

Isaiah Part 1: Introduction and God's judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem

Isaiah 1

Introduction (and verse 1)

“The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (v 1) – the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah covered 81 years. Isaiah's ministry began in the year king Uzziah died (739 BC, Isaiah 6 v 1), and lasted until the reign of Hezekiah; he may have composed Chapters 40 to 66 in retirement.

Isaiah was the greatest and most comprehensive of the writing prophets. His themes span from the creation of the universe (Isaiah 42 v 5) to the creation of a new heavens and new earth (Isaiah 65 v 17, 66 v 22). No other prophet matches his majestic eloquence on the glory of God, or is more focused on the redemptive work of the Messiah, or more aware of God's grace. In terms of literary style, for versatility of expression, and brilliance of imagery, Isaiah has no rival; his book is regarded as the climax of Hebrew literary art.

Isaiah was the son of Amoz, and Jewish rabbinical tradition holds that Amoz was the brother of Amaziah, king of Judah. Isaiah's was a family of rank: he had access to the king (Isaiah 7 v 3) and the high priest (Isaiah 8 v 2). Isaiah lived in Jerusalem and had two sons: Shear-jashub, meaning 'a remnant shall return' (Isaiah 10 v 21), and Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Isaiah 8 v 3), meaning 'hurry to the spoils'. Tradition says that Isaiah was martyred by king Manasseh, who cut him in half with a wooden saw (see Hebrews 11 v 37).

Are there two authors? Many 'experts' hold the view that 'Isaiah 1' wrote Chapters 1 to 39 and 'Isaiah 2' wrote Chapters 40 to 66. But in John 12 Jesus quotes two passages: the first from Isaiah 53 v 1 and the second from Isaiah 6 v 9, and in verse 39 Jesus links the authorship of the two passages by saying "For again Isaiah said". The Dead Sea Scrolls contain a complete scroll of Isaiah dated from the second century BC. The book is one unit, with the end of Chapter 39 and the beginning of Chapter 40 in one continuous column of text, indicating that the scribes never doubted the unity of the book. Neither did the New Testament authors, nor the early church, as quotations from both sections of the book are attributed to a single author.

Outline of the Book of Isaiah

Section 1: Chapters 1 to 35 – God's Judgment upon the Nations

- 1 to 6: Judah
- 7 to 12: Israel
- 13 to 23: the Nations – Babylon, Philistia, Moab, Syria, Egypt, Edom, Arabia, Tyre
- 24 to 27: the World
- 28 to 33: six 'woes' upon Jerusalem
- 34 to 35: tribulation and the Millennium

Section 2: Chapters 36 to 39 – Historical Interlude

- 36: Hezekiah's trouble
- 37: Hezekiah's prayer
- 38: Hezekiah's illness
- 39: Hezekiah's folly

Section 3: Chapters 40 to 66 – The Messiah

- 40 to 48: the purpose of the Messiah
- 49 to 57: the suffering Servant
- 58 to 66: the reign of the Messiah

The wickedness of Judah (verses 2 to 20)

- What sins have brought God’s judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem? See verses 2, 4, 13, 15. How is the nation’s sorry condition described (verses 5 to 9)? Why does God condemn their formal religious observances (verses 10 to 17)?
- What does God say the people of Judah and Jerusalem have to do, to remedy the situation (verses 16, 17)? What promises and warnings does he give (verses 18 to 20)?

“Your country lies desolate; your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence foreigners devour your land” (v 7): during the reign of Ahaz, Judah was attacked by Israel, Syria, Edom, the Philistines, and Assyria. It was written of this period: “For the Lord humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had made Judah act sinfully and had been very unfaithful to the Lord” (2 Chronicles 28 v 19).

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the Lord (v 18) – God invites his people to come and reason with him. This offer is made not because he is ‘greater’ than us and has the right to dictate whatever terms please him. God’s direction for us is ‘reasonable’ – it is the smart way to live. True reason will drive any honest person to humble adoration and submission towards God. The ‘living creatures’ surrounding the throne of God are covered with eyes, which speaks of their great ability to perceive and know (Revelation 4 v 6 to 8). These are perhaps the most intelligent, rational beings God ever created, and they spend every moment of their existence ‘lost’ in praise and adoration to God. That is where the highest reason will drive us!

“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (v 18) – God offers a repentant, humble nation true and complete cleansing from sin. Their condition of sin can be transformed from deeply stained to completely white. In this passage, Isaiah says nothing about how this cleansing takes place; but we know it comes because Jesus took upon himself the stain of our sin, and God judged that sin completely, so that we can be accounted white as snow and wool.

The unfaithful city (verses 21 to 31)

- What is the purpose of God’s judgment as described in verses 24 to 31? How is this linked to the promise and warning in verses 19 and 20?

“Righteousness lodged in her” (v 21) – the days of justice and righteousness are long past in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was filled with murder, fraud (“your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water”); political corruption (“your princes are rebels”); and theft, bribes, and favouritism against the weak (“they do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow’s cause does not come to them”). God’s accusation against Jerusalem shows, by contrast, what he values among political and civil leaders: God expects them to keep the peace, show integrity, and defend the weak (the ‘fatherless and widows’).

“The Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel” (v 24) – God now addresses Judah, introducing himself with titles that show his power and majesty. He is the ‘Lord of hosts’, ‘hosts’ referring to the armies of heaven. He is indeed the Mighty One of Israel, and it is futile to oppose him. The title itself is a wake-up call.

“And will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy” (v 25) – dross and alloy are impurities in metal. God promises to ‘turn up the heat’ and refine Judah, taking away their impurities. His goal is not to destroy: instead he says, “I will restore” (v 26). God will purify Jerusalem, to the point where “afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city” (v 26). “Like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water” (v 30) – God speaks of the spiritual dryness of Judah. Though they continued their religious rituals, they were spiritually dry. As dry trees, dry gardens and dry tinder are ready to burn, so an unrepentant Judah will feel the fire of God’s refining judgment.

Prayer – Lord, thank you for the Book of Isaiah. From our reading today, we remember that Jesus took upon himself the stain of our sin, so that we can be accounted righteous, white as snow and wool. Thank you, Lord, that through Jesus our sin is completely forgiven, and our guilt is taken away. Amen.