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INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH

The Lord Is Salvation!

Sir Winston Churchill was once asked to give the qualifications a person needed in order to succeed in politics, and he replied: "It is the ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month, and next year. And to have the ability afterwards to explain why it didn't happen."

Because God's prophets were correct *all of the time*, they didn't have to explain away their mistakes. "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true," wrote Moses, "that is a message the Lord has not spoken" (Deut. 18:22, NIV). "To the law and to the testimony," wrote Isaiah; "if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (8:20). Isaiah was a man who had God's light, and he was not afraid to let it shine.

Before we examine the text of Isaiah's prophecy, let's get acquainted with the background of the book so that we can better understand the man and his times.

1. The man

The name "Isaiah" means "salvation of the Lord," and salvation (deliverance) is the key theme of his book. He wrote

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concerning *five different acts of deliverance* that God would perform: (1) the deliverance of Judah from Assyrian invasion (chaps. 36-37); (2) the deliverance of the nation from Babylonian Captivity (chap. 40); (3) the future deliverance of the Jews from worldwide dispersion among the Gentiles (chaps. 11-12); (4) the deliverance of lost sinners from judgment (chap. 53); and (5) the final deliverance of creation from the bondage of sin when the kingdom is established (chaps. 60, 66:17ff).

There were other Jewish men named Isaiah, so the prophet identified himself seven times as "the son of Amoz," not to be confused with "Amos" (see 1:1; 2:1; 13:1; 20:2; 37:2, 21; 38:1). Isaiah was married, and his wife was called "the prophetess" (8:3), either because she was married to a prophet or because she shared the prophetic gift. He fathered two sons whose names have prophetic significance: *Shear-jashub* ("a remnant shall return"; 7:3) and *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* ("quick to plunder, swift to the spoil"; 8:1-4,18). The two names speak of the nation's judgment and restoration, two important themes in Isaiah's prophecy.

Isaiah was called to his ministry "in the year that King Uzziah died" (6:1), which was 739 B.C. Isaiah ministered through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, who died in 686. Tradition says that Manasseh, King Hezekiah's successor, killed Isaiah by having him sawn in half (Heb. 11:37); but there is no record of this in Scripture.

What kind of a man was Isaiah the prophet? As you read his prophecy, you will discover that he was *a man in touch with God*. He saw God's Son and God's glory (chap. 6; John 12:41), he heard God's message, and he sought to bring the nation back to God before it was too late.

Isaiah was a man who *loved his nation*. The phrase "my people" is used at least twenty-six times in his book. He was a patriot with a true love for his country, pleading with Judah

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to return to God and warning kings when their foreign policy was contrary to God's will. The American political leader Adlai Stevenson called patriotism "not a short and frenzied outburst of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime." He was not thinking of Isaiah when he said that, but Stevenson's words perfectly describe the prophet and his work.

He was also a man who *hated sin and sham religion*. His favorite name for God is "the Holy One of Israel," and he uses it twenty-five times in his book. (It is used only five times in the rest of the Old Testament.) He looked at the crowded courts of the temple and cried out, "They have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward" (1:4). He examined the political policies of the leaders and said, "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help... but they look not to the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord" (31:1). Jehovah was holy, but the nation was sinful; and Isaiah called the people to repent.

Isaiah was certainly a *courageous man*. Unafraid to denounce kings and priests, and unwavering when public opinion went against him, he boldly declared the Word of God. For three years Isaiah wore only a loin cloth to dramatize the victory of Assyria over Egypt (chap. 20). In so doing, he hoped to get the attention of a people who were blind to their country's danger.

He was a man *skilled in communicating God's truth*. Not content with merely declaring facts, Isaiah clothed those facts in striking language that would catch the attention of a people blind and deaf to spiritual truth (6:9-10). He compared the nation to a diseased body (1:5-6), a harlot (v. 21), a useless vineyard (chap. 5), a bulging wall about to fall down (30:13), and a woman in travail (66:8). Assyria, the enemy, would come like a swollen stream (8:7-8), a swarm of bees (7:18), a

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lion (5:29), and an axe (10:15). Like our Lord Jesus Christ, Isaiah knew how to stir the imagination of his listeners so that he might arouse their interest and teach them God's truth (Matt. 13:10-17).

2. The monarchs

Isaiah prophesied during the days of "Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" (1:1). The nation had divided after the death of Solomon (1 Kings 12), but the priesthood and the Davidic throne belonged to Judah. The ten northern tribes formed the kingdom of Israel (Ephraim), with Samaria as its capital city; and Benjamin and Judah united to form the kingdom of Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital city. Though Isaiah predicted the fall of Israel to Assyria (chap. 28), which occurred in 722 B.C., his major focus was on Judah and Jerusalem (1:1).

Uzziah is also called Azariah. At the age of sixteen, he became co-regent with his father Amaziah and was on the throne for fifty-two years (792-740). When his father was assassinated in 767, Uzziah became the sole ruler and brought the nation to its greatest days since David and Solomon (2 Kings 14:17-22; 15:1-7; 2 Chron. 26:1-15). "But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction" (v. 16). He tried to intrude into the priest's ministry in the temple, and God judged him by smiting him with leprosy. It was in the year that King Uzziah died that Isaiah was called to minister (Isa. 6:1).

