



**30 DAYS WITH**

The book of

**ISAIAH**

A toolkit for you and your church

# Introduction to Bible Month

This booklet, *30 days with Isaiah*, is part of a series to help you and your church focus on one book of the Bible in any one month. Its aim is to develop biblical literacy across the breadth and depth of your community: everyone can have their own copy and dig deep into the book of Isaiah, at the same time!

Bible passages form the basis of a series of four weeks of Bible notes written by Helen Paynter to guide your sermons. There are four sets of small group resources by Abi Jarvis that invite every home group to join in; and the four sets of all age resources, by Gail Adcock and wider team, include imaginative activities. The two reflections by Clare Williams and John Goldingay provide different ways into the text. The timeline and further resources by Michael Wadsworth will be exciting for those who wish to explore further into context and commentary.

Ministers, worship leaders and preachers of all denominations find the Bible Month material invaluable in deepening understanding of scripture, building community cohesion, and in outreach to share the word of God. Whether joining online or in person, everyone who is part of your main church service will be able to relate to the content during a Bible Month four-week programme.

The booklet is the primary resource for equipping people to join Bible Month and is often a catalyst for personal thinking and prayer. Other resources include author videos with additional insights; training events online and in person; a bespoke YouTube channel; and a dedicated Facebook group with weekly input. You can order the booklets and follow video links at [preachweb.org/biblemonth](http://preachweb.org/biblemonth), you can find links to other resources at [methodist.org.uk/biblemonth](http://methodist.org.uk/biblemonth).

Bible Month resources are produced as a partnership between The Methodist Church ([methodist.org.uk](http://methodist.org.uk)) and LWPT (Leaders of Worship and Preachers Trust [lwpt.org.uk](http://lwpt.org.uk)).

## Contributors

### Helen Paynter

Rev Dr Helen Paynter is Biblical Studies Tutor at Bristol Baptist College, and Director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence there. [csbvbristol.org.uk](https://twitter.com/CSBibleViolence) Twitter [@CSBibleViolence](https://twitter.com/CSBibleViolence)

### Michael Wadsworth

Michael Wadsworth is Regional Learning and Development Officer in the Connexional Team in The Methodist Church. He has a passion for teaching, biblical studies and theological reflection and loves to help people to read the Bible with greater expectancy.

### Abi Jarvis

Abi Jarvis is Discipleship and Faith Formation Officer in The Methodist Church's Evangelism and Growth Team. Abi supports churches and communities to thrive through a culture of discipleship and disciple-making, by encouraging a holistic approach to Christian life.

### **Gail Adcock**

Gail Adcock works with the Children, Youth and Family Team of The Methodist Church. She is author of *The Essential Guide to Family Ministry* (BRF, 2020). Gail pulled together the all age material with a team of layworkers across The Methodist Church.

### **Clare Williams**

Clare Williams is the founder of Get Real, a Christian apologetics organisation which addresses questions about Christianity, particularly from the black community. She enjoys engaging with questions of culture, truth, identity and the gospel. [realquestions.co.uk](http://realquestions.co.uk) [facebook.com/realquestions.co.uk](https://www.facebook.com/realquestions.co.uk)  
Insta: [getreal321](https://www.instagram.com/getreal321)

### **John Goldingay**

Rev Dr John Goldingay was Principal of St John's College, Nottingham, then Professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. He and his wife Kathleen now live in Oxford and he teaches online for Fuller. His webpage is [johngoldingay.com](http://johngoldingay.com).

## **Isaiah small group sessions**

The purpose of the small group sessions is to give people an opportunity to discuss the teaching they have received, and to move from teaching to action – how will what you've read / heard about make a difference in your life? How will you encourage one another in your discipleship? If you'd like some guidance on how to run a small group, take a look at the Methodist Church's guide to developing small groups: [methodist.org.uk/smallgroups](http://methodist.org.uk/smallgroups)

If you are leading a group, in advance of each meeting, review the suggested discussion questions and prioritise those you think would be most useful for your group. If you know that your group are reflective learners, you may want to suggest that people respond to some of the questions through writing, drawing, doodle, or quiet reflection, rather than (or in addition to) open discussion. You may wish to circulate the sermon notes for the week before you meet, in case anyone hasn't heard the sermon.

