending on Egypt rather than on God for protection.

Isaiah's extreme measure, of course, cannot begin to compare to God's indescribable love for all sinners. Second Peter 3:9 says that God is not willing for any to perish. Our heavenly Father loves us far too much to leave us in our sin. As parents you know the heartache that comes when a child or a loved one is headed for trouble. You are ready to take drastic measures which experts call "tough love."

This happened to my friends when their high school daughter "Kim" began dieting. Unfortunately, it soon became evident Kim had lost sight of reality. She was diagnosed as anorexic and was hospitalized. For several years Kim was in and out of treatment centers.

1. Barker, Kenneth, General Editor, *The NIV Study Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985)

At age 18 Kim was again rushed to the hospital because she was dying. Despite the gravity of her illness she checked herself out as soon as she was able. It was then her parents started procedures to obtain a court order to become guardian of her health, even though she was of legal age. Angered by her heartbroken parents' actions, Kim accused them of cruelty. To explain why they needed to take this drastic step her father said, "Kim, we love you far too much to permit you to destroy yourself."

The book of Isaiah presents some drastic actions God had to take because His children refused to listen, to repent and to return to Him.

A Prophet

The book of Isaiah is one of the prophetic books of the Bible, written by a prophet. Why a prophet? In Isaiah's day the Bible, as a written book, had not been completed; thus, God spoke directly to His people through individuals chosen as His messengers.

As God's spokesmen, prophets were called by God for this task. They were the evangelists of that day. Their duty was not only to tell of coming events, but to admonish and reprove, to condemn prevalent sins, to warn of coming judgments, to urge people to repent and turn to the living God. In view of the fact that prophets dealt with current moral and religious conditions, they were often the most unpopular people of their day.

Do not confuse a prophet with mystics such as fortune-tellers as we know them today. There is absolutely no comparison. Turn to Deuteronomy 18:18,19 for the biblical definition of a prophet. God, in speaking to Moses about the Israelites said, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; *I will put my words in his mouth*, and he will tell them everything I command him" (italics added). God also said if anyone failed to respond to the prophet He Himself would deal with erring listeners.

Isaiah was not the only prophetic voice in his day. His contemporaries were Amos, Hosea and Micah. God sent Amos to work in the northern kingdom of Israel. Hosea's ministry was in Israel, beginning sometime before Isaiah began in Judah. The youngest was Micah, who also worked in Judah.

A prophet of the Israelites was highly honored because he had a sacred call from God. No man could apply for the job, neither could he obtain the position because his friends and family voted for him. Furthermore, no one could refuse God's call to be a prophet. Jeremiah felt inadequate and wanted to be excused, but God told him he had been chosen before he was born (see Jeremiah 1:4-5). The job was for life. One could not quit or even retire with a pension!

False prophets were faced with tragic consequences: "But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I [God] have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death" (Deuteronomy 18:20). There was to be no tampering with or changing God's words.

How could people know whether a prophecy was from God or from a false prophet? Deuteronomy 18:22 says, "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken."

Dr. Henrietta C. Mears points out in her book *What the Bible Is All About* that, while Abraham and Moses were both referred to as prophets (see Genesis 20:7; Deuteronomy 18:18), the *office* of a prophet was not established until the time of Samuel (see Acts 3:24).

The Book of Isaiah

The theme of the book of Isaiah is salvation. God's message to all is: "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:22). It is a unique book, and in my research I found many beautiful accolades by well-known authors. In the foreword of *Word Biblical Themes, Isaiah* by John D. W. Watts, Dr. David A. Hubbard said, "No other part of the Bible gives us so panoramic a view of God's handiwork in Israel's history... If Beethoven's nine symphonies loom as landmarks on the horizon of classical music, Isaiah's sixty-six chapters mark the apex of prophetic vision. Their music, their majesty, their mystery combine to inspire, challenge and intimidate the saints of God from the least to the greatest, from the most naive to the most profound."

There is a striking similarity between the format of Isaiah and the entire Bible. Isaiah has sixty-six chapters, the Bible has sixty-six books. The Bible has two main divisions—thirty-nine books in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New. Isaiah also has two divisions with thirty-nine chapters in part one and twenty-seven chapters in part two.

You will be challenged by a study of Isaiah due to the importance of its message and the scope of its subject matter. The book contains history, poetry and law, but its primary subject is salvation and prophecy. These messages came to Isaiah from God in visions. God permitted the prophet to look into the distant future as He showed Isaiah what was going to happen to Judah and Jerusalem. Isaiah also spoke of local events in the near future. For example, when the king of Assyria frightened the people by surrounding Jerusalem, Isaiah prophesied that God would halt the Assyrians before they entered the city, which is exactly what He did (see Isaiah 37:33,34).

