

Introduction to the Book of Isaiah: 25th February 2018

The book of Isaiah is an epic. Apart from the Psalms it is the longest book in the Old Testament and yet I doubt if most of us have ever read the whole thing. We may have dipped into the book from time to time, but there is so much more to discover than a few famous passages.

It's a bit like going to the USA. Ask a group of travellers where they have visited and I suspect that Las Vegas, New York and Florida would all be common destinations. But the 49 states of mainland America are far more varied and have far more treasures and delights to explore than the great tourist hotspots. So whilst you might have been to the Empire State building of Isaiah chapter 6 and the prophet's vision of God in his temple, or spent some time looking into the Grand Canyon of Isaiah 53 and the beautiful prose of the suffering servant, before and beyond and in between these passages there is so much more to discover. And over the next three years we are going to work our way through this glorious book and immerse ourselves in Isaiah's prophecies. We won't be doing it continuously, we will be looking at other books in between, but today is where our journey begins.

And we are going to begin with an introduction. Perhaps you'd like to consider it as a basic travel guide to the book of Isaiah, things you need to know to make sense of the book and things you need to be on the lookout for as we study Isaiah's words together.

Let's begin with two basic questions: who wrote it and when was it written?

According to Isaiah 1:1, Isaiah was the son of Amoz, and lived during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah kings of Judah. It seems that Isaiah he was killed by King Manasseh shortly into his reign which began somewhere between 687 and 697 BC, and tradition has it that he was sawn in half whilst alive, which is not the way any of us would want to go!

We don't know very much about Isaiah's life apart from those facts. However, given his access to the King it's likely that he was born into a well-connected family. And as you read chapter 8 it seems that Isaiah was married with children of his own.

But who Isaiah was is perhaps not as important as the situation into which he spoke. These were tumultuous years for God's people.

After the glorious years of the reigns of David and Solomon, the 12 tribes of Israel had divided into a northern kingdom often called Samaria, and a southern kingdom usually called Judah. These two separate kingdoms had different kings and did not play nicely together! There was a great deal of animosity and jealousy and by the time of Isaiah, this was compounded by the threats from the nations surrounding them. The land of Israel sits on a geographically important crossroads between Europe, Asia and Africa. To control this part of the world meant you controlled the trade routes and the lucrative taxes that went with it. What's more, unless you controlled this part of the world your empire could not grow. No wonder that both the northern and southern kingdom, and the other smaller nations around them felt so threatened.

It is during this time of political and national upheaval that Isaiah appears. During his lifetime the northern kingdom would be overrun by the Assyrian Empire and its people taken to captivity. Later Judah would be threatened as well and would only escape by the miraculous intervention of God.

But whilst Isaiah's life ended before Judah itself was finally captured and taken into exile, this time by the Babylonian army, his ministry has a far longer reach. Chapters 1 to 39 are words to God's people before the Babylonian exile, calling them to repent so that God might relent and be gracious to them. But in chapters 40 to 55, the focus of Isaiah's ministry changes, and it's here that we read God's message through

Isaiah to those people who were living in exile. Despite the situation, God had not given up on them and if they trusted God he promised to bring them back to the land. And Isaiah's reach goes even further, because in chapters 56 to 66 we read God's message through Isaiah to his people who were now living back in the land of Israel after the exile. And here the focus is twofold: it's both about how to live in the land God had given and also about the final destination for God's people. They were not to think they had arrived in the kingdom of God now they were back in Jewish territory. Their eyes were to be on the new creation.

So although Isaiah's life ended around 697 BC, the events into which he spoke go far beyond the return of the exiles some 160 years later. And of course, the power of his words goes far, far beyond that as well. The themes which Isaiah writes about may have their original meaning in ancient events long before Jesus, but they echo today still. These are God's words, and rightly understood they will encourage and challenge us just as much as they did their original recipients. As Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16, *"all Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servants of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* All Scripture includes this glorious book of Isaiah, and I hope and pray that we will all be blessed through our studies over the coming years.

As with all the Old Testament prophets Isaiah has a number of themes which occur time and time again throughout the book. He knits them together like themes in a symphony, weaving them across one another to emphasise different facets. And if we are going to understand his book we need to be aware what those themes are. And there are six major themes which I want to briefly highlight this morning in the rest of our time together.

The first theme is judgement.

Isaiah lived in a time of great political turmoil where Judah was under threat from far more powerful nations, but that wasn't the biggest problem. The biggest problem was that although they were God's people living in God's land, they were not living under God's law. When God gave his law before the people entered the promised land it came with great blessings of protection and plenty when the people obeyed, but with curses and dire consequences if God's people disobeyed him.

From the time of Joshua up until now God had been oh so patient with his people. Time and time again God had sent them judges, prophets and kings to bring them back to himself. In each cycle the people seemed to accept the message but then they returned to their old ways. And by the time of Isaiah God's patience was finally running out and so Isaiah was given a message of judgement. God would not tolerate sin for ever. He would not sit idly by and let those he had made, especially those who owned his name, reject his rule and corrupt his reputation.

And that's a warning for us too isn't it. When we see the wicked seemingly getting away with things, we can be tempted to think that it doesn't matter how we live. But God is a holy God and sin is serious and if we are his we need to live in the right way.

But as well as judgement there is hope.

Time and time again as Isaiah brought messages of God's condemnation on his rebellious people, he also offered them hope that all was not lost.

There was hope for the individual. When Isaiah predicted the fall of Jerusalem, his message to individuals was not to get caught up in God's judgement but to hand themselves over willingly to the Babylonians who would preserve their lives. For the individual there was a way out.