Jotham was co-regent after his father became a leper, and his record as king was a good one (2 Kings 15:32-38; 2 Chron. 27). He reigned for twenty years, and it was during his time that the Assyrian Empire began to emerge as a new and threatening power. During the last twelve years of Jotham's reign, his son Ahaz served as co-regent; but Ahaz was not one of Judah's good kings.

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Ahaz forged political alliances that eventually brought Judah into bondage to Assyria (2 Kings 16; 2 Chron. 28). Judah was repeatedly threatened by Egypt from the south and Syria and Israel from the north, and Ahaz depended on an alliance with Assyria to protect himself. Isaiah warned Ahaz that his alliances with godless Gentiles would not work, and he encouraged the king to put his trust in the Lord (Isa. 7).

Hezekiah reigned forty-two years and was one of Judah's greatest kings (2 Kings 18-20; 2 Chron. 29-32). He not only strengthened the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Judah, but led the people back to the Lord. He built the famous water system that still stands in Jerusalem.

The ministry of Isaiah spans a period of over fifty years, from 739 B.C. (the death of Uzziah) to 686 B.C. (the death of Hezekiah); and it probably extended into the early years of King Manasseh. It was a difficult time of international upheaval, when first one power and then another threatened Judah. But the greatest dangers were not outside the nation; they were within. In spite of the godly leadership of King Hezekiah, Judah had no more godly kings. One by one, Hezekiah's successors led the nation into political and spiritual decay, ending in captivity in Babylon.

The British expositor G. Campbell Morgan said: "The whole story of the prophet Isaiah, as it is revealed to us in this one book, is that of a man who spoke to an inattentive age or to an age which, if attentive, mocked him and refused to obey his message, until, as the prophetic period drew to a close, he inquired in anguish, 'Who hath believed our report? And to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?' " (*Westminster Pulpit*, vol. 10, p. 10)

3. The message

The following suggested outline will help you get an overview of this magnificent book.

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Theme: the salvation (deliverance) of the Lord

I. Condemnation—1-39

1. Sermons against Judah and Israel—1-12
2. Burdens of Judgment against the Gentiles—13-23
3. Songs about Future Glory-24-27
4. Woes of Coming Judgment from Assyria—28-35
5. Historical Interlude-36-39
 - a. Hezekiah delivered from Assyria—36-37
 - b. Hezekiah deceived by Babylon—37-38

II. Consolation—40-66

1. God's Greatness-40-48 (The Father vs. idols)
2. God's Grace-49-57 (The Son, God's Servant)
3. God's Glory-58-66 (The Spirit and the kingdom)

Isaiah opens his book with a series of sermons denouncing sin: the *personal* sins of the people (chaps. 1-6) and the *national* sins of the leaders (chaps. 7-12). In these messages, he warns of judgment and pleads for repentance. The Prophets Amos and Hosea were preaching similar messages to the people of the Northern Kingdom, warning them that time was running out.

But the Gentile nations around Judah and Israel were not innocent! In chapters 13-23, Isaiah denounced them for their sins and warned of God's judgment. Israel and Judah had sinned against the Law of God and were even more guilty than their neighbors, but the Gentile nations would not escape God's wrath. In the way they had behaved, these nations had sinned against conscience (Rom. 2:1-16) and against human decency. The Prophet Amos was preaching the same message in the Northern Kingdom, but he denounced the Gentiles first and then warned the Jews (Amos 1-2).

As you study the Book of Isaiah, you will discover that the prophet intersperses messages of hope with his words of judgment. God remembers His mercy even when declaring

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His wrath (Hab. 3:2), and He assures His people that they have a "hope and a future" (Jer. 29:11, NIV). Isaiah 24-27 is devoted to "songs of hope" that describe the glory of the future kingdom. Isaiah sees a day when the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah will return to the land, be reunited and redeemed, and enter into the blessings of the promised kingdom.

Chapters 28-35 focus on the impending Assyrian invasion of Israel and Judah. Israel will be destroyed and the ten tribes assimilated into the Assyrian Empire. (This is the origin of the Samaritans, who were part Jewish and part Gentile.) Judah would be invaded and devastated, but Jerusalem would be delivered by the Lord.

At this point in his book, Isaiah moved from prophecy to history and focused on two key events that occurred during the reign of King Hezekiah: God's miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrians (chaps. 36-37), and Hezekiah's foolish cooperation with the Babylonians (chaps. 38-39). This section forms a transition from an emphasis on Assyria to an emphasis on Babylon, for the last twenty-seven chapters look ahead to the return of the Jewish remnant from Babylonian Captivity.

The Jewish rabbis call Isaiah 40-66 "The Book of Consolation," and their description is accurate. Addressed originally to the discouraged Jewish exiles returning to an impoverished land and a ruined temple, these chapters have brought comfort and hope to God's people in every age and in every kind of difficult situation. The Hebrew word translated "comfort" also means "to repent." God brings comfort, not to rebellious people but to repentant people.

