



Lesson 1

THE LORD HAS SPOKEN

What a huge and happy prospect: to read this monumental book from beginning to end. This introductory lesson will help prepare us to read Isaiah with its contexts clear: the prophetic context, the historical context, and the literary context.

DAY ONE—THE PROPHETIC CONTEXT

1. The opening verse might serve as a heading for the whole book, as the prophet introduces this “vision”—a word that denotes a special revelation from God. First, read Isaiah 1:1–2b (i.e., through the second line of v. 2), and write down several specific observations about how the prophet Isaiah presents his book. (See also Isa. 2:1, introducing an initial section of the book.)

b. 1 Samuel 3:19–21

c. 1 Kings 21:17–19

4. Moving through the Old Testament in English, we find the *writing prophets* beginning with Isaiah and ending with Malachi. These prophets are classified as “major” and “minor” simply depending on the length of their writings. (Isaiah is major!) They spoke into a dark part of the story. God had promised to bless the descendants of Abraham and all the nations of the earth through them. Yet, after God redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, gave them the law to show them how to live, and settled them in the land he had promised them—even after all that, they turned away from God. As they became great, they disobeyed God and suffered disastrous consequences. The prophetic books generally address at least four central themes: the people’s *disobedience*, the *resulting punishment* and exile from their land, a *call to heed*

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God's Word, and God's gracious *promises to restore them*. Look briefly through Isaiah 1:18–26. What phrases evidence these four themes?

5. The writing prophets pointed not only to the relatively near future of exile and restoration but also to the distant future: to the heavenly prophet who would come and perfectly fulfill all God's promises to his people. Comment briefly, as you read the following verses, on how the New Testament brings the climax toward which all the Old Testament prophets were pointing?
 - a. Mark 1:1–9

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600s–500s B.C.). What do you notice? What strikes you, in relation to the world today?

Although his message applied to all God's people (and all nations of the world), Isaiah spoke mainly to Judah, the southern kingdom composed of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, with Jerusalem as the capital city. Early in the growth of God's people under kings in this promised land, the northern ten tribes separated themselves and made Samaria their capital. (The northern kingdom was called Israel, although "Israel" could still refer to all God's people.) The southern kingdom of Judah, which stayed faithful to the kingly line of David, in general disobeyed God less thoroughly and consistently. Judah's captivity and exile at the hands of the Babylonians (which Isaiah foresaw) came much later than Israel's captivity and exile at the hands of the Assyrians. It was the exiles from Judah who were allowed finally to return to their land after the exile—as Isaiah also foresaw.

3. In Isaiah 1:1, find the four kings of Judah under whose reigns Isaiah lived. As you look through the following background chapters from the historical books,

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what general observations would you make about each king?

a. Uzziah (2 Chron. 26)

b. Jotham (2 Chron. 27)

c. Ahaz (2 Chron. 28)

d. Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29)

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DAY THREE—LITERARY CONTEXT, PART I:
THE BOOK'S SHAPE AND THEME

1. It is crucial at the start to grasp the shape of the entire book, so that each section will find its place within the whole. Read Isaiah 1:21–23, and then 66:10–14. What transformation do you see in this book, which has sometimes been called a “tale of two cities”?

Judah's center was Jerusalem, and the center of Jerusalem was the temple on Mount Zion. This was the place where God showed his presence with his people and where they came to worship and offer sacrifices. Isaiah uses Jerusalem, as we shall see, to mean not only the physical city but also the spiritual reality to which that city points: the New Jerusalem, the people of God gathered in his presence forever. The overarching shape of Isaiah's prophecy might be expressed as the *transformation of Jerusalem from disobedience and destruction to eternal life and communion with God*.

2. But there's more. This transformation will be accomplished through a particular figure, one who in Isaiah's

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Babylonians. These chapters also foresee the suffering of the Servant who will come to redeem this suffering people. Read and comment briefly on Isaiah 42:1–4.

4. Finally, in chapters 56–66, which foresee the return from exile (and a restoration that stretches far into the future), Isaiah envisions a *conqueror* who will restore God's people. Read and comment briefly on Isaiah 61:1–7.

Many modern commentators have noted these sections and claimed the existence of two or three different writers of this book. After all, how could one man living when Isaiah lived foresee all the events prophesied in these chapters? The key word is “prophesied,” which implies a message given by God, who knows all of history before it happens. The words God gave Isaiah form a unified book, one that

reveals a God who not only knows but indeed sovereignly determines all of human history—for his glorious saving purposes in the one who is the King, the Servant of the Lord, and the eternal Conqueror. *Through this one the Lord will save his people forever in that New Jerusalem.* This is the overarching and consistent theme of Isaiah’s prophecy.

For a summary review of Isaiah’s shape, please consult the outline on pages 355–56.

DAY FOUR—LITERARY CONTEXT, PART II: THE BOOK’S STYLE

Isaiah is celebrated as a literary masterpiece not only because of its beautifully unified shape but also because of its masterful use of language. Critics have discerned a difference in style between the first section (chapters 1–39) and the others: the first section communicates in more of a preaching style, with perhaps less-exalted poetry than the rest of the book. It does not necessarily follow, however, that different writers were at work. Isaiah, at different times in his life, had varying and probably increasing amounts of time, experience, and understanding from which to draw in his inspired writing. His growing poetic depth only enhances the book’s consistent thematic focus.

1. Isaiah combines varying writing styles throughout. What differences do you note in style and subject between chapters 35 and 36?

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The whole book of Isaiah combines *poetry* (as in chapter 35) with *prose* (as in chapter 36). Some of the prose tells a story in narrative form, as in chapter 36, and some is closer to poetry (see chapter 4).

We should notice the poetry! Hebrew poetry is characterized by units of parallel meaning, which we see in lines balanced against each other—usually with the second (and sometimes a third) line indented. Three kinds of *parallelism* are generally acknowledged:

- Sometimes the second line continues the meaning of the first (*synthetic* parallelism).
 - Sometimes the second line contrasts with the meaning of the first (*antithetic* parallelism).
 - Sometimes the second line repeats in some way the meaning of the first (*synonymous* parallelism).
2. In Isaiah 1:3, for example, we find two sets of synonymous parallelism. How does each second line deepen while basically repeating the thought of the first?

3. Besides parallelism, another central characteristic of Hebrew poetry—and most poetry—is the use of imagery (picture language). Taking time to notice and muse on the imagery is a crucial part of understanding especially the poetic parts of God's Word. Consider the pictures in verse 3 and verse 18 of chapter 1, for example. What

DAY FIVE—JUMPING IN

1. This lesson has aimed to provide context for the book of Isaiah. The book's preface in chapters 1–5 provides its own introductory context, setting the tone and themes for all that follows. On this final day, simply read through this preface, not stopping to figure everything out as you go. We will study it more in depth. But in this read-through, be on the lookout for themes that emerge repeatedly—themes this lesson has introduced and themes that will shape the entire book. Look for the initial unfolding of the main theme: that *God will save his people forever in the New Jerusalem, through his promised King/Servant/Conqueror*. Be praying, as you read, for eyes to see the Lord God who reveals himself through the words of this book.
2. In light of what we have seen so far, what would you pray as you begin to study this book? Write a prayer, asking God for his own guidance as you study, and thanking him for the gift of his revelation to us in Isaiah.

Notes for Lesson 1