In his commentary *The Prophet Isaiah*, author H. A. Ironside admitted there are many things in Isaiah that are perhaps beyond our present comprehension. In fact, said Ironside, perhaps some of God's words were beyond Isaiah's understanding, yet the prophet wrote at God's command. In view of the fact that the prophecy of Christ's coming to earth as a baby, as well as His sufferings on the Cross, were penned more than 700 years before the events, this lack of comprehension by prophet and people is understandable. To us, however, the truth has been made amazingly clear through the four Gospels. Dr. Ironside also pointed out that events pertaining to Christ's second coming will not be fully understood until the day of fulfillment.

Do not be discouraged, therefore, if you do not understand every truth fully. Even the scholars in their commentaries do not always fully agree.

It was Mark Twain who said, “Most people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which troubled me most are those I do understand.” This is true of the book of Isaiah. There is much truth, however, that is a blessing, a challenge, a guide and a reason for praise.

Please do not be overwhelmed at the chapter assignments for each lesson. This is not a verse-by-verse study. Isaiah is unique in that often several chapters make up one sermon or one theme and must be treated as one unit to maintain continuity. If you do not have time to read all the assigned chapters, read as many as you can. The deeper you dig into this marvelous book the richer will be your spiritual experience. If possible use several different Bible versions as you study.

Historical Setting

To help you appreciate the prophet's position and the task God had entrusted to him, we need to do a brief review of the Israelites and their whereabouts during the last half of the eighth century B.c. when Isaiah responded to God's call.

Israel was a united kingdom under Saul, their first king, followed by kings David and Solomon. That kingdom was made up of twelve tribes descended from the twelve sons of Jacob (see Numbers 2; Joshua 13). After the death of King Solomon, however, ten tribes revolted as a result of high taxes and years of smoldering jealousy. These ten tribes became known as Israel, the northern kingdom, under the rule of King Jeroboam II (see 1 Kings 12:20-21). Under Jeroboam's reign of forty-one years and just before Isaiah began his ministry, the northern kingdom experienced its greatest prosperity and expansion, but unfortunately the kingdom was rotten to the core. They were rapidly approaching God's judgment.

The remaining two tribes became known as the tribe of Judah, the southern kingdom, under the reign of Rehoboam (see 1 Kings 12:21). Each of the kingdoms eventually had a series of kings, most of whom were evil to one degree or another. Depending upon the spiritual leadership of their kings— or lack of it— each kingdom either walked in obedience to the Lord or drifted far from Him.

God's heart was saddened by the moral condition of His people each time they drifted into idolatry and sin. Again and again God raised up prophets to warn the people and call them to repentance. One example of such a warning is: “The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: ‘Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the entire Law that I commanded your fathers to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets’” (2 Kings 17:13).

The principal world power in Isaiah's day was Assyria. Even Egypt, which had been very strong, became involved in a death struggle with the rising, aggressive Assyria. Why be concerned with these

ancient powers? Because it will help you understand the political references in the book of Isaiah. In fact, during the prophet's lifetime Israel was swallowed up by the mighty Assyrians. It fell to Isaiah's lot to live in one of the most critical and turbulent periods of that day. The two small Israelite kingdoms, Israel and Judah, often at odds with each other, were caught up in the clash of stronger empires.

While salvation is the keynote theme of the book, Isaiah is also a prophecy of God's coming judgment. This book is clearly an example of the truth that it is God, not man, who determines the course of history no matter what the circumstances of the day may suggest. Clever political moves and alliances may appear to be beneficial, but if these moves lead a nation away from its faith and trust in Almighty God, these activities are evil. Some of the kings of Judah made such political alliances; therefore, Isaiah courageously proclaimed that true peace and prosperity can only be experienced by the nation that is obedient to the will of God.

An Indictment

Isaiah 1:1 begins with the prophet identifying himself as one who had a vision “concerning Judah and Jerusalem.” We become aware that this message did not originate with the prophet but came by way of a vision from God, with Isaiah reporting what he “saw.”

The apostle Peter, in teaching about the amazing validity of the Scripture, said, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20,21). In the first verse of Isaiah we see an example of the verse in 2 Peter.

Isaiah's message is directed to the people of Judah, the southern kingdom, and to Jerusalem, the capital. Chapter 1 describes a courtroom scene. God has summoned His people and He states the charges (see Isaiah 1:2-4). Despite all He had done, despite His blessings and the special privileges He had given them, the people rebelled against Him. Even the ox and donkey, says God, two domestic animals known for their stupidity and self-will, respond better to their owners than God's people responded to Him.

According to Isaiah 1:4 the sin of which the people were accused was not a passing thing, but a habitual practice. They had broken a solemn national covenant God made with His people in the days of Moses. When Moses met God on Mount Sinai, the Lord clearly presented the conditions of the covenant. God said, “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession” (Exodus 19:5). When Moses presented God's covenant the people “all responded together, ‘We will do everything the Lord has said’” (Exodus 19:8).

