

Isaiah

Context

Let's talk a little about the context of this book. Isaiah is the author.¹ He wrote his book sometime at the end of the 8th century B.C. He comes onto the scene sometime in the middle of the story of 1st and 2nd Kings. Both Israel and Judah have been slipping further and further into idolatry for years, until finally God has had enough of Israel and sends the Assyrians to conquer them. Now, Isaiah is in Jerusalem after the Assyrians have conquered the North, and are now headed towards Judah. We can actually read the narrative of how Jerusalem survives Assyria by God's miraculous grace in chapters 36-39.

Now, taking a step back, we have to realize that Isaiah is prophesying in a crucial moment in redemptive-history, when Israel was destroyed and scattered, and Judah's own existence hung in the balance. So much of the focus of the book is on the sin that brought Israel and Judah to these breaking points: idolatry, chasing after other gods, the gods of the world around them. But amazingly enough, the redemptive-historical role of this book is greater than all the sin and punishment of Isaiah's day. Rather, Isaiah also points explicitly and repeatedly to the future, more than any book we've looked at so far. He points forward to a time of comfort for the afflicted people of God, to the time when God will visit His people, when God will send a Savior and when He will restore the world, bringing in a New Heaven and New Earth.

Theme

First though, we need to get a feel for the setting that the book creates. We're supposed to envision a courtroom setting, especially in the second half of the book. God is the Judge, and in many ways the prosecutor. He is calling His covenant people to court to give an account for their actions and to establish the truth. Isaiah is like the lawyer executing God's case. What's interesting is that the whole earth is called upon to come and hear this case and the establishment of the truth. The truth is this:

Yahweh is the only God. We know this for four reasons:

¹ There a number of scholars who make the case that there were actually many "Isaiahs," and that this book is really a compilation of a number of different writings. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that this book is full of both judgment and grace. And no one author can write about both of those, right? The main reason though is this: Isaiah names King Cyrus by name (44:28 & 45:1). What's the big deal about that? Well. Isaiah is here predicting something, down to the very details of someone's name, about 200 years before it happens. It's one thing to predict and make prophecies, it's another to have such intricate detail. For this reason, it's concluded *a priori* that the part of Isaiah with the prophecies about Cyrus could not have been written until after Cyrus' reign. Well, I reject these notions. First, as an inspired text, I can't accept that it's presenting itself as prophecy in fraudulent way. But a more convincing reason may be this: That Yahweh can to only predict the future, but actually has control over the future is the *very thing* that makes Him different from, and superior to, the idols of the nations. The whole point of the book is to demonstrate superiority. What better way to do that , than by naming the very man He'll use in His future plans. Thus, Yahweh's name of Cyrus is an argument for, not against, the claim of a single author, Isaiah, having written one book in the 8th century BC, under the inspiration of God. Finally, Jesus himself accredits the entire book of Isaiah in John 12:37-41 when He quotes Isaiah 6 and 53 citing Isaiah for both quotes.

Exhibit A: He alone is holy, “the Holy One of Israel,” whereas the idols are the creation of man’s idolatrous heart, and the people are sinful.

Exhibit B: He alone is high and lifted up, majestic, whereas the idols and kings of the earth are lifted up only in vain pride.

Exhibit C: He alone controls history, sees and controls the future, whereas the idols and great kings of the nations can do nothing and cannot save.

Exhibit D: He alone can save, bringing peace to the earth in the form of a New Creation, whereas the idols cannot save and the kings only bring war.

Every redemptive-historical theme, bar none, runs through Israel and points with a megaphone into the future, towards Jesus Christ’s ministry. So this thematic statement could go on for as long as the book of Isaiah itself is. However, this will suffice for now. All the redemptive-historical themes that appear in the book work themselves out of this context of challenging Israel and Judah for their idolatry and pointing forward to the future. It’s in the pointing forward to the future where we’ll first encounter an important phrase that will appear many more times before we’re done with the Old Testament, the day of the Lord, and hear a great deal about the future, eschatological King, the Spirit, and Yahweh’s star witness, the Servant.