## **Introduction to the book of Isaiah**

### **Helen Paynter**

'May you live in interesting times.' It is said that the Chinese have a curse to this effect. For while we might like to read an interesting book or watch an interesting documentary, an interesting time is not generally very pleasant to live through. The book of Isaiah is set in an interesting time. It was a time of great political shifts, of international instability, of social tensions, and – in the end – catastrophic upheaval.

The book spans around two hundred years of history, more than the lifespan of any one person. Did Isaiah of Jerusalem, with whom the book opens, foresee future events in great detail right down to the name of the ruler of a future empire (Cyrus of Persia, Isaiah 45)? Or do we have here the compiled writings of two, or even three prophets, who lived in successive periods of Israel and Judah's history?

Much ink has been spilt on this question, and sadly, believing in just one Isaiah, who had the gift of prophetic foresight, has become a test of orthodoxy for some. For others, like me, the fact that God *could have* given Isaiah of Jerusalem the foresight is beyond doubt, but doesn't necessarily mean that he *did*.

Either way, it doesn't make a great deal of difference to our understanding of the book, whose message is not dependent on God giving Isaiah supernatural foresight. Rather, the prophecies that it contains provide pungent commentary on several periods of Judah's history. What was God doing during these times of great turmoil? Why was he allowing them to happen? And what – if anything – could his people expect from him, as they looked into the years ahead?

But we haven't yet set the book properly in its historical context. Let me attempt a rough sketch of the international scene. Israel and Judah were two tiny nations, situated at an important strategic location, linking Africa with Central Asia and the Far East. Judah sat to the south of her larger sister, and rejoiced in having Davidic kings on the throne, and Jerusalem with its temple within her territory. Israel, on the other hand, was often more prosperous, but was governed by a succession of royal dynasties, each of which was overthrown by force.

Around these two little nations, and some other relatively small nation states such as Aram (or Syria, depending on your Bible translation), some great superpowers were flexing their muscles. To the south-west was Egypt, not quite the power that she once had been, but still a force to be reckoned with. To the north-east, at the commencement of the book, is the superpower of Assyria, cruel, strong and greedy. During the course of the time period that the book covers, Assyria will give way to Babylon, and then Babylon in turn to Persia. Each one presented its own challenges and threat to God's people.

Close to the beginning of the book we read of the prophet's commissioning. This took place, we are told, in 740 BCE, 'the year that king Uzziah died'. This is significant. Uzziah had governed Judah for over half a century, and in his time the nation had been stable, prosperous, and had enjoyed military success. But five years before his death, the ambitious young Tiglath-Pileser III had come to the throne of Assyria, possibly by coup. He began an aggressive programme of consolidation and extension of his power base, and by the death of Uzziah, the Assyrians had taken the well-fortified Syrian city of Arpad, to the north of Israel. So the death of the old king of Judah could not have come at a worse time. There was threat beyond Judah's borders and now there was instability at home. Things were starting to look very scary.

And so it proved to be. Tiglath-Pileser and his successors (Shalmaneser, Sargon and Sennacherib) were brutal expansionists who completed the conquest of Syria in 732, and then – *catastrophe!* – of Israel in 722. At this point the border of the Assyrian empire sat just 8 miles from Jerusalem, and Judah was paying tribute to the superpower to try to appease her.

But Jerusalem never did fall to Assyria, despite further horrific incursions during the reign of Hezekiah. It was not until the Assyrians had been swallowed up by the hungry Babylonian empire that an army was able to defeat Jerusalem. More than 100 years after Israel had been defeated and dispersed by Assyria, Judah fell to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. In 605 the city was conquered, and its leading citizens deported. But the puppet king put in place by the Babylonians did not toe the line, and following a lengthy siege, the Babylonian army descended in 597 in overwhelming force, demolished the city and deported most of its surviving inhabitants. Most devastatingly of all, they sacked the Temple, tore it down, and set fire to it.

