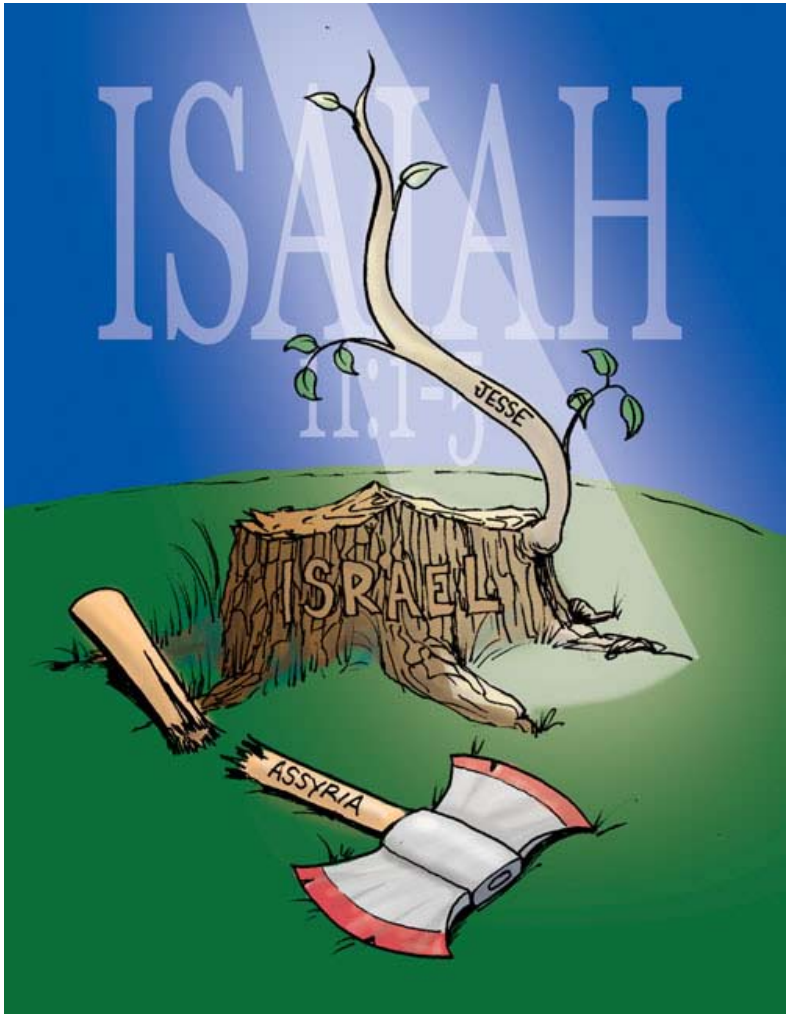


# Isaiah Week 1



This image shows the thrust of Isaiah. God used the Empire of Assyria as an Axe to chop down the Kingdom of Israel. Yet, even in the harsh discipline of God, he displays his grace. The axe which he used to chop down the tree has itself been broken because of its pride. In their darkest hour God gives them a glimpse of the hope of the coming Messiah, "a branch from the root of Jesse."

**Monday:** Isaiah 20-26

**Tuesday:** Isaiah 27-32

**Wednesday:** Isaiah 33-38

**Thursday:** Isaiah 39-43

**Friday:** Isaiah 44-49

## Introduction

As Americans living during the second half of the 20th century, it is safe to say that we were spoiled. Although we experienced wars like Vietnam, Desert Storm, and Iraq, we really do not know what it's like to have major strife on our own soil. On September 11, we had a brief and shocking wakeup call, but isn't it amazing how quickly we have slipped back into our complacent, self-indulgent ways?

In order to understand the book of Isaiah we need to shake the cobwebs of complacency off of our perspectives and enter into the world of war, terror, and uncertainty. Isaiah's ministry happened during a period of Israel's history when it seemed that the world was falling apart. For a much richer comprehension of Isaiah, read Isaiah's book while you have your thumb stuck in 2 Kings. It is a great exercise to track Isaiah's message with the four kings of Judah (Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah) and their war-torn history as it is told in 2 Kings. If you pay close attention, you will notice that Isaiah 36-39 are almost exact replications of 2 Kings 18-20.

