

Introductory Thoughts adapted from introduction No Empty Word: Relentless Pursuit, a study of Hosea by Paula Miles

Press on Through Prophetic Literature

This study may be difficult for you as you seek to understand prophetic books. Isaiah is the largest book of prophecy, covering an extended timescale. The prophet addresses the current context of Israel, as well as things in the far future for God's people. The words can feel confusing and sometimes weighty. I encourage you to persevere when reading and understanding get tough. I found this study to be very challenging, but I was also reminded of the usefulness and effectiveness of God's Word in my life. All of His Word is breathed out by Him and brings life to us. And so, I want us to expect those things to happen. Ask the Lord by His Spirit and through His Word to do the miraculous work of transformation in your life.

The historical backdrop of this major prophet is found in 2 Kings 15-20 and 2 Chronicles 26-29. Take some time to read these sections of Scripture to learn more about what was happening in Israel at this time. When we think about the history of God's people, remember the story of redemption is one big story that God is writing. This story extends from eternity past to eternity future. As God writes His story, He reveals increasingly more about Himself. Isaiah is just one piece of the narrative telling us what is going on as God is redeeming the people He has chosen before the foundation of the world. If we are in Christ, at some point in time and space, we have also been included in this story. It's no longer being written down, but a continuation of the same story, and it will extend into eternity future.

Covenant-keeping God

As we study God's Word, we always want to keep the big picture in mind. From the very beginning of time, God created the world and began calling a people to Himself. Throughout history, He entered into a covenant relationship with His people. Let's talk a little bit about what that means.

A covenant is a binding agreement with specific terms usually made between a sovereign and those under him. When a covenant is administered, it has a condition and a promise. In God's covenant with His people, the condition is perfect obedience, and the promise is living in the presence of God. The Bible tells us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), that there is no one righteous (Romans 3:10). No one can meet the condition of the covenant. We are all covenant breakers. That's really bad news. *But God.* . . God is a covenant keeper who provides a way for us to live in His presence. He sent Jesus - the only One who perfectly obeys. Not only does He meet the condition of the covenant, but he pays the penalty for our covenant-breaking. He died on the cross in our place. He is our Substitute and Sacrifice. Because of Him, we are covenantally bound to the Father. And that is really good news.

One of the people God made a covenant with is Abraham. Abraham had a son named Isaac. Isaac had twin sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob had twelve sons from whom God grew the nation of Israel. This is a simplistic picture, but in the Bible, we read about the people who are born to these twelve sons, known as the twelve tribes of Israel, being raised up as a nation while they are slaves in Egypt. The book of Exodus tells the story of how God's people were delivered from slavery, which is a picture of our redemption from our slavery to sin. God is leading His people to the land He promised to Abraham. We read about their struggles and rebellion as they wander in the wilderness on the way to this land. In these stories of wrestling and revolt, we see our own hearts and lives, but we also see a God who relentlessly pursues His people. God's people rejected Him as king and cried out for an earthly king because they wanted to be like the other nations. God gave them what they asked for. Saul was the first

king, followed by David, and then David's son, Solomon. During Solomon's reign there began to be dissension and rebellion. Solomon had his own sin issues that brought idol worship into the nation of Israel. After Solomon's death, his son, Rehoboam, was to be on the throne, but one of Solomon's servants, Jeroboam, incited rebellion against the heir to the throne.

Again, this is somewhat of an oversimplified description, but at this point, the nation of Israel divided into the northern and southern kingdoms. Jeroboam was over the northern kingdom and Rehoboam, the southern. There was a lot of unrest, dissension, and war. Ten of the twelve tribes made up the northern kingdom, and two of the tribes stayed in the south under the rule of Solomon's son. Neither of these kings followed the ways of the Lord. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin made up the southern kingdom called Judah. We know from Scripture that Jesus came from the tribe of Judah, so God was protecting and preserving them. Eventually, the northern kingdom, known as Israel, was taken captive by Assyria in 724 B.C, and later the southern kingdom was taken captive by Babylon around 587 B.C. This was God's loving discipline for His people in order to bring them to repentance. In God's plan of redemption, He brought the southern kingdom back to the promised land, rebuilt the Temple, and remnants of those in the northern kingdom who belonged to Him were brought back as well. Isaiah lived in the southern kingdom and prophesied before the fall of Judah to Babylon.

Isaiah's writing and ministry are dated from 740 B.C. to the 680s. This is a hundred years or so before Judah's actual captivity. Isaiah chapters 1-39 cover the context of Isaiah's life and ministry with God's people, 40-55 the exile to Babylon, and 56-66 after the exiles have returned to their promised land.

"Isaiah stands at a turning point in the history of God's people when after centuries of breaking the covenant relationship, God's judgment will fall upon them and, indeed, the whole world. Yet Isaiah proclaims the "good news" that God will bring His kingdom, renew all creation, and restore His people to Himself. This redemption will be accomplished through a servant who will suffer in the place of sinners that they might be forgiven and restored to God. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has begun to fulfill in a decisive way the promises of Isaiah. We await the day when Jesus returns to gather the redeemed to worship God in a new creation forever." (Drew Hunter, Isaiah: a 12-week Study, p.7-8)

"At the center of Isaiah's story is Israel, redeemed but wayward, stubborn but loved, and it is Yahweh's relationship with them, told over and over again by pointing back to the exodus and the Davidic covenant, that reveals His mercy and compassion. Judge them he must, but give them up He will not – and it is here that the theme of Yahweh's saving a "remnant" belongs to the story. The story of this redemption thus climaxes with a servant Messiah who will redeem both Israel and the nations by dying for them – a story that finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ and the cross." (Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible Book by Book, p.177)

God's Word is living and enduring, and so these prophecies are relevant for God's people today. These words are useful in our lives for teaching, correcting, rebuking, and training in righteousness. As we see His heart and character revealed in this book, it is my prayer that we will not just know about Him but that we will really know Him, that we will then fall deeper in love with Him and will logically respond to His mercy by offering our very lives to him – every part of who we are- to Him.

Key Things to Remember:

- The Bible was originally written to a specific audience at a particular time in redemptive history. It was to them, but it is for us. Both of those things should be considered as we read Isaiah. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16)

"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." (Romans 15:4)

- The Bible is one big story. Our lives are a continuation of God's grand story, but they are not being recorded in the pages of Scripture. His big story makes sense of our stories. God's people in Isaiah lived during a particular time in redemptive history, before Jesus came. They looked forward in hope. We, too, live during a specific time in redemptive history, after Jesus' first coming. We look back but also forward, knowing for certain He will come again. We have been given the end of the story.

Note: Jesus' first and second coming will be referenced throughout the book of Isaiah. They are peaks in the story of redemption, climaxes in God's grand story.

- God is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Psalm 102:25-27, Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8, James 1:17). He does not change. The God we read about in Isaiah is the same God who has rescued us and whom we worship and serve.
- The Old Testament (old covenant) and New Testament (new covenant) are the same story, God's big story referenced earlier. "New" in this context does not mean different. It means better. We are connected to God's people in Isaiah.
- Israel is a type or shadow of the church. There is one covenant of grace providing a way for both Jews and Gentiles to become part of the one people of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Old Testament believers look forward; we look back.
- Christians live in a tension of experiencing the benefits of God's kingdom in the present while anticipating its full manifestation in the future. This is often referred to as the "now and not yet." Through faith and the Holy Spirit, we enjoy the blessings of God's reign now, awaiting Christ's certain return when His kingdom will be fully manifested and we will live and reign with Him.

"Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of Him."

John 12:41