Outline w/Pivotal Tets

1. Isaiah 1-39 — Yahweh is/has a King

- A.) Chapter 1-6: Yahweh and His sinning people (ch. 6 a pinnacle)
- B.) Chapters 7-12: Yahweh and His saving promise (ch. 12 a pinnacle)
- C.) Chapters 13-27: The Day of the Lord upon all the earth — for the unrighteous and the remnant (ch. 24-27 a pinnacle)
- D.) Chapters 28-35: The Day of the Lord upon Israel — for refusal/readiness to listen and learn (ch. 35 the salvation)
- E.) Chapters 36-39: The Day of the Lord in shadow/type - nations, kings, gods, pride all destroyed; trusting remnant saved.

2. Isaiah 40-66 — Yahweh has a Servant (“the Servant’s Song”/courtroom scene)

- A.) Chapters 40-44: Behold your God oh Israel, there is no other
- B.) Chapters 45-48: Behold the only God you nations, there is no other
- C.) Chapters 49-55: Yahweh’s new exodus people comforted (ch. 54-55 the crown of the song)
- D.) Chapters 56-62: Yahweh’s new exodus people learn righteousness and vindicated
- E.) Chapters 63-66: Yahweh’s final wrath on sin and salvation of His own (65:17ff point into eternity).

Theme texts

There are a lot of texts that we could go to in Isaiah where these themes are developed. There are a lot of texts in Isaiah that are important for understanding redemptive-history. We could really spend as much time in Isaiah as we did in Genesis and Exodus. However, time is limited so we have to pick and choose only a few that most embody the thrust of the book as a whole.

Chapter 6

Let's start in **chapter 6**. We actually encounter most of the themes of the book in chapter 6. Here, Isaiah has a vision of the Lord, seated on his heavenly throne, arrayed in dazzling holiness. The first five chapters on the other hand, have been filled with indictment after indictment of Judah's sin. With only a few moments of hope in those first five chapters, the tone is overwhelmingly sad. The people of Judah are sinners and unholy. It's against that backdrop that we turn to chapter 6 and see the awesome holiness of the Lord.

Let's just read the chapter, and then we'll go back to look at it verse by verse. This vision that Isaiah has here influences and shapes the rest of his ministry, and so it's not surprising that most of the themes of the book are found here in this chapter. Let's take a look.

Look at **verse 1**. The words Isaiah uses to describe how he saw Yahweh in this vision, is "high and lifted up". That He is lifted up is meant to convey His preeminence and superiority over all things, His great majesty. In His being and nature, He is unlike anything else in the universe because He is in a class all by Himself. He is incomparable. Any simile that we may think of to compare Him to could only place a pale shadow of the reality of who He is. He is "high and lifted up."

Secondly, in verse 1, in His loftiness He is seated on a throne, and He's wearing a robe. The image here, of course, is that of a king. He is the King over the entire universe. In **verse 3** notice that His glory fills *the whole earth*. He's not like King Uzziah who just died. Uzziah was the sinning king over one small nation. Yahweh, on the other hand, is the eternal King, who never sleeps nor slumbers and will never die, who reigns over every last corner of creation.²

The fact that Yahweh's glory fills the whole earth means there is no room for any other gods in this earth. Yahweh will brook no rivals. He will not share His glory with another. Only one God exists, and only one God will get the glory. Yahweh's insistence that there are no other gods will be repeated often through the rest of the book.

Look at **verse 3** again. This adjective, "holy" is only repeated three times like this in the Bible to describe Yahweh. His one overwhelming attribute, from which springs the glorious manifestations of all His other attributes, is His holiness. To be holy, as we discussed when we studied Leviticus, is to be utterly distinct and different, just as it does to be "high and lifted up." But added to that is also an ethical purity and perfect uprightness. Yahweh has not a *single* moral imbalance in Him. He is completely righteous in all his dealings, and in all His ways. Everything He does, and is, is marked by an inviolable sanctity. That is why Isaiah's most common name for Yahweh is "The Holy one of Israel."