Where was God while all this was going on? Well, this is what we learn from Isaiah. Into the tumultuous situation leading up to the Babylonian exile, he brings words of rebuke and warning. And to the dispirited and broken people after the exile, he offers words of comfort and hope. Hope for restoration in their near future, and glimpses of a greater hope still.

Spare a thought for the prophet as you read. He was probably a wealthy man when he was called, and his obedience to his calling would have been costly in many ways. Prophets are seldom popular, and Isaiah probably paid for it with his life – legend has it that he was sawn in half under the reign of Manasseh.

But for Isaiah, disobedience was not an option. Transported into the throne room of heaven (Isaiah 6), confronted with his own sinfulness and that of his people, his response to the divine question ‘Who will go for us?’ feels like an involuntary reflex. ‘Here am I, send me’.

And God did. He sent him to speak tough love to God’s disobedient people. He sent him to stretch their minds with the broadness of God’s embrace, even for their enemies. He sent him to whisper to a kingdom that had lost its monarchy of the king that was still to come. And he sent him to hint of the inconceivable – a kingdom that would reign without use or fear of violence.

And these are the themes that we will be exploring together. May God use his word to speak to us in our own ‘interesting times’.

# WEEK 1: Isaiah – Tough Love

## Helen Paynter

Lovers of police procedurals will be familiar with the idea of ‘good cop, bad cop’. A suspect who is being interrogated is first interviewed by someone aggressive, threatening and insistent. Then when the suspect is thoroughly worked up and rather distressed, in walks the ‘good cop’, apologising for the previous unpleasantness. This, of course, is part of the ‘softening up’ process that gets the criminal to ‘cough’.

It’s tempting sometimes to imagine that Isaiah and the other prophets are rather like the good cop and bad cop rolled into one. Sometimes they seem to be full of judgement and threat. At other times they are gentle and tender. Is this all part of a process to get the people of God to comply?

Well, no. Although getting the compliance of the people is the object, the prophet isn’t playing psychological games with his listeners. What he’s doing is presenting two aspects of God’s own character; two aspects that are sometimes viewed as being in tension with one another, even contradictory. But rather, as I hope to persuade you, these two aspects are entirely congruent. We know that God is Love. But a God of love also needs to be angry sometimes. Let’s track some of these themes through the book of Isaiah.

One of the first highlights of the book is the beginning of Isaiah 5, often referred to as the Song of the Vineyard. Isaiah describes the nation of Judah as being like a vineyard, which God, the good gardener, had planted and nurtured. Then he looked for fruit from the vines. But instead of the crop he had every reason to expect, all that that pampered vine could yield were simply small, sour, wild grapes. Now listen to the yearning of God for his people, as Isaiah speaks in the first person with God’s voice.

*Judge between me and my vineyard.*

*What more was there to do for my vineyard,*

*that I have not done in it?*

*When I looked for it to yield grapes,*

*why did it yield wild grapes?*

### Preaching Point

Can we identify any good fruit and any wild grapes growing in this church?

Many readers will have noticed resonances with Jesus’ story of the Tenants in the Vineyard (Mark 12:1-9). This is, of course, not accidental. Jesus is deliberately choosing a very familiar part of scripture to criticise the Jewish leaders. And they knew it. ‘They perceived that he had told the parable against them’ (v.12). There are also echoes of this parable in Jesus’ enacted parable of the cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:12-14; 20-21), and the ‘I am the Vine’ part of Jesus’ farewell discourse in John (15:1-17).

But, turning back to Isaiah, the prophet does not end this section with wistfulness. Rather, he sets out God’s intention to remove the hedge and break down the wall and turn his vineyard into a wasteland (vv.5-6). What is going on here? Has God just lost his temper with Judah?

