

The Man...

Isaiah (meaning Yahweh is salvation) lived around the second half of the 8th century BC, at the same time as Amos, Hosea and Micah. His ministry spanned 40 years and the reign of 4 kings – Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, but also predicts more than any other prophet, the coming Messiah as King. Isaiah was married; his wife was a prophetess, and his two sons both bear symbolic names (see Isaiah 7.3, 8.1-4, 18)

The Context

After the reign of Solomon Israel has been split into two kingdoms – the northern kingdom made up of 10 tribes confusingly still called Israel, with its capital in Samaria. They quickly begin to disobey God and worship idols, their descendants are the Samaritans. During Isaiah's ministry Samaria was destroyed by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom of Judah kept its capital in Jerusalem, and consisted of the tribes of Judah (from which the kings came) and Benjamin. Isaiah began his ministry at the end of the reign of Uzziah, under whom Judah had prospered for 50 years. This signalled the end of peace and prosperity as the Assyrian empire swept all away in its path – uprooting and transplanting whole populations and punishing any sign of rebellion with prompt and hideous reprisals.

The Book

Isaiah has often been called the 5th gospel because it contains so much of the gospel, and is full of predictions about the coming King – Jesus. Over this series of 5 bible studies it is hoped to introduce the broad sweep of Isaiah's message and its main themes.

1-5 Introduction

Isaiah sketches the situation into which he was called. The disobedience and sin of the people which must be judged (1.24-5, 2.10-11, 3.11, 5.30) is contrasted with the future blessedness and holiness the nation will enjoy (2.1-5, 4.2-6)

Isaiah's call

Opening with story of a single sinner cleansed and ending with the song of a saved community (12.1-6), within it, against the background of a King who rejects God, the light of the coming King (Jesus) shines out (7.14, 9.1-7, 11.1-9). In many ways the rest of the book describes the outworking of Isaiah's experience in on a national scale. Just as Isaiah needed to see God and himself correctly (6.1-5) so did the nation (ch 7-39). Just as Isaiah needed to receive the fiery, but ultimately gracious cleansing of God (6.6-7) so did the nation (ch 40-55). And just as Isaiah needed to receive God's commission (6.8-13) so did the nation (ch 56-66).

7-39 A Question of Trust

The people are called to trust God and be delivered from the nations – in doing so they will demonstrate God's unique glory to those nations. Instead they are impressed by human glory and trust the nations (Assyria/Egypt) instead of God; as a result they will be captured and destroyed by those very nations. Despite this God still offers himself to them. We see a contrast of two cities – the world's city – an attempt to organise the world without God which falls (24.10) and the strong city of salvation (26.1) which stands. God's judgement on Israel and the nations is demonstrated.

40-55 The Servant

Written to a people in despair, who feel God has failed. Instead God demonstrates He alone is God, the sole creator, and that the Israelites are his chosen servants who will declare His glory to the world (even though they do not deserve to be treated with such mercy). The nation, like Isaiah must be cleansed, and God describes the servant who will restore his wayward people to himself. The section ends with invitations to Israel in ch 54-55 to come receive restoration and cleansing, as a result of the suffering of the servant ((52.13-53.12). The people are challenged to experience the righteousness of God.

56-66 Hope!

Isaiah looks forward to the time when the Israelites will be carried off into exile. The people are still awaiting the Lord's salvation (56.10) but these chapters are full of the hope of the coming conqueror (63.1-6) who will do what they could not do themselves, the one who will dry his people's tears (61.1-3), put an end to oppression so that at last Jerusalem, the city of Zion will be the joyful centre of the new earth. Israel will finally become a light to all nations. In these chapters God's people are challenged to 'do' righteousness, to be servants of God we are to be obedient, but this comes through God's enabling.

Main themes

Judgement and hope are the dominant themes weaved the whole way through, perhaps with a greater emphasis on judgement in 1-39 and hope in 40-66. Yet the purpose of judgement is always hopeful, that God will cleanse and restore His people and bring glory to His name.

