

## Isaiah – An Introduction

### “Multiple Pathways Through the Garden”

If you are the facilitator of this study group, you'll want to read the handout titled *“Facilitator Preparation Isaiah Course.”* It provides a number of helpful tips on facilitating a small group Bible study. You will also want to preview the two PPTs that introduce Isaiah. While there are a few slides in common, most are different. You are welcome to combine them, use them both, or just use one.

This short Bible study on the book of Isaiah can be experienced in the same manner you'd enjoy a well-kept botanical garden. While there is one direct walkway that opens up views of the entire garden, and can be walked in a relatively short period of time, there are often side paths that meander deep into an area with particular kinds of plants. For those with time, these side paths afford one incredible views close up of what might prove to be your favorite cultivar!

I've designed this course on Isaiah to be experienced in a short and direct way, with plenty of side paths available for those with time and curiosity. The main walkway includes this introduction, and one session on each of the three Isaiahs.

1. Introduction
2. 1<sup>st</sup> Isaiah, known as Isaiah of Jerusalem (Chapters 1-39)
3. 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah, known as Isaiah of Babylon (Chapters 40-55)
4. 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah (Chapters 56-66)

Some of the shorter side paths one might chose to experience include:

1. “Intro to Isaiah Study for Fall Ministry Retreat” – Optional introductory PPT
2. “A Tale of 4 Cities” – The Fall of Assyria and Rise of Babylon
3. Overview of Israel's History
4. “Worship Prophetic Style”
5. Isaiah 55 Choral Reading and PPTX titled “Isaiah 55 Through a Lutheran Lens”
6. 4 Lenses for reading the Bible from the Book of Faith Initiative
7. “Names in Isaiah” – available as a PDF or a Word Cloud
8. The original artwork by Janelle Thompson which provides a very different way to enter into conversation about the message of the three Isaiahs.

### Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we are embarking on a journey together through your prophet Isaiah. We pray that your Spirit would open our hearts and minds so that Isaiah's message might give us hope as we try to rebound in this new COVID world. Amen

### Why Isaiah and Why Now?

I'm glad you asked. Before sharing my reasons, it will be helpful to ask your group questions such as these:

- What parts of your pre-COVID congregational life do you wish you could still have?
- What gave you the most joy prior to COVID changing everything about how we live together as a congregation?
- How has the radical income disparity in our country impacted you? Your congregation?
- What is your reaction to the many recent social justice resolutions passed at our synod assemblies?
- When things seem to be falling apart, a logical question might be “Is God trustworthy?” Ever wonder about that?
- How do we rebound faithfully in this new COVID world we find ourselves in?

Here are some of the reasons I think Isaiah has a lot to offer to you and your congregation in this COVID world we live in.

- Isaiah is the most quoted OT book by early Christians as they tried to explain to the Greco Roman world that a crucified Galilean could be the Savior of the world.
- Jesus quotes 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah in Luke 4 to define his own public ministry! I guess if it is good enough for Jesus, maybe it might be good enough for us!
- Isaiah is the largest prophetic book in our OT.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Isaiah is one of four 8<sup>th</sup> century literary prophets. (Amos, Micah, Hosea and 1<sup>st</sup> Isaiah) They were the first ones whose sayings have been recorded in a book dedicated to each of them. Their constant refrain calling for justice in our personal lives and in our society sound eerily similar to the prophetic voices in our own time and place.
- Isaiah’s message proved to be highly adaptable over several centuries! The material included in its 66 chapters cover a time span from 742BCE – to the period following the exile and return (538BCE). The fact that 1<sup>st</sup> Isaiah’s message kept being updated over several centuries points to the importance then and now of his message. Isaiah’s trifold emphasis included:
  - The importance of justice in society and ethical lives – worship without justice is rejected by God
  - Realism of global politics – yes the 3 Isaiahs waded right into that world!
  - Complete trust in the saving power of God. God is faithful even if we aren’t.

These same three emphases fit our own time and place all too well. We are struggling with how to reframe hope. We are tempted to look back and wish things could just be what they used to be like. We wonder if we can trust God in a world that seems to have lost its way. How do we rebound in this COVID world? The 3 Isaiahs have something to offer you and your congregation if you are willing to dig into their message!

### **Brief introduction to the entire book of Isaiah**

- Show the Half Ads for the 4 methods of Biblical Study included as bonus material. It outlines in an easily understandable format the different tools we can use to open Scripture and join the conversation. This will be very useful as you engage the rest of this study.

- If your group isn't familiar with the basic outline of the history of Israel/Judah, pass out the handout "Overview of Israel's History."
- Show the PPT "Isaiah Introduction." (Optional PPT – "Intro to Isaiah Study for Fall Ministry Retreat")

### Questions for discussion

1. What did you notice the three Isaiahs have in common?
2. Were you surprised by the large time span and international scope of Isaiah? What implications might that have for your own life in America today?
3. Justice is one of the common themes of all three Isaiahs. What might Isaiah write to your congregation today about justice if his message was being updated a 4<sup>th</sup> time?
4. What questions do you have that we can think about for next time?

### Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we know that Isaiah challenges us to live lives that honor you by striving for justice in all that we do. We pray that our study of Isaiah will also give us the courage to put what we learn into practice in our personal lives and in this congregation. Amen

### Assignment for Session 2

We will look at selected passages from 1<sup>st</sup>. Isaiah in our second session. Nothing beats actually becoming familiar with the material, so as time permits, read Isaiah 1-39. However, our lives seldom are filled with free time, so if you are limited in time, read Isaiah 1-12.

Here are some passages to focus on:

- Isaiah 1:1-23 Isaiah attacks ritual devoid of justice for the oppressed, widows and orphans.
- Isaiah 2:1-4 Bookends with Isaiah 55:5. Swords into plowshares!
- Isaiah 6:1-13 Isaiah's call
- Isaiah 7:10-17 Young woman will bear a son and name him Immanuel.
- Isaiah 9:2-7 Unto us a child has been born = Hezekiah?
- Isaiah 10:1-4 Those with political power are accountable.
- Isaiah 11:1-9 "The peaceable kingdom" – painting by Janelle Thompson
- Isaiah 25:6-10a The Lord will swallow up death forever!
- Isaiah 26:19 "Your dead shall live." Very rare perspective in OT.
- Isaiah 31:4-9; 37:35 God will protect Mount Zion from the Assyrians. Led to false belief that Jerusalem could never be captured.