If you were to poll the average person on the street and ask them what a prophet was they would answer, "the money left over in a business after all the expenses were paid." Then, after clarifying that you are referring to a "prophet" not "profit," they would

most likely say either, 1) a crazy man who stands on the street corner yelling out that God is going to kill everyone, or 2) a guy who can predict the future.

Let's be honest; the Old Testament Prophets are very foreign to us and reading them is not always the easiest thing to do. In fact, many times it leaves us scratching our heads and saying, "huh?"

In order to make the prophets more understandable there are a few things we must keep in mind.

### **1. Prophets are real people.**

It is easy to look at famous preachers and pastors in our world and elevate them to a sort of demi-god status. These people walk on water and can do no wrong. If that is how we view them then it could become possible to doubt whether they really know what "real life" is like. Hopefully that bubble has already been burst in your perspective of pastors as you have come to realize that pastors are fallible humans like everyone else.

Unfortunately, it seems to be more difficult to remove the writers of scripture from this same lofty pedestal. The fact that centuries of time, language, and culture create a gulf between us and the biblical writers makes this dethroning process all the harder.

While that may be true, it is still important to do so. Isaiah was a regular guy. He was a real man, who lived in a real city, he shared the same hopes and fears that every person has. His world was the city of Jerusalem during the

time when the Empire of Assyria was pressing in on the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He watched Israel move from being a pompous, self-righteous, arrogant nation, thinking they could conquer the world, to being completely and utterly destroyed. The Empire of Assyria continually attacked Judah until, in its final stages, was camped only eight miles outside of Jerusalem. Imagine the pressure and stress the citizens of Jerusalem must have felt as they watched the smoke rise from the burning cities of Judah, fearing that their city would be next.

## **2. Prophets are primarily preachers.**

A prophet is not a sooth-sayer or a fortune teller. A prophet is a person who is so in tune with the Spirit of God that he or she has the ability to speak God's truth in a clear, no-nonsense manner to the world.

Isaiah's preaching ministry was targeted at Jerusalem. He was desperately trying to get the people of that city to see that the reason their twin kingdom, Israel, was being destroyed by Assyria was because the people of that kingdom had strayed so far away from God. They didn't trust in God or obey Him. They worshipped pagan idols and made alliances with all the countries surrounding them in order to fight against the Assyrians. Isaiah's message could be summed up like this, "Jerusalem, if you don't wake up, what happened to them will happen to you."

### **3. Preaching was very different in those days.**

One of the main reasons reading the prophets is so difficult is because the popular form of public speaking was so radically different then than what we are used to. For us, if a person isn't casual and full of clever anecdotes in his message, then we tune him out. Back then it was very different. In the ancient world (everywhere, not just Israel) public speaking was an artform that was done in a highly poetic fashion. The orators were expected to craft their words in poetic stanzas and weave dynamic imagery into their presentation. You could say that the prophets were being "culturally sensitive" by speaking in this form of poetry.

### **4. Isaiah's book is actually a collection of Isaiah's messages that were given over a long period of time.**

Another thing to keep in mind was that Isaiah did not sit down at a word processor to compose his manuscript and take the notes to the pulpit. The words of the prophets were first spoken, then written. Whether Isaiah actually placed the words of his messages on the paper himself, or if it was done by one of his followers is not known.

What we do know is that the book of Isaiah is really a "best of" series of Isaiah's messages spoken over the course of four different kings' reigns in Jerusalem. If you track the book according to which king is in power when each individual message is given, you will notice a very different tone and agenda in each section.

# Two Halves to Isaiah

The book of Isaiah can be divided into two halves.

**Part 1: chapters 1-39 Destruction is coming, Judah beware!**

**Part 2: chapters 40-66 The Messiah is coming, World prepare!**

This week we will focus on Part 1. During this section Isaiah is preaching during the impending and ever-growing threat of the Assyrian Empire. The first three kings under his ministry do not listen to his message and the pagan idols remain in the temple and the people continue to oppress the poor and think like the pagans. The climax of the section is when King Hezekiah changes things and destroys the idols and ceases paying homage taxes to Assyria. This was a bold step of faith that Hezekiah made, and God honored it. Assyria was defeated by the Babylonians and Jerusalem experienced a season of peace.