The people of Isaiah's day, however, had broken the covenant their forefathers made, and they had forsaken the Lord. God, as the “Holy One of Israel” pleads with them, “Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion?” (see Isaiah 1:4,5). Note the tone of concern and love throughout God's accusation. From a

human viewpoint the nation was doing well, but the worst thing about its habitual sinful state was that it was covered with a mask of spirituality. People were going through the motion of worship and observing all outward requirements, but their activities were not from the heart. God's response to their meaningless practices are evident in His words, "Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me" (Isaiah 1:13).

Charges and Results

God's accusation against His people was specific. They were rebellious (Isaiah 1:2); they had rejected the Lord (Isaiah 1:4); they brought meaningless offerings and had turned sacred meetings into evil assemblies (Isaiah 1:13); they uttered hypocritical prayers with raised hands stained with blood (Isaiah 1:15), and more.

Despite the accusations, the Lord did not reject nor disown Judah, but her moral condition demanded discipline. Isaiah reminded the people that because of their sins and indifference to God's message the country would eventually be destroyed. Even Jerusalem—described as "the Daughter of Zion"—is "like a hut in a field of melons, like a city under siege" (Isaiah 1:8). Only God's great mercy would keep her from being overthrown like Sodom and Gomorrah (Isaiah 1:9; Genesis 19:24,25).

What does the prophet say is the answer for Judah? Repentance and returning to God as evidence of genuine faith in Him. There could be no doubt about what God wanted from the people: "Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!" (see Isaiah 1:16,17). Unless there is true repentance there can never be true fellowship with the Lord.

The late A.W. Tozer, a man frequently referred to as a "twentieth century prophet," tells this true incident in his book *The Root of Righteousness*: When a state governor visited a prison in disguise, a young convict caught the official's attention. The governor was impressed with the young man's demeanor and felt that perhaps a pardon was possible.

In his attempt to pursue the matter further, the governor began a conversation with the young convict. Casually the governor asked, "Young man, what would you do if the governor were to offer you a pardon?"

Without any hesitation, hatred surfaced and the convict snarled, "The first thing I'd do is to cut the throat of the judge who sent me here!" Obviously, there was no repentance nor responsibility for the crime, and the possibility for a pardon was erased.

This convict needed what God urged His people to do—to show remorse and repent. God had every reason to punish His people for their sins, but He is always gracious, long-suffering and merciful. Instead of punishment, the Lord offered pardon (see Isaiah 1:18). There was a condition, however. If they would cleanse themselves by repenting and turning from their sins (see Isaiah 1:16,17) they would be cleansed. No matter how great the sin— "though they are red as crimson" (Isaiah 1:18)— God would forgive and cleanse. The color red was considered to be colorfast or indelible. No effort of man—

washing, long usage, tears, sacrifice— could take away the color. Only the almighty power of God could remove it.

Points to Ponder

Among God's accusations against Judah is one that may easily entangle us, namely, going through the routine of worship without even thinking about the Lord. All of us need to examine our own hearts. Why do we worship? Is it because it is the thing to do? Or does worship come from a sincere, cleansed, seeking heart?

By merely going through the motions the worship of the people of Judah became hypocritical, and God was sick of their rituals and sacrifices (see Isaiah 1:12-15). Sincere worship must include motivation from the heart resulting in actions pleasing to God. In preparation for worship I find it helpful to frequently read Psalm 95:1-7 because the verses spell out how and why to worship. A number of psalmists and prophets (too many to mention) join Isaiah in stressing the proper heart attitude for worshipers (see Psalm 40:6-8; 51:15-19; Jeremiah 7:21-26; Hosea 6:3-6; and others). Perhaps none stress the truth of the necessity of a right heart attitude by worshipers as strongly as Isaiah. God, through Isaiah, warned His people against being insincere. Their activities had become a burden to Him (see Isaiah 1:14). He said, "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood" (Isaiah 1:15).

As we worship the Lord let us remember Revelation 4:11: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

Study Questions

Before you begin your study this week:

- ☞ Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- ☞ Use only the Bible for your answers.
- ☞ Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- ☞ Answer the "Challenge" questions if you have the time and want to do them.
- ☞ Share your answers to the "Personal" questions with the class only if you want to share them.
- ☞ Each day the assigned Scripture may include long passages. If necessary you may read only the specific portions cited for each question. If you have more time, you may wish to read the entire assigned passage.

First Day: Read the commentary on the Introduction to Isaiah.