Holiness – the unique holiness of God and our call as his servants to live holy lives permeates Isaiah.

Salvation – Isaiah clearly points to God’s salvation – the servant of the Lord – in the person of Jesus. This salvation involves forgiveness and cleansing, and must produce people committed to the justice of God and declaring his glory, holiness and good news to the world.

Trust – unless the people entrust their future to God and let him demonstrate He is the holy creator and saviour, their mission will remain unfulfilled. The contrast is with their ill-fated trust in other nations and idols that led to their destruction. Yet God, unlike His people remains compassionate and faithful.

The coming Messiah-Servant – throughout, Isaiah points to the coming of God’s Anointed One.

Isaiah 1-2

The court is called into session, Isaiah calls his witnesses (beginning of v2), to hear what the Lord has spoken. The charges are laid (2-23) and in v24 sentence is pronounced. The people have rebelled against God (2), practised empty religion (15) and abandoned any sense of justice or righteousness (21). Despite the case for divine judgement there are glimmers of hope as Yahweh provides redemption (27) and will purge and restore (25-6) the justice and righteousness the people have abandoned (21).

1.2-4 All of creation called to hear the words of the Creator, and hear how His family has turned from Him.

1.5-9 Enemies have left Israel beaten within an inch of her life (only Jerusalem still standing), yet she persists in rebelling as a nation. Sodom and Gomorrah were obliterated because of their injustice (Ezekiel 16.49)

1.10-20 False Religion. How people relate to God affects national fortunes (1.2-9) and social conditions (1.21-23). The people spent time and money on religion without morality, which was focused on what they did for God, always doing, not entering into the grace He offers. God’s tone is one of revulsion, but there is a way back (16-20). There are 9 commands in 16-17, the first 3 regarding cleansing, then 3 to reorder personal life – stop doing wrong (abandon sin), learn to do right (cultivate a new mind – Rom 12.2), seek justice (actively pursue God’s ways). The final 3 concern action that reforms society. In v18 God reiterates the effectiveness of the cleansing He invites His people to. Obviously in coming before God, the people are found guilty, but there is free pardon – not just cleansing but like snow and wool – naturally white, therefore promise of a new, holy nature. Obedience (19) is a serious matter – life in its fullness or death.

1.21-31 Social chaos and breakdown of morality. 21-23 show the lost purity and vanished glory with metaphors progressing from the tragic (wife) to trivial (wine); God laments the loss of morality. 24-27 – God’s refining fire restoring purity and glory. 27-31 God’s destroying fire, burning up the dross. Oaks and gardens refer to the fertility cults of the day – human strength and organisation/self-sufficiency and man-made gods are a dangerous combination!

2.1 A tale of two cities – Jerusalem as God intended and the sad reality of idolatry.

2.2-4 The vision of the missionary city, full of God’s truth which draws people to it, those who hunger to learn and obey (walk in) God’s ways. As a result the world is transformed, peace reigns, no national identities interfere.

2.5-9 The actual Jerusalem. Faced with the ideal, Isaiah calls people to return and walk in the light (5). Instead of the light of the Lord the people look to other gods, they guide their lives by human ingenuity (divination) not God’s word. Instead of feeding the world they are being fed by every kind of religion resulting in materialism – they worship their houses, careers, possessions....

2.10-22 The terror of the Lord. The arrogant will be humbled and their powerlessness exposed, merely by God revealing His presence. The repetition is to emphasis the importance that one day God alone will be exalted, He is awesome in majesty and holiness and not to be trifled with. He is not someone we play around at following as we will see in Isaiah 6. We would be foolish to put trust in anything but the awesome Yahweh, so Isaiah exhorts us not to rely on what is created instead of the Creator.

Next

The next Bible study will be Isaiah 6, so take some time to read (and encourage your group as well) the first 6/7 chapters of Isaiah.

It may be helpful to refer to a commentary for stuff you don’t understand – only after you’ve grappled with it yourself! Helpful ones on Isaiah include the Crossway Bible Guides (Philip Hacking) and Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Alec Moyter)