There was hope for the nation too. Before the exile Isaiah told them time and time again that there was still time to repent and that if they did, then God would restrain his hand of judgement. And despite the fact that they failed to heed that message, God offered them hope after the exile with promises that a remnant would be preserved and that the nation would return to the land. There was hope for the people of Israel.

And there was a global hope here too, because as Isaiah's vision widened we see that God's purposes are not just for the nation of Israel but for the world as a whole. Isaiah chapter 60 speaks of Zion, God's city, being a place where all who turn to God, from what ever nation, will ultimately find their true home.

And as Christians we know that hope don't we. We see in Jesus how God takes the punishment we deserve on himself so that we also might have hope both of this life and the next. My prayer is that we will understand more of the hope that is ours as we look at the hope Isaiah speaks of in this glorious book.

The third major theme is the sovereignty of God.

Living in a world which ridicules our faith it's often easy to let our vision of God shrink down to the size of a small local deity. But that is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is the God who spoke and brought creation into being and who sustains all things by his powerful word. He is Almighty, all-powerful, always present, unchanging, eternal, righteous and sovereign over the world he has made. He is not a great watchmaker who created a wonderful world and then left it behind to go its own merry way. Our God is God of the nations, directing their hearts, shaping their purposes for his greater purposes. Throughout the book of Isaiah, we will see God raising up nations and leaders to accomplish his will and bringing them down when they rebelled against him. This is our God! As we see the way that God directs history my hope and prayer is that our vision of God's might and power would be vastly increased. We have a great and mighty God and it is because of God's power and might that we can be certain that his promises to us will come true.

The fourth major theme reveals God's mercy and love, because so much of Isaiah is about Jesus.

God's great purpose for his people Israel was that they would be a light to the world, a sign to the other nations that Yahweh, the God of Israel, was the one true God. But Israel failed miserably in that regard. Despite having God's laws, they ended up just as corrupt, proud, violent and idolatrous as the nations around them.

But God's purposes for the world would not be deflected, and so through the Old Testament prophets, particularly Isaiah, we see God's plans to come and win a people for himself. Largely from chapter 40 onwards this messiah figure, referred to as the servant of the Lord, takes centre stage as the one who will bring hope and peace and redemption to God's people. As we read these chapters through together we will see an astonishing clarity in the way Isaiah describes the work, the words and the person of Jesus Christ. As strange as it may seem, this book written over 600 years before Jesus was born will help us see and understand Jesus better.

Isaiah 53, a beautifully poetic chapter written hundreds of years before crucifixion was even invented, will take us to the cross and in glorious detail describe all that Jesus went through for us. If you read Stuart's testimony on the back of the Mini-Mission flyer, you'll know the impact that passage had on his life. And I hope when we read these latter chapters of Isaiah together, we too will be caught up in wonder, love and praise to God for his wonderful work of salvation. The cross had been God's plan all along and we see that clearly in the book of Isaiah.

The fifth theme is the kingdom of God.

God's kingdom is the place where his people live perfectly under his righteous rule. The land of Israel never quite lived up to that description, either before or after the exile. In fact, after the exile there was a sense of emptiness and disappointment amongst those who returned. The oldest among them still remembered the glory of Solomon's temple, the thickness of the walls, the power of the army, the wealth of the population. After exile they were small band of people, back in the land but still under threat from the nations around them, and without the glory of the temple to remind them of the power and might of God. But Isaiah has words for them also.

And so in the latter part of the book particularly, although there are certainly hints elsewhere, Isaiah points them and us towards God's eternal kingdom. He offers a vision that goes with beyond this world so that we might have hope and joy in the present. He writes to whet our appetite for heaven and God's new creation, and I hope that as we get to grips with those passages that our hope might be increased as well.

Despite the challenges of life we have a pretty comfortable existence don't we. We have great houses to live in, plenty of food to eat, good health care, families around us, security and money to spend on fun and fun and holidays. But as good as this life is, even at its very best, it pales into insignificance compared to what God has prepared for those who love him. I hope Isaiah whets your appetite for heaven.

But the final theme is about how we live now.

Just like those who had been brought back from exile, so we, living this side of the cross, know that our salvation is complete. The work has been done. Jesus died and rose again so that if we trust in him then right now, we are, spiritually speaking, seated next to Jesus on God's right hand, with our eternal destiny secure.

But whilst the work has been done, our response to it continues. We are God's redeemed people and so we are to live like God's redeemed people. We belong to a holy God and are therefore called to live holy lives. We have been saved by the precious blood of Jesus and our response must be to take up our cross and follow him. And that doesn't just mean coming along to church, week by week reading our Bibles and praying daily, although it certainly includes that. It means a new way of life out in the world. It means we are called to embody the values of God. As God is generous so we are to be generous. As God is a God of justice who cares for the poor and the weak and the downtrodden, so we too must be people of generous justice who do what we can to lift people out of poverty in Jesus' name. How we live matters, because how we live demonstrates both to our own hearts, our family, friends and to a watching world the goodness and mercy of the God we serve.

As we read through the book of Isaiah together those six themes will come up time and time again: God's judgement but a judgement always with hope; the sovereignty of God over the nations and God's greatest intervention in history in Jesus; and the kingdom of God which is our final destination and how we live now in the light of all that God has done for us.

Those themes are just as relevant for us today as for those who lived in the time of Isaiah. May the Lord bless our studies and give us ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to us. Amen.