

Session Four

Isaiah Part 1: Prophet of Woe



Group sculpture of the Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel

A. Establish the Context

In this session, we move from the minor prophets to Isaiah, the first—and perhaps the greatest—of the major prophets. The opening verses of Isaiah place him firmly in the same time period as Hosea by naming the same four kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The main “villain” we encounter in Isaiah has been introduced to us in Jonah: Assyria, whose capital is Nineveh.

Hosea, you may recall, speaks to Israel, the Northern Kingdom. He expresses God’s heart-cry to the people, who have abandoned him to worship other gods, and he warns that the consequence of continued infidelity will be exile. The northern kings do not listen to Hosea. Instead of returning to the LORD, they scramble to build foreign alliances—particularly as Tiglath-pileser comes to power in Assyria and begins a series of aggressive, empire-building campaigns that threaten Israel’s existence.

In this session, we will see how the struggles in Israel affect Judah. King Pekah of Israel threatens to invade Judah, which is ruled by King Ahaz, if Ahaz will not join his anti-Assyrian alliance. Isaiah is called upon to advise Ahaz, and he warns him that Israel will be conquered as the consequence of its persistent unfaithfulness and reliance on other nations rather than on God. This prediction comes true in 722 BC. When Israel is conquered, Judah is spared, but the reprieve is short-lived. In 701 BC, Assyria’s king, Sennacherib, takes a huge army to the gates of Jerusalem and threatens Judah as well.

The first half of the book of Isaiah is set during this crucial time period. Like Hosea, Isaiah gives voice to God’s strong and loving cry to his children. This voice is full of warning and promises of judgment in Isaiah 1–39, which, taken together, have been called the “Book of Woe.” While the people of Judah watch the fall of Israel from the sidelines, they should not think they are immune to the consequences of turning from God simply because they possess Jerusalem, the Temple, and a Davidic king. God calls Judah to repent and gives the people multiple signs of his will to save them for the sake of his promise to King David.

For now, we will focus on the first thirty-nine chapters of the book of Isaiah, leaving the second half of the book—the “Book of Consolation”—for the next session. Given Isaiah’s scope and richness, our aim in both sessions is simply to present an overall picture of the whole.

Regarding authorship: It is not known for certain whether Isaiah wrote the entire book or whether Isaiah 40–55 and 56–66 were written by one or more others (called “Second Isaiah” and “Third Isaiah”). Most scholars agree that the book holds together as a literary and theological unit. For the purposes of this study, we will refer to the author of all sixty-six chapters as Isaiah.

And now, the “Book of Woe” ...

B. Read the Story

We recommend that you read Isaiah 1–12, 36–39 in one sitting. As with many of the prophetic books, Isaiah is not a seamless narrative but a collection of oracles. Do not worry about understanding everything; simply read to get a feel for what is written. The following questions will help you take a deeper look at some of the highlights.

Going Deeper (optional): To get the entire story and message of Isaiah’s “Book of Woe,” read Isaiah 1–39. Further background can be found in 2 Kings 16–20.

As always, pray before you read.

C. Take a Deeper Look

Answering these questions will draw you into the heart of the story. If you do not understand something, make a note of it to bring up in the small-group discussion.

GOD REASONS WITH ISRAEL AND CALLS FOR REPENTANCE (ISAIAH 1)

Isaiah 1:1 introduces the author, his audience, and the overall historical context. If you have not done so yet, find the kings named there on your Bible Timeline Chart.

1. In Isaiah 1:2–4, “The LORD” (literally, “YHWH,” the God who established a covenant with his people) lays out his case against Judah.
 - a. What are the charges?
 - b. Compare these charges to the charges God levels against Israel in Hosea 4:1–6. How are they similar? Why is this significant? (See questions 4–6 in Session Two.)
2. The sacrifices Hosea condemns in Israel are made at false altars to false gods (see Hosea 2:13, 8:13; NAB 2:15, 8:13). In Isaiah 1, God rejects Judah’s sacrifices made to him in the Temple in Jerusalem. Why? (See Isaiah 1:12–15, and read CCC 2100 for insight into this question.)

3. God lays two paths before his people in Isaiah 1:18-20. What are the two paths, and where do they lead? (See also Isaiah 1:27.)

4. **Think About It:** What does Isaiah 1 reveal about God's heart and desire?

THE CALL OF ISAIAH (ISAIAH 6)

In Isaiah 5, God sings a plaintive love song for his beloved Judah, which is overrun with injustice like an abandoned vineyard with thorns. He pronounces a series of woes on the land; as a consequence of Judah's rebellion, judgment is at hand. God will "whistle for" (Isaiah 5:26) a foreign nation to invade them and carry them off into exile. It is against this backdrop that Isaiah in chapter 6 tells of his call, which comes at a crucial time. "The year that King Uzziah died" (Isaiah 6:1) marks the end of a time of peace and prosperity and the start of Tiglath-pileser of Assyria's ruthless, empire-building crusades. God will allow this looming threat to overcome his people if they do not return to his loving care.