One thing that Isaiah will do for the rest of the book is to compare everyone else to Yahweh in His holiness. The people are sinners. The kings of the earth are corrupt. The idols of the nations are nothing more than the corrupt inventions of men's evil hearts. But Yahweh, He is holy.

Let's look at **verse 5** now. What I want to point out here is the sinfulness of the people, even Yahweh's own people. They are "unclean." Yahweh's holiness is not a cause for alarm in and of itself. The problem arises when Yahweh's holiness rubs against the sinfulness of His

² What's interesting here is that the next six chapters in Isaiah describe a future human King over Israel who will bring salvation, peace, and an eternal kingdom to Israel. This King will, of course, be the final descendant of David.

creatures, **especially** His covenant people. Throughout the book the people's sinfulness is highlighted and demonstrated for just how wicked it is when it is compared to the brilliant holiness of the Lord.

Nonetheless, Yahweh is full of grace. In the following verses Yahweh takes the initiative and purifies Isaiah to enter His service. He forgives Isaiah's sins and sets Him apart. So the themes of Yahweh's grace and long-suffering with Judah are seen at every turn in this book.

Well, in verses 9-12 there is a lot we could talk about: sin blinding the people and preventing them from seeing the divine glory, sin deafening the people to the word of the lord, the people's helplessness in this state, exile as a punishment for their sin, and so on. But I want to move quickly to **verse 13**. After the exile, described in verses 11-12, there will be a return. Though the nations will be cut down in a terrible way, there will nevertheless be a remnant, like the way a tree leaves a stump behind when it's cut down. What key redemptive-historical word do you see there in verse 13? It's the seed—that line of godly descendants who are promised to give birth to the savior of the world. Remember Genesis 3:15? Well, God has not forgotten His promised seed and His plan of redemption, even if He has to take punitive actions against His people.

So, this vision of the Lord, juxtaposed with the sinfulness of the people, ends on grace. This is actually what we'll see in all the prophets; they will have messages of destruction and calls to repent, but they will always end on grace. Specifically in Isaiah, the grace that he'll prophecy about in the light of Judah's on-coming enemies, is the promise that God will re-create the universe after the exile. We'll look at that in a moment.

7:10-17

The next section of Isaiah, chapters 7-12, is all about how this grace in 6:13 will be accomplished, how this remnant will be saved. It is the prophecy of the coming eschatological King in the line of David who will defeat the enemies of God once and for all.

Look at **7:13-17**. What is the "house of David?" It's the kingly line of David that Yahweh has promised will continue forever. Well, in the context here, two armies are coming up to Jerusalem to attack. Thus, the house of David is in trouble. Look at **verse 6**. Their plan is to remove the king in David's line, and replace him with another. So to assure the King of Judah that his line will not be broken, and that the "house of David" will indeed remain. Yahweh gives this sign: a young woman will have a child, and, as it says in verse 16, before the child is a few years old, the attacking armies will be overtaken by another, Assyria. So the house of David, will be safe again (for a while).

Prophecy

Now may be a good time to take a brief detour and discuss the way OT prophecy works. We'll start by asking this question "What is this passage in Isaiah 7 most famous for? In Matthew chapter 1, we are told that Jesus' birth by the virgin Mary fulfills this prophecy. Jesus is the final king in the line of David. Jesus is "God with us," which is what "Immanuel" means. So this passage we just looked at prophesies the birth of Jesus Christ some 700 plus years later.

But this is not what I just described. I just described a baby that would be born in Isaiah's day before Assyria comes from the north. In fact, that is exactly what happened. Look at **chapter 8** of Isaiah, **verses 3 and 4**. So what is the deal? If this prophecy was fulfilled in Isaiah's day, why does Matthew think it speaks of Jesus over 700 years later?