Not at all. Isaiah is writing on the back of Deuteronomy 28. In this passage, the blessings and curses of the covenant which God made with his people are spelled out for them. If they keep the covenant God will bless them in many ways. But if they persistently fail to keep the covenant then, following a series of warnings such as crop failure and fall in fertility rate, ultimately the people will lose the land that God has given to them. Living in the promised land was a conditional benefit of the covenant; it could be taken away from them.

But at the time that Isaiah is writing, it is not yet too late. The people are being disobedient – they are already in breach of the covenant – but there is still the possibility of repentance. It's worth noticing this element of the prophetic writings; many of the warnings and threats which the prophets offer are conditional ones. They show the future as it will play out if the people do not repent. A good example of a prophetic warning which is averted can be found in the book of Jonah, where the people of Nineveh repent in sackcloth and ashes, and the city is saved.

### **Preaching Point**

In what ways is God shown to be for God's people in the book of Isaiah?

Isaiah's words, then, are more of a warning than a condemnation, and he, like the other prophets, understood that the responsibility to warn was a grave one. Ezekiel summarises it well, using the metaphor of a watcher on the city wall.

*If the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand. (Ezekiel 33:6)*

Isaiah's criticism is aimed at a number of inter-related offenses. Judah is failing to trust God, but instead is putting trust in the nations around (e.g. 30:1-4). Similarly, they are putting their trust in the gods of the other nations. Read Isaiah's satirical rebuke in Isaiah 44:9-20, and the beautiful contrast he draws in chapter 46 between the idols that need to be carried (vv.1-2) and the living God who carries his people (vv.3-4). A third offence, which Isaiah speaks of a lot, is that of injustice. Read Isaiah 5:8-23 for a catalogue of social injustices that includes the expansion of the land of the wealthy (v.8) and the perversion of justice through bribery (v.23). Have a look at Isaiah's stinging criticism of outwardly observant worship that is unacceptable to God because it is offered in a context of violence and oppression (58:1-12).

Perhaps it is this issue of structural and physical violence which helps us to understand God's anger. I think we want a God who loves enough to rage at such things. A placid, ever-smiling god who just blandly overlooks evil would not be worth worshipping.

### **Preaching Point**

In what ways is God shown to be for God's people in the book of Isaiah?

But of course, we want a God who loves enough to forgive; a God who keeps his side of the covenant even when his people fail to keep theirs. And, tough as God's love is, it is tender, too. Read Isaiah 41:1-11 or 43:1-7 if you are in any doubt.

# WEEK 2: Isaiah – Light to the World

## Helen Paynter

As we begin to consider the theme for this week, we will start with Isaiah 19:16-25; a passage which, I think, represents Isaiah's best-kept secret. These few verses are not widely known, but they are quite staggering.

The chapter concerns Egypt, and begins in a fairly typical way, an oracle of judgment against the nation which had enslaved Israel. But suddenly, there is a change of tone. Read verse 18, which unexpectedly predicts five cities in Egypt giving allegiance to Yahweh. But Egypt had set itself *against* God and his people. How could Isaiah see a vision of an altar to the Lord at the heart of that nation (v.19)? Read on. Next Isaiah foresees a saviour for Egypt (v.20). But Israel had needed a saviour *from* Egypt!

Then things take an even more surprising turn. Because while Egypt was the great nation which had *historically* opposed God and oppressed his people, Assyria was the *current* threat – a great imperial nation, ruthlessly conquering, and controlling its vanquished people with a regime of terror. But in verse 23, Isaiah foresees a great highway between Egypt and Assyria; worship of the Lord in both great nations – oh, and Israel will be a place of worship, too (vv.24-25)! For just a moment, Israel is placed at the periphery, as God is shown to be at work in the pagan nations. Yes, even in Egypt and Assyria.