The arrangement of chapters 40-66 is not accidental. "The Book of Consolation" is divided into three sections; each focuses on a different Person of the Godhead and a different attribute of God. Chapters 40-48 exalt the greatness of God

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the Father; chapters 49-57, the grace of God the Son, God's Suffering Servant; and chapters 58-66, the glory of the future kingdom when the Spirit is poured out on God's people. Note the references to the Spirit in 59:19 and 21; 61:1; and 63:10-11 and 14.

Servant is one of the key words in this second section of the Book of Isaiah. The word is used seventeen times and has three different referents: the nation of Israel (41:8-9; 43:10); Cyrus, king of Persia, whom God raised up to help Israel restore their nation and rebuild their temple (44:28; 45:1; see Ezra 1:1); and Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Isa. 42:1,19; 52:13; 53:11), the Suffering Servant who died for the sins of the world. While Assyria and Egypt vie for center stage in chapters 1-39, it is Babylon and Persia that get the attention in chapters 40-66.

In summary, Isaiah had an immediate *word of warning* to both Israel and Judah that Assyria was on the march and would be used by God to punish them for their sins. Occasionally, Isaiah uses this invasion to picture "the day of the Lord," that future time when the whole world will taste of the wrath of God. The prophets often used immediate circumstances to illustrate future events.

Isaiah had a *word of promise* to Judah that God would deliver Jerusalem from the enemy for the sake of David's throne. There was also a *word of hope* for the future Jewish exiles in Babylon, that God would rescue them and help them restore their nation and their temple. But Isaiah's greatest message is his *word of salvation*, announcing the coming of the Messiah, the Servant of the Lord, who would die for sinners and one day return to earth to establish His glorious kingdom.

4. The Messiah

Isaiah is much more than a prophet: He is an evangelist who presents Jesus Christ and the Good News of the Gospel.

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Isaiah's "Servant Song" about Jesus (Isa. 52:13-53:12) is quoted or alluded to nearly forty times in the New Testament.

The prophet wrote about the birth of Christ (7:14; 9:6; Matt. 1:18-25); the ministry of John the Baptist (Isa. 40:1-6; Matt. 3:1ff); Christ's anointing by the Spirit (Isa. 61:1-2; Luke 4:17-19); the nation's rejection of their Messiah (Isa. 6:9-11; John 12:38ff); Christ, the "stone of stumbling" (Isa. 8:14; 28:16; Rom. 9:32-33; 10:11; 1 Peter 2:6); Christ's ministry to the Gentiles (Isa. 49:6; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47); the Savior's suffering and death (Isa. 52:13-53:12; Acts 3:13; 8:32-33; 1 Peter 2:21-25); His resurrection (Isa. 55:3; Acts 13:34); and His return to reign as King (Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1ff; 59:20-21; 63:1-3; Rom. 11:26-27; Rev. 19:13-15). There are many other references in Isaiah to the Messiah, and we will notice them as we study this book.

It is this emphasis on redemption that gives Isaiah a message for the whole world. While it is true he ministered to the little nation of Judah, and wrote about nations and empires that for the most part are no longer on the world scene, his focus was on God's plan of salvation for the whole world. Isaiah saw the greatness of God and the vastness of His plan of salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike. Isaiah was a patriot but not a bigot; he saw beyond his own nation to the gracious work God would do among the Gentile nations of the world.

I have a feeling that the Book of Isaiah was a favorite book of the Apostle Paul. He quotes from it or alludes to it at least eighty times in his epistles and in at least three of his recorded messages (Acts 13:22-23, 34, 47; 17:24-29; 28:26-28). This interest in Isaiah may stem from the fact that Jesus quoted Isaiah 42:7 and 16 when He spoke to Paul on the Damascus Road (Acts 26:16-18). When Jesus encouraged Paul during his ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:9-10), He referred to Isaiah 41:10 and 43:5. Paul's call to evangelize the Gentiles was

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confirmed by Isaiah 49:6. Like the Prophet Isaiah, Paul saw the vastness of God's plan for both Jews and Gentiles; and like Isaiah, Paul magnified Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Five times in his letters Paul refers to Isaiah 53.

As you study Isaiah and discover God's prophetic plan for the nations of the world, don't miss his emphasis on *the personal message of God's forgiveness*. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (1:18). "I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and, like a cloud, your sins" (44:22, NKJV). "I, even I, am He, who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins" (43:25, NKJV).

How can "the Holy One of Israel," a just and righteous God, forgive our sins and remember them no more?

"But [Jesus] was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed" (53:5, NKJV).

It was on the basis of this truth that Peter declared, "To [Jesus] all the prophets witness, that through His name, whoever believes in Him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43).

"Who hath believed our report?" Isaiah asks us (Isa. 53:1).

"If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established," he warns us (7:9, NKJV).

If you have never believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and received Him into your life, then do so now. "Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (45:22, NKJV).

"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12, NKJV).