The answer is this: Old Testament prophecy usually has what we call “near and far” fulfillment. It’s as though when a prophecy is made, there is an immediate fulfillment. We could call this the first “horizon” of fulfillment. But then, years later, usually generations later there will be another “horizon” of fulfillment. This second horizon will involve a greater fulfillment than the first fulfillment. There may even often be a third or fourth horizon of fulfillment for some prophecies. Finally, the horizons all come to an end in Christ whose life, death, and resurrection comprise the greatest and climactic fulfillments.³

So an example of this is right here in Isaiah 7 and 8, and Matthew 1. Yes, a “young” virtuous woman had a child which served as a sign that Yahweh would protect the house of David. Well, an even greater fulfillment is that a virgin would have a child. That child will not be a symbol of the Lord’s salvation from an earthly army. Rather, He will be the very source of salvation from something far worse than an army. Matthew 1 tells us that the virgin-born Child will save his people from their sins, the tyrant of all tyrants.

This is another form of typology. Do you remember that from earlier in the course, where real historical persons, events, and institutions — in God’s sovereignty — prefigure Christ?

There is a lot more we could say about this section of Isaiah, chapters 7-12, but we need to move on. Let me just summarize it by saying that it’s a typological prophecy of salvation that Christ will bring to both Jew and Gentile. It’s first about Yahweh’s preservation of Judah, and then that serves as a type of what Yahweh will do through Christ in the future. I wish we had more time to explain, but time contains us. I’ll be glad to talk with anyone about it some time if you have questions.

24:1-5

Chapters 13-35 are a long discourse on “the Day of the Lord.” We’ll talk more about the Day of the Lord in more detail when we look at some of the other prophets. For now, it can simply be defined as a day when Yahweh will visit the earth and judge the people for their sins and for their oppression of God’s people, and at the same time will vindicate and save His people. When his judgment and salvation take place, Yahweh will also re-create the universe.

Turn to **chapter 24**, and look at **verse 1**. This is a return to Genesis 1:1, when the world was void and desolate. Look at **verse 3**. This is another reversal of the creation story. Then God filled the earth, now He’s emptying it out. Look at **verse 4**. In Genesis 2 God watered the land, now He’s drying it up. The whole scene is meant for us to see that creation is being undone. Why? Look at **verse 5**. The reason is sin. Sin is calling for Yahweh’s justice upon the earth. In the context, He is calling for the nations of Babylon to come and destroy the nations. They are the ones who will destroy everything, but only as they are instruments in Yahweh’s judgment. The imagery here to describe this judgment is that of creation running backwards. So we have here another near and far fulfillment. Babylon will invade all the nations and destroy their land. But in the distant future Yahweh Himself will bring an eternal and permanent judgment which will include the refurbishing of the whole universe.

³ At least one reason for this is to verify that a prophet is a legitimate prophet. If we was given a word from Yahweh about the distant future (like Isaiah is here), there needed to be a way to discern if it really was a word from Yahweh. Deuteronomy 18 says that the simple test for a prophet is to wait and see if his word comes to pass. Well, if he predicts the distant future his word is really unfalsifiable. So to validate that future prophecy, an immediate lesser fulfillment would occur.

Chapter 36-39

Chapters 36-39 are an historical interlude in the middle of the book. A lot could be said here, but let me just give you an overview and you can read it yourself on your own time. The plot is this: Assyria has just conquered the Northern Kingdom, and now Judah is next on their list. It's time for those promises in chapter 7 to come true. Well, long story short, Yahweh, delivers His people, and brings down Assyria who is puffed up with arrogance. Again, notice why Yahweh saves His people. Look at **37:35**. No matter what the seed of the serpent sends against the seed of the woman, Yahweh is insistent on preserving His plan of redemption, and seeing it through.⁴

Yet, just as Assyria conquered Judah's enemies and then turned on Judah, Babylon will do the same. Babylon is the nation that Yahweh will use to rid Judah of their Assyrian problems. But then Babylon will come to the gates of Jerusalem, and they won't get out this time. Look at **39:5-7**. The line of David is always narrowly escaping the schemes of the devil, but this time it will be for their own sins that they will go into captivity. This will come about over 100 years after Isaiah makes this prophecy. It's a scary prophecy. Look at verse 7 again. The heirs to the throne of Judah will become *eunuchs* in a far off land! Do you know what a eunuch is? Well, suffice it to say that eunuchs don't have children. It's a frightful prophecy. Now the rest of the book will be about how Yahweh will overcome even this deck stacked against Him.