### Preaching Point

In what ways might this passage have been offensive for Isaiah's audience? What might an equivalence of Egypt and Assyria be in your context?

The theme shouldn't surprise us enormously, although its application to Israel's arch-enemies is an unexpected stretch. Almost at the beginning of the book, we have an extraordinary vision of the mountain of the house of the Lord (the Jerusalem temple) being exalted above all the other mountains, and the nations of the world thronging there to receive teaching and justice from God (2:1-5). This forms part of the theology of *centripetal* mission (in-drawing, rather than out-sending) which is found in the Old Testament. The idea that Isaiah is representing – picked up by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:14-16) – is that the radiant presence of God should be so visible within the covenant community that people from outside are attracted to it. This is a challenge to us, the church, I think.

### Preaching Point

How visible is your church community to people from the outside? In what ways do you radiate God's presence?

Isaiah's vision speaks of God's love for those outside Israel, and his determination to invite them, draw them in, and include them in the blessing. Isaiah understands this better than perhaps any other prophet.

He revisits the theme again in chapter 56, where he focuses on two types of people who were legally excluded from the temple: foreigners and eunuchs. Both of these will find their place and their role in the house of the Lord:

*To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant,  
I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name. (vv4-5)  
And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,  
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants...  
these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer (vv.6-7).*

We may like to make connections here with the story in Acts 8:26-40. As an Ethiopian eunuch, the man was in a category doubly excluded by law. Yet somehow he had found his way into the Jewish faith (Ethiopian connections with Judaism may date back to the Queen of Sheba) and on encountering Philip, found himself worshipping the Jewish Messiah. 'What prevents me from being baptized?' (v.36) he asked. What, indeed? Nothing, as Isaiah had foreseen.

The importance of this passage is further underscored by Jesus's use of it when he cleansed the (Gentile court) of the temple. 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples' (Isaiah 56:7; Matthew 21:13). Among the many things that offended him about the commerce he witnessed in the temple courts, one was that the Gentiles were being impeded in their worship.

Isaiah's vision of all people being drawn into the embrace of the family of God is one that inspired the apostle Paul. Consider Ephesians 2, where he marvels in the mystery of the church:

*Remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh... were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (vv.11-13).*

For myself, and for most readers of these notes, we need to remember that we are the Gentile guests at the heavenly party. It's easy for us to position ourselves at the heart of the family of God, and to forget that we are only 'in' by the mercy of God. Paul uses the horticultural metaphor of grafting:

*But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. (Romans 11:17-18)*

### **Preaching Point**

What things might we want God to get angry about?

But there is another cluster of passages in Isaiah which relate to the Gentiles coming to worship, and these use the image of light. Isaiah 60 contains elements which may well strike a chord:

*Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...  
And nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your rising...  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord. (Isaiah 60:1-6)*

And in the glorious chapter 49, these words:

*The Lord says:*

*“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;  
I will make you as a light for the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”*

To whom are these words addressed? To the faithful servant of the Lord. More about him next week.

# WEEK 3: Isaiah – Faithful Servant

## Helen Paynter

Of all the prophets, Isaiah is probably the one who speaks most about the Anointed One (Messiah) that God would send. But he does it in a variety of ways and we need to be alert to the devices he uses. In Isaiah 7, for instance, the prophet has a conversation with Ahaz, king of Judah. Ahaz's lack of faith in God is leading him to seek military assistance from Assyria – a dance with the devil, if ever there was one! In response, Isaiah offers him the sign of a young woman who would name her child 'God-with-us' (Emmanuel). In the first instance, this has to relate to a child born during Ahaz's lifetime; essentially, the baby was a sign to the king that God would save his people. This is why Matthew quotes it in his gospel, because he sees even more clearly than Isaiah how much the world needs God to step in and save it. And the birth he is describing is of the baby, the sign that God will definitively save the people.

### Preaching Point

What are people's hopes or expectations for a 'saviour' today? How does Jesus meet or challenge those expectations?