Next week we will see that Hezekiah's son, Manasseh became king and took the city in a 180 degree turn, deeper into sin than it had ever been. This broke Isaiah's heart. Tradition tells us that Manasseh had Isaiah thrown in prison and eventually sawed in half. During this dark time is when the focus of Isaiah's teaching went beyond the bleak and inevitable annihilation of Jerusalem to the future hope of the Messiah. From his dark dungeon, Isaiah preaches messages of hope that have lit up the centuries since they were first uttered. We'll get to those next week.

## Monday -- The Vineyard

Isaiah 5:1-7, 20-30

In Isaiah Chapter five we read the story of a farmer who planted a Vineyard. In vv. 1-3, what is the farmer's attitude towards the Vineyard? What did he look for? What did he find?

What did the farmer do to the Vineyard as a result of these findings?

In verse 7 this parable is explained. What does the Vineyard represent?

There are many passages in the New Testament that deal with bearing fruit (John 15; Matthew 3:7-12; Matthew 7:15-20; Matthew 12:33-37; Galatians 5:22-23) Read Luke 13:1-9. What similarities do you see between Jesus' parable in Luke and Isaiah's parable of the vineyard?

## Food for thought:

On this first day of looking at Isaiah it is important to understand that, by the time Isaiah was preaching, the people of Israel had been pushing the limits with God's patience for centuries. God had come to His vineyard year after year and found little to no fruit. It was finally time for Him to pull the axe out of the back shed and start doing some serious pruning. The axe that He chose to use was the Empire of Assyria. During Isaiah's lifetime the Assyrians annihilated the Northern Kingdom of Israel and destroyed all of Judah except the city of Jerusalem.

We must never forget that although God is a loving and gracious God, that does not mean that He turns His head away from blatant sin. As a loving Father it is His duty to discipline us and prune our branches on a regular basis.

If you think of your heart as God's vineyard, what kind of fruit would God find there today?

In what ways could you allow God to cultivate and fertilize your vineyard this week?

## Tuesday -- A Wake up Call

Isaiah 6

When did Isaiah's vision take place?

What did Isaiah see?

What was Isaiah's reaction to this vision?

What does "I am ruined" mean?

What was God's response to Isaiah's "ruin?"

How would you have felt if you had seen what Isaiah saw?

How does this vision of God impact your view of the nature of God?

How does the fact that God cleansed Isaiah's lips make you feel about God?

## Food for thought:

Many people feel that this was Isaiah's "call to ministry." Look a little closer. Isaiah saw this vision when Uzziah died. Isaiah had been preaching in Jerusalem for years already! So what we have here is a seasoned preacher who has been working hard for the Kingdom of God who is suddenly confronted with a deeper revelation of God. He is not a "sinner" off the streets when he falls down and says "I am ruined!" He's a preacher!

So what? We can learn a great deal from this event. It doesn't matter where you are in life. You could be a drug addict who is struggling to survive, or you could be the president of a seminary and the pastor of a church, revered in the community. No matter who you are, when you truly come face to face with the reality of God's presence, there is only one response; on your face, now! No one is holy in their own ability. No one is good enough to meet God's standards. It is only through the grace of God that we can do anything. When we keep that in mind, it will be easier to remove any prejudices or barriers that may exist between us and others in the world.

# Wednesday -- The Branch of Hope

Isaiah 11:1-9

The branch that is emerging from the stump represents a future king of Israel. How is this king described in vv. 2-5?

How is his kingdom described in vv. 6-9?

## Food for thought:

In the first half of Isaiah, the prophet is warning the nation that Israel will be destroyed by the empire of Assyria. He says that God is using Assyria like an axe to chop down the tree of Israel. Because of their perpetual sin, God removed the wall of His protection from them and allowed the beastly hordes from the north to swoop in and devour His vineyard, to cut down His beautiful vine, leaving behind only a stump of wood sticking out of the mud.