40:1-2

It's here where that courtroom motif really comes out. Yahweh is calling his people to testify to the nations that He alone is God. However, they have failed. They have perjured themselves through their idolatry. Therefore, Yahweh will turn to his star witness, "The servant of the Lord." That Servant will also be the savior who will rescue His people from exile in Babylon, and bring them a great deliverance. No wonder this section begins like it does in **chapter 40**. These are the words of Yahweh's coming salvation.

44:28

Again, I wish we had the time to look at this section in detail. It's full of wonderful poetry about God's sovereignty, majesty, and salvation. If nothing else, just read chapters 40-44. You'll really get the feel of this courtroom motif, and you'll be struck with greatness of Yahweh. Real quick though, notice **44:28**. Cyrus is the man who will eventually sign the edict to send God's people back to Jerusalem nearly 200 years after this was penned. Yahweh actually names the very man before he's even born, let alone comes to power. It is with such detail that Yahweh controls the future.

49:1-7

But this section is not about Cyrus ultimately, nor the way he will serve Yahweh's purposes. Rather, just like so much else in Isaiah, Cyrus is a small shadow of a greater Servant of Yahweh, and the freedom he grants to God's people is just a foretaste of the greater freedom to come through Another. Turn to **49:5**. Here this Servant is said to only to bring the preserved ones of Israel back to the Lord, but also to reach out and call Gentiles to join the people of God. This Servant will bless all the nations of the earth like none ever before have.

⁴ In many ways, Isaiah 36:14 is the defining question of the whole book.

This great Servant of the LORD, who will save both Jews and Gentiles, is, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ.

52:13-53:12

But how will He do this? How will he save so many, and lead His people out of their exile from the Lord's presence? Turn to chapter **53**, and let's read verses **3-6**. Did you not that in verse 5? The problem with humanity is "transgressions, iniquities." It's our *sins* that have made a separation between God and us. Sin is our problem. Judah's removal from the land was just a small symbol of the real problem: our removal from the presence and fellowship with God, because of our sin.

So if a Savior is going to reconcile us to God, He will have to deal with our sin and make atonement for them. That is exactly what this prophecy is saying about the work of Christ. He was "pierced," He was "crushed" in order to bring His people back to God.

But the story doesn't end there. After this Servant's death, Yahweh also raised Him to life. Look at **verses 10-12**. After Christ pours His life out. He is then rewarded with prolonged days and victory. Thus, now our crucified Savior is still not dead. But He is risen and reigns with all authority in heaven and on earth.

61:1-3

The rest of the book is full of celebration of this salvation and imagery of the New Heavens and the New Earth. But before we collude we should look at one last passage. Look at **chapter 61**. We'll look at this a lot more in the other prophets. It'll be enough for now to simply point out that the Holy Spirit will be the Servant's Helper when He comes. The anointing of Jesus with the Holy Spirit, at His baptism, is a symbol that the new age has dawned and that Jesus will accomplish the salvation here predicted.

Conclusion

Well, as I said, Isaiah is full of a lot of important material. All together the book is an exultation of the majesty and the glory of God. That majesty and that glory are demonstrated in the course of history as Judah undergoes some difficult trials. That majesty and that glory are the most powerfully trumpeted in Yahweh's faithfulness to the house of David, and His ability to control the future and save His people.

Application

As with every book so far a lot of application can be made here. But I just want to say one this at the close:

We need a vision of God like Isaiah had. We need to catch a glimpse of Yahweh's holiness and glory. If we can see the Lord a little bit better for who He is, it will change the way we see everything else too. That, in turn, will change the way we live. We will be more personally, holy, we will be more humble, we will be more patient and forgiving with others, we will be more earnest in prayer, we will be more zealous in missions and evangelism, and so on.

What I'm saying is that all right living begins with right thinking about God. To that end, we need higher and loftier, truer and more beautiful thoughts about the Holy One of Israel. Isaiah can help us with this. Read Isaiah.