Messianic prophecy in the Old Testament is like a river. Early on in the Bible there are tiny rivulets; whispered clues about what God is planning. Over time, those rivulets become streams. Sometimes these are visible, loudly demanding our attention. At other times they disappear underground and we may think they have vanished. But they haven't, and one by one they re-emerge, combine and rush like a great river towards Jesus Christ.

Many of these streams run through the book of Isaiah. Each one gives a glimpse of one of the ways that God operates, one of the patterns he is setting up. And when they converge they build a fuller picture.

Kingship is one of those streams. The book of Judges displays the maelstrom of violence that occurs when 'there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes' (see Judges 21:25 in the context of chapters 19-21). In 2 Samuel 7, God makes a promise to David of having a son always on his throne. But as we have discussed, the book of Isaiah is set during the moral failure of the Davidic monarchy and then its catastrophic ending with the Babylonian conquest (see 2 Kings 25:1-7). The people might well have imagined that God had forgotten his promise; that the 'Davidic king' stream had dried up. Now, with this in mind, read Isaiah 11. Jesse was King David's father (see 1 Samuel 16) so the image of the stump of Jesse (v.1) is a picture of David's dynasty being cut off. But despite all appearances, the promise had not failed, and God had not forgotten his people. 'There shall come forth a shoot', a new Davidic king will arise. And, what's more, this king will govern wisely (v.2) and justly (v.3-5); something that no king of Israel had ever fully achieved. In the New Testament, the kingship of Jesus is proclaimed from his very earliest days (e.g. Matthew 2:1-2).

The jubilee is a stream of prophecy, too. In Leviticus 25 a set of laws are given about Sabbath years. In particular, the fiftieth year, the jubilee year, was a year of good news. Land reverted to its original owners, debts were cancelled, and those who had been forced to sell themselves into bonded servitude were set free. It was to be a year of good news, particularly for the poor – but there is no clear evidence that the nation ever actually did it. Watch the stream emerge in Isaiah 61, a pivotal passage where the prophet speaks of one who would be anointed 'to bring good news to the poor' and 'liberty to the captives' (v.1-2). It then becomes a torrent in Luke 4, where Jesus reads the

prophecy aloud and says the electrifying words, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (v.21).

### **Preaching Point**

What stories and images do the gospel writers use to present Jesus as a king and a bringer of jubilee? How many can you think of?

Another stream was the suffering of the faithful servant of God. Most of the time, the biblical writers tend to associate obedience with flourishing. See Deuteronomy 28:1-14, or Psalm 1, for example. But there is a quiet, gentle trickle showing the opposite. See Psalm 73:12-13, or the book of Job. In Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 that stream becomes a flood. Here, the faithful servant of God, entirely innocent (53:9) suffers oppression and affliction (52:14; 53:7), is despised by other people (53:2-3) and apparently smitten by God (53:4,10), and ultimately dies (53:8). But the prophet pushes this daring idea even further than the psalmist and Job. Because there is something about this faithful servant's death that benefits others; somehow, others are healed by his affliction (v.5-8). The river roars on into the New Testament, where the passage is quoted frequently by gospel writers (e.g. John 12:38), the apostles (e.g. Romans 4:25; 1 Peter 2:25), and must surely have been in discussion on the road to Emmaus ('O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' Luke 24:25-26).

Last week we touched on another great prophetic stream – the one that floods out in so many parts of Isaiah: light to the nations (42:6; 49:6). Light is a powerful metaphor for justice and truth (51:4), right living and healing (58:8), the blessing and presence of God (60:1). Of course this is picked up again and again in the New Testament to describe Jesus (e.g. John 8:12) and as an exhortation to his people (e.g. Matthew 5:14-16). Ultimately, as Isaiah foresees and Revelation reminds us, God himself will be the light of his people (60:19-20; Revelation 21:23-24).