5. Read Isaiah 6:1-8.
 - a. Consider the details of Isaiah's vision. What do they tell you about God?
 - b. **New Testament Connection:** Centuries later, the apostle John is given a similar vision in Revelation 4:1-8. What similarities do you see between the two descriptions?
 - c. Think about what the angels say in this passage. Does it sound familiar? At what part of the Mass do we enter into this angelic praise of God's holiness? What do we say?
6. Read all of Isaiah 6.
 - a. Based on Isaiah 6, what kind of a man is Isaiah?

- b. Think About It:** What might be discouraging or encouraging about the details of Isaiah's calling? Is there encouragement in the fact that he himself is cleansed?

- 7. Catechism Connection:** Read CCC 208, and consider what you have read in Isaiah 6. What ramification does the holiness of God have for people who are separated from him by sin?

"THE LORD HIMSELF WILL GIVE YOU A SIGN" (ISAIAH 7:14)

That Isaiah's lips are cleansed is a sign of what God is willing to do for all his people if they will return to him. This "call story" prepares us for two signs of hope that God will send to two very different kings: Ahaz and his son, Hezekiah. Consult your Bible Timeline Chart if you need a reminder of their place in the "big picture."

- 8.** By the days of King Ahaz, Judah is in crisis. Israel (Ephraim)¹ and Syria have joined against Assyria, and they are attempting to force Judah to join their revolt. As an alternative, Ahaz enters into a protection treaty with Assyria, requiring Judah vassals to pay tribute to and worship Assyrian gods.² Isaiah is a court prophet with Ahaz's ear, and he speaks to him for the LORD. Read Isaiah 7:1-9. What message does he bring?
- 9.** This message bears with it the hope that Ahaz will put his trust in God and not in political alliances. Isaiah asks Ahaz to request a sign—which he refuses to do. But God himself gives Ahaz a sign for the house of David. Read Isaiah 7:10-17.
 - a.** The sign is a familiar one. Describe it and the One who is promised.

¹ "Ephraim," the name of the largest tribe in the north, was sometimes used to refer to the entire Northern Kingdom, Israel. "The house of David" in verse 2 refers to the kingdom of Judah.

² See 2 Kings 16:7, 16:10-18.

GOD GIVES AHAZ A SIGN

Efforts to explain the sign of Emmanuel within its immediate historical context have largely failed. “The passage about the virgin who gives birth to Emmanuel,” Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “is a word in waiting.”³ That Word, Christians believe, came to pass when a virgin of Nazareth gave birth to one who is truly “Emmanuel,” God with us. Pope Benedict continues: “Marius Reiser has summed up the way Christian readers have experienced this passage as follows: ‘The prophet’s prediction is like a miraculously formed keyhole, into which the key of Christ fits perfectly’” (Bibelkritik, 328).⁴

- b. The sign of a coming child echoes through the next few chapters. Read Isaiah 9:6-7 (NAB 9:5-6). What role and characteristics will this child have?

- 10. In Isaiah 11:1, the expected Savior-child is described as “a shoot from the stump of Jesse” (i.e., a King from the royal line of Jesse’s son David, which will have been cut off by that time).
 - a. Read Isaiah 11:2-5, and list the characteristics of this future anointed King.

 - b. Read Isaiah 11:10-12 and 11:16.⁵ What will this “root of Jesse” accomplish?

HEZEKIAH’S VICTORY (ISAIAH 36–39)

In 722 BC, toward the end of Ahaz’s reign in Judah, the prediction that came with the sign in Isaiah 7 comes to pass as Assyria sweeps into the Northern Kingdom of Israel, conquering Samaria and resettling most of the population in other parts of the Assyrian Empire. Israel is no more.

In 715 BC, Ahaz’s son, Hezekiah, succeeds him to the throne. The situation in Judah becomes dire, with no buffer between it and the continued onslaught of Assyria. We have already seen that the people of Judah rely on religious ritualism while their hearts are far from God. Politically, there is constant pressure to turn to other nations—instead of to God—for help.

- 11. In 701 BC, Sennacherib brings his huge Assyrian army to the gates of Jerusalem and the “Rabshakeh” (called the “the commander” in the NAB) delivers a message.
 - a. Read Isaiah 36:13-20. What challenge does the commander bring to the people?

³ Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger). *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Random House, 2012), 50-51.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In Isaiah 11:10, “stand as an ensign” (“set up as a signal” in the NAB) means to put up a banner or raise a flag for the nations to gather around.