1. What helpful or new thought did you find in the commentary or from your teacher's lecture? What personal application did you chose to apply to your life?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down and post it in a prominent place. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its "address" (reference of where it is found in the Bible). The suggested memory verse is Revelation 4:11 or you may select another verse.

Second Day: Read Isaiah 1:1-9 and 6:1. (The remainder of chapters 1-5 will be covered later.)

1. God often spoke to Isaiah the prophet through visions to warn the people of their sins. According to Isaiah 1:1 to what nation and city was this first warning directed?

2. Name the four kings who were on the throne during Isaiah's ministry.

3. a. We read in Isaiah 6:1 that King Uzziah had died. This king had a good influence on Judah. Read 2 Chronicles 26:3-5. What does verse 4 say about his reign that would account for a good influence?

b. There was a reason for the king's success. Find it in 2 Chronicles 26:5.

4. a. Read 2 Chronicles 26:16-21. King Uzziah became very powerful. What happened to cause his downfall according to verse 16?

b. What was the cause of King Uzziah's death according to 2 Chronicles 26:17-21?

5. How does Psalm 10:4-6 describe some dangerous actions a person filled with pride might do?

6. Personal: How could practicing the truth in Galatians 5:25,26 help you not to become a proud, arrogant person?

Third Day: Read Isaiah 6:1-3.

1. What awesome sight did the prophet see in the vision he described in Isaiah 6:1?
2. John the apostle refers to Isaiah's vision. Read John 12:39-41. According to verse 41, who else did Isaiah see in that vision?
3. The seraphim around the throne were angelic beings. What were they doing and saying? See Isaiah 6:2,3.
4. Challenge: Isaiah's vision in the Temple had similarities to a vision John had on the Isle of Patmos. Both describe a worship scene. Compare Isaiah 6:2,3 with Revelation 4:8,9.
 - a. What similarities did you find?
 - b. What differences did you find?
5. Personal: How could Isaiah 6:3b and Revelation 4:11 help you focus more fully on the Lord as you worship?

Fourth Day: Read Isaiah 6:4-5.

1. What was Isaiah's response concerning his own spiritual condition when he saw the Lord in the vision?
2. Isaiah used the archaic word "woe" often in the first 40 chapters of the book. Use a dictionary and write down a definition of woe.
3.
 - a. What sin did Isaiah confess about himself and the people with whom he lived?
 - b. Challenge: Read Mark 7:17-23. Jesus and His disciples were having a discussion. What answer did Jesus give them that might help us understand why Isaiah confessed the sin he did?

4. When a person is consciously brought into the presence or realization of God there is an overwhelming awareness of sin and unworthiness. Read the Scriptures below and complete the response:

Job 42:5,6: Job said,

Luke 5:8: Peter said,

5. a. Read Psalm 86:8-10. Find several truths David enumerated about the Lord.
- b. Personal: Write at least one sentence telling how these verses make you feel about the Lord.

Fifth Day: Read Isaiah 6:6-8.

1. a. What happened to Isaiah after he admitted his own unworthiness and sin? (Isaiah 6:6-7a)
- b. What did the seraphim say to assure Isaiah concerning his sin? (Isaiah 6:7b)
2. According to 1 John 1:9 what is the condition for cleansing?
3. What happens to our prayers and praise if we do not confess our sins? Read Psalm 66:16-19.
4. a. After Isaiah was assured of forgiveness and cleansing how did he respond to God? See Isaiah 6:8.
- b. How does Isaiah's response compare to the responses of Moses and Jeremiah in the following verses?
Exodus 3:10-11

Jeremiah 1:5,6

5. Answering God's call for service after forgiveness is a very serious commitment. How did the apostle Paul feel about God's call? Read 1 Corinthians 9:16.

6. Personal: Have you experienced the Lord Jesus Christ's forgiveness of your sins? Have you prayed and asked God to show you what your call to service is? Have you responded to his call?

Sixth Day: Read Isaiah 6:10-13.

1. Re-read Isaiah 6:10 with Jeremiah 5:21,23. What was God saying about the people of Judah and their response to His warnings?

2. When Isaiah asked the Lord how long his assignment would be, God gave several signs in Isaiah 6:11,12. It might be helpful to read the *New Living Translation* for this. Find two or more signs.

3. What words in Isaiah 6:11,12 suggest the people will be taken from their land into exile? (This punishment would come because they failed to return to God after years of warning.)

4. If possible read Isaiah 6:13 in several Bible versions. God mercifully promised that a tenth of faithful followers would survive. How does Isaiah refer to these faithful ones?

5. a. What do the following Scriptures say about God's love and mercy for us? If you wish, put your name in these verses as you write them, and thank God for His promises to you.

John 12:46

James 4:8

2 Peter 3:9

- b. Personal: God extends an invitation to you in Matthew 11:28,29. Will you respond and let Him guide you? Tell Him right now.