And this theme of light leads us to one of Isaiah's best-known prophecies, that the people who walk in darkness will see a great light (9:1-7). But as we revisit it, let's not skip from verse 2 to verse 6. If we do, we will miss the promise of a totally demilitarized world (v.5). And that is something we will pick up next week.

### **Preaching Point**

How might understanding the prophetic streams in the Old Testament help us better appreciate who Jesus was and is?

# WEEK 4: Isaiah – A New World

**Helen Paynter**

## **Straining towards God's promised future**

Whichever way you look at the authorship of Isaiah (see introduction), his audience were a people all-too-familiar with conflict and violence. Last week we touched on King Ahaz's dilemma (chapter 7), facing military threat from Israel and Syria and tempted to dally with mighty Assyria, the most brutal empire to date. Isaiah recounts Assyria's devastating invasion of the northern kingdom and much of Judah in the following chapter, and this forms the backdrop for some parts of the book. (You can read of this more fully in 2 Kings 17-19.) Isaiah also speaks of the Babylonian invasion which came about 150 years later (2 Kings 24:10-17). His words capture something of the desperation of that time:

*A man will seize one of his brothers in his father's house, and say,*

*"You have a cloak, you be our leader; take charge of this heap of ruins!" (Isaiah 3:6)*

The book of Lamentations will take you even more deeply into the devastation that the Babylonians wrought.

### **Preaching Point**

Why and in what ways might Israel have felt forgotten by God? Why and in what ways might we feel the same way today?

But although Isaiah engages deeply with the politics of his day, he is ultimately optimistic. One of his great themes is that God will redeem his people. Chapter 40 is widely considered to be the turning point of the book:

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*

*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her*

*that her hard service has been completed,*

*that her sin has been paid for. (Isaiah 40:1-2)*

This is a message of hope for the people in exile; God has not forgotten them and will redeem them. Isaiah draws on exodus imagery to describe the promised rescue. This is particularly striking in chapter 43, where God is described as making a path in the sea and inundating horses and chariots (vv.18-19, compare with Exodus 14:15-31). It's easy to see why this would be a useful image to use; God's people knew their history and how God had brought them out of a place of oppression. Isaiah promises that he will do it once again.

But did the anticipated mass exodus from Babylonia ever take place? In 538 BCE the Persian king Cyrus issued a proclamation allowing the captive peoples to return home and establish themselves in vassal states. You can read about this in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-4; you can also see the Cyrus Cylinder for yourself in the British Museum. But the trickle of people who made their way back and rebuilt the temple and walls of Jerusalem was nothing like the glory days of Moses. Many people never returned, and those who did found themselves living in a Wild West, frontier-style existence quite different from the kingdom of David or Solomon.

So did God's promise in Isaiah fail? According to New Testament scholar Tom Wright, God's people in the time of Jesus believed that the return from exile had not yet fully taken place. They were still

under foreign occupation, for one thing. And the new temple had never been filled with the presence of God as the old one and the tabernacle were. (Compare Ezra 6:13-22 with Exodus 40:34-35 and 1 Kings 8:10-11.)

### **Preaching Point**

What do we think of as the 'good ol' days'? How might Isaiah's vision of the future keep us looking forward not back?

So perhaps Isaiah has something more distant in view as well as the immediate comfort for the exiled people of God. And there are many clues that this is the case. This is what will happen when the expected 'son' takes his throne:

*Every warrior's boot used in battle  
and every garment rolled in blood  
will be destined for burning,  
will be fuel for the fire.  
For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders. (Isaiah 9:5-6)*

As Isaiah struggles to describe this wonderful future, the exodus language is useful but not enough. So he turns to creation language. The chaos that swirls around the people sounds like the pre-creation emptiness (*tohu* and *bohu*, Genesis 1:2) and the land is populated with unclean animals signifying the disruption of human dominion (Genesis 1:28).

*The desert owl and screech owl will possess it;  
the great owl and the raven will nest there.  
God will stretch out over Edom  
the measuring line of chaos (*tohu*)  
and the plumb line of desolation (*bohu*). (Isaiah 34:11)*

### **Preaching Point**

What images might we use to describe the chaos of today? What images might help people imagine a world made new?