This act of devastation must have broken the heart of God. From a human perspective, it paints a bleak and desperate portrait of Yahweh. When we observe a lifeless stump protruding from the ground it does not elicit great feelings of hope. On the contrary, this vision could leave us in the mindset of Ecclesiastes, asking the question, “what is the purpose behind this? Where is the meaning?”

Then we see chapter 11 and a renewed sense of hope floods new light on the picture. There, just below the violent hack marks of the axe, a fresh, green sprig of a branch begins to emerge. From the aftermath of death and destruction, new life is given birth.

Read v. 1. Jesse was King David’s father, so the “stump of Jesse” represents the remnant of Israel that is left after God has destroyed it with Assyria. This passage is one of many in Isaiah that is called a “Messianic” passage. Messianic means that it refers to the coming Messiah (or anointed one) of God who would be the greatest King the world had ever seen. We believe that Jesus was the fulfillment of these Messianic passages. We will look more closely at these passages next week.

As you read over your descriptions of the Messiah and the Messiah's Kingdom, how does it make you feel to know that Jesus is that person?

## Thursday -- Of Prideful Clay

Isaiah 29: 13-16

In this message, Isaiah is focusing his attention on the worship attitude of the people of Jerusalem.

In v. 13, what is the attitude of the people's heart toward the worship of God?

In what ways have you seen this attitude present in your church or your own life?

In v. 14, what is God's response to this attitude?

What is the attitude of the people in v. 15?

Have you ever had a time when you were doing something (whether it was an action or a thought) that you thought God was not watching?

We know that God sees everything, even our thoughts, but, isn't it strange how often times we behave in a way, or develop thought patterns, that seem as if we don't believe God is watching. Why do we do that?

V. 16 tells how how God feels when we behave as if He can't see us. What is the analogy?

## Food for thought:

It is at this point that we must unwrap the real culprit that lies at the root of our silly scheming: Pride. Deep inside we have a desire to be “right,” to be “free,” to be “in control.” Our society has adopted a notion of radical individualism; this notion that I am a free agent, the master of my destiny. We believe that we can shape ourselves into whatever form we want. How foolish is that?!? Can the pot make itself into something else? This all comes down to a matter of trust. Do you trust that God, who is your creator, has your best interest in mind. Do you trust Him enough to obey what He says, even if it seems contradictory to human wisdom? For a person who has been burned by people in the past, this is a scary proposal. Yet, it is the heart of the gospel. Let go of your need to be your own master and turn everything over to your creator. Let Him have your heart, then He will make it produce the kind of fruit that it was meant to produce.

Spend some time asking God to expose to you the areas of your life where you are still holding on to control. Ask Him for the courage to let go.

# Friday -- The Way of Holiness

Isaiah 35

What is the message in vv. 3-4 and to whom is that message given?

In vv. 5-6 what kind of people are described?

If God were to judge your church's attitude toward the poor, sick, and needy right now, what results would He find? What if He evaluated your heart?

In v. 8, what is the name of the main street in God's Kingdom? Who will be there?

How is that avenue described in vv. 9-10?

In this message Isaiah proclaims a vision of hope for the future. He describes what the Kingdom will be like when the Messiah comes and God vindicates Israel. It is a beautiful picture that will, hopefully, spark hope in your heart.

It is interesting to note that one of the themes throughout the Bible has to do with the treatment of the lame, sick, orphans, and poor. The value of a leader is measured, not on his ability to erect grand structures or conquer other nations. Rather, in God's eyes, a leader is measured by his attitude toward and ability to aid the poor and underprivileged. Reading through Isaiah it is easy to observe that the elite of Judah had become calloused to the poor and sick and had hoarded the wealth for themselves. In Isaiah's vision of God's Kingdom those members of society become exalted and their pain is vindicated.

We can walk on that street today. God's Kingdom is open to us through the King of all Kings, Jesus. He has made the Way of Holiness accessible to us through the Holy Spirit. Let's open our hearts to God's holiness so that it will overflow with grace and mercy to those in our society who are hurting and in need.