- b. Now read Hezekiah's response to this challenge in Isaiah 37:1-4, 37:14-20 (where he responds when it comes a second time). Explain how Hezekiah lives up to his name, which means, "God is my strength."
- c. Read Isaiah 37:33-38. What is the result? What does this say about God?

D. Application

This question will help you apply one of the key themes of the session to your life. After meditating on it, respond to God with a brief written prayer if you choose.

Do you wonder where Hezekiah finds the strength of faith he needs to face Sennacherib? Isaiah 38 gives us a clue. A year prior to the Assyrian invasion, Hezekiah's fervent prayers on his deathbed had brought him personal healing and a reprieve for the nation: fifteen additional years of life and a promise that God would deliver him and Jerusalem from Assyria. His beautiful prayer of thanksgiving and devotion to the LORD is recorded there as well. Spend some time reading this chapter and meditating on it. Has there been a time in your life when God has intervened on your behalf? Can this strengthen you for future battles?

Dear Lord ...

SESSION FOUR TALK NOTES

Isaiah Part 1: Prophet of Woe**I. Setting the Stage**

- A. Background and scope
- B. Two-part division
 - 1. “Book of Woe” (Isaiah 1–39) – “Afflict the comfortable”
 - 2. “Book of Consolation” (Isaiah 40–66) – “Comfort the afflicted”
- C. A call to covenant faithfulness

II. Isaiah 1 as an “Overture” – Key Themes Introduced

- A. The problem (Isaiah 1:2-4)
 - 1. Covenant infidelity (language of father-child)
 - 2. They do not know the LORD
- B. God revealed as the Holy One of Israel, *Kadosh Israel* (Isaiah 1:4)
 - 1. A title nearly exclusive to Isaiah
 - 2. Repetition provides inner unity to Isaiah
 - 3. The Holy One issues an appeal to holiness (Isaiah 1:18)
 - a. “Come now, let us reason together” – I can make you clean
 - b. Importance of cooperation
 - c. CCC 1470 on the sacrament of reconciliation

III. God Lays Out His Case Regarding Covenant Infidelity (Isaiah 1–5)

- A. Summation of charges (Isaiah 1:21-23)
 - 1. The “faithful city” (Jerusalem) “has become a harlot”
 - 2. Violence, treachery, lack of love for the poor
- B. Expanded in chapters to come

IV. God Calls Isaiah (Isaiah 6)

- A. Vision of God enthroned
- B. Song of the Seraphim
 - 1. *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh* – holy to the highest degree
 - 2. Parallel in book of Revelation
- C. Isaiah’s response (“Woe is me”)
 - 1. He confesses his sin
 - 2. “Woe” used eight times in Isaiah 3–5 to describe Judah
 - 3. Isaiah identifies with his people

D. Isaiah purified, set apart (Isaiah 6:6-7)

1. Burning coal to unclean lips before he speaks for God
2. Liturgical connection to Eucharist: Mass of St. John Chrysostom
3. St. John of Damascus: "Let us take hold of the divine coal [the Eucharist], so that the fire of our longing, fed by the flame of the coal, may purge away our sins"⁶

E. Isaiah's mission and response: "Here am I! Send me" (Isaiah 6:8)

1. The people resist

V. Historical Account of King Ahaz (Isaiah 7-8; NAB 7:1-8:22)

A. Syria and Israel try to force Ahaz (Judah) to join them against Assyria

B. Ahaz's choice: fear or faith?

C. The LORD gives Ahaz a sign

1. A virgin will conceive and bear a Son, Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14)
2. Who is the Son? The prophecy is:
 - a. "A word in waiting" (Pope Benedict)⁷
 - b. "A miraculously formed keyhole into which the key of Christ fits perfectly"⁸

D. The multiple layers of prophetic fulfillment

E. Ahaz tells Assyria of its treachery, weakening himself in the process

VI. Oracles Against the Nations

VII. Historical Account of King Hezekiah (Isaiah 36-39)

A. Contrast with Ahaz – a case study of trust, not failed faith

1. "Double trouble" – threats expressed in letter
2. Hezekiah takes the situation to God
3. Motivation: so all will know you are the LORD (Isaiah 37:20)

B. A supernatural solution

C. Every problem is an invitation to faith

1. "Believing means entrusting oneself to a merciful love which always accepts and pardons. ... Faith consists in the willingness to let ourselves be constantly transformed and renewed by God's call."⁹

VIII. Conclusion: Prayer of Renewal¹⁰

⁶ "An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," 4:13.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, (New York: Crown Publishing, 2012), 50.

⁸ Ibid, quoting Marius Reiser, *Bibelkritik*, 328.

⁹ *Lumen Fidei* 13.

¹⁰ For the text of this prayer, which is prayed at the close of each session, see page 12.