But Isaiah, perhaps more than any other prophet, foresees a world made new (65:17; 66:22). Here, creation will once more exist in perfect harmony, and human dominion over creation will be perfect – and peaceful (Isaiah 11:6-9).

What Isaiah dimly foresaw, we too are still awaiting. Centuries later, the writer of Revelation took up much of Isaiah's language as he, too, strained forward to God's promised future. (Compare Isaiah 65-66 with Revelation 21-22.) But we know more than the Old Testament prophet did; the 'son' of Isaiah 9 now has a name – Jesus. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end (Isaiah 9:7).

Even so. Come, Lord Jesus.

# Further Resources

If you have found the notes in this booklet helpful and would like to explore the depths of Isaiah further, here are some suggestions of resources that might help you.

**Key:** \* Introductory    \*\* Accessible    \*\*\* Advanced

## BOOKS

### Isaiah Devotional Books:

- John Goldingay, *Isaiah for Everyone* (SPCK, 2001) \*
- Alec Motyer, *Isaiah by the Day: A New Devotional Translation* (Christian Focus, 2014) \*

### Isaiah Study Books:

- Richard S Briggs, *Reading Isaiah, A Beginner's Guide* (Grove biblical series, Grove Books, 2010) \*
- Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (The Bible Speaks Today series, IVP, 1997) \*\*
- John E. Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah* (IVP, 2014) \*\*
- Hyun Chul Paul Kim, *Reading Isaiah: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2016) \*\*
- Abernethy, Brett, Bulkeley & Meadowcroft, *Isaiah and Imperial Context: The Book of Isaiah in the Times of Empire* (Pickwick Publications, 2013) \*\*
- J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (SPCK, 1999) \*\*\*
- Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, *The Oxford Handbook of Isaiah* (OUP, 2020) \*\*\*
- Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39 & Isaiah 40-66* (Westminster Bible Companion series, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) \*\*\*

### Wider Understanding:

- Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Modern Classics series, Harper Perennial, 2001) \*\*
- Jeanette Mathews, *Prophets as Performers* (Cascade, 2020) \*\*
- Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim & Peterson, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Abingdon Press, 2005) \*\*
- Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, revised 2010)
- Brian Wintle, *South Asia Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, 2015)

## USEFUL WEBSITES

- Simply type 'Isaiah' into the website search engine for a wealth of useful info and resources.
- bibleproject.com \* (includes videos, blogs, notes to help you explore Isaiah)
- www.biblesociety.org.uk \* (includes a rich and accessible introduction to Isaiah)
- www.thegospelcoalition.org \* (includes a short introductory course on Isaiah)
- www.youtube.com/user/baptistuniongb \*\* (includes 3 helpful videos by Helen Paynter about Isaiah)

- [www.methodist.org.uk/walking-with-micah](http://www.methodist.org.uk/walking-with-micah) \* (*resources to explore what it means to be part of a justice-seeking church*)

## **SMALL GROUPS & ALL AGE**

- Drew Hunter, *Isaiah: A 12-Week Study* (Crossway, 2013) \*
- Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: Isaiah* (Seedbed, 2016) \*

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Bible Month provides a toolkit for you and your church to engage with the book of Isaiah over four weeks. It includes Bible notes with preaching ideas and a timeline; small group study guides, all-age resources; a reflection on what Isaiah says about justice and equality; a reflection on what Isaiah says about discipleship; and suggestions for further study.

Written by Rev Dr Helen Paynter (Bible notes) with Abi Jarvis (study guides), Michael Wadsworth (timeline and further study), Gail Adcock (all age material), and reflections by Clare Williams and Rev Dr John Goldingay.

**[www.preachweb.org/biblemonth](http://www.preachweb.org/biblemonth)**

**[www.methodist.org.uk/biblemonth](http://www.methodist.org.uk/biblemonth)**