

Isaiah – Part I . . . Catholic Scripture Study

Memory verse: (Is1:18-20)

***"Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.
If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the
land;
But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."***

Week 1 – Introduction

“Of all the books in the Old Testament (OT), Isaiah is perhaps the richest. Its literary grandeur is unequaled. Its scope is unparalleled. The breadth of its view of God is unmatched.

In so many ways it is a book of superlatives. Thus it is no wonder that Isaiah is the most quoted prophet in the New Testament (NT), and along with the Psalms and Deuteronomy, one of the most frequently cited of all OT books.

Study of it is an opportunity for unending inspiration and challenge
. . .

“To read the book with the open eyes of the spirit is to see oneself, at times all too clearly, but also to see a God whose holiness is made irresistible by his love.”

-- *John N. Oswalt - The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39 (pg 3)*

I. THE BIBLE OF JESUS AND THE JEWS

As we study the book of the Prophet Isaiah – the greatest of all the classical OT prophets - it is helpful to keep in mind that the OT was completed long before the time of Jesus.

It was (and still is) the sole Bible of the Jews, God's first people, before it become part of the Christian Bible.

It should not be forgotten that Jesus Himself was raised on the OT, and that he based his whole ministry on what it says, and that he approached his death with its words on his lips.

Christians have in this ancient collection of Jewish writings a unique insight not only into the will and purposes of God the Father, but into the mind and heart of God's Son, who was Himself born a Jew, and who through the Cross and Resurrection became the Savior of the world.

Read reverently and imaginatively the Old Testament can become a living and relevant force in our everyday lives.

II. PROPHETS AND PROPHECY

Both Jewish and Christian traditions hold the books of the prophets in high regard, because prophecy was an integral part of the religious heritage of ancient Israel.

These books record the **Word of God** addressed to his people through the **oracles** (=direct words of God) of the prophets.

Predictions of the immediate and distant future are often interrelated, not on the basis of years separating the events but on the analogy of the pattern joining present with very distant, though similar, conditions and circumstances.

A. What is a Prophet?

A prophet is “one chosen by God to speak in His name.” In the Bible, a prophet is given various titles such as, “man of God,” “man of the Spirit,” and “servant of the Lord.”

The prophets were spokesmen of God, intermediaries between him and his people. The communications they received from God came through visions, dreams, and ecstasies and were transmitted to the people through preaching, writings and symbolic actions.

B. The Office of Prophet

The office of prophet was due to a direct call from God. It was not due to heredity, or to the appointment of kings or priests. It was not a permanent gift but a transient one, subject entirely to the Divine will.

- Only the call of God set aside a prophet.

As an institution proper to Israel, prophecy began during the very early days of the monarchy, at the shrines to which the Israelites sought answers to their questions and to discover what the Lord's will demanded of them.

Often the prophets saw the enemies of Israel as instruments of God, as when Isaiah prophesied that the plans of human beings would be destroyed by the rod of God's anger, namely, the **Assyrians** (Is 8:5-8; 10:5-11).

At the heart of the prophetic call was God's plea for the Israelites to return to their personal relationship with their Lord.

- They should **return** to their God (Isa 55:7; Ezek 18:30; Hos 6:1),
- They should **seek** the Lord (Amos 5:4-6) and
- They should **know** the Lord again (Hos 6:3; Jer 31:34).

C. The First Prophets

The first persons to be called prophets in the Old Testament were **Abraham** (Gen 20:7), **Aaron** (Exod 7:1), **Miriam** (Exod 15:20), and, above all **Moses**, who is honoured as the greatest prophet of all (Deut 34:10).

Samuel, a prophet in the temple of Shiloh (cf. 1 Sam 3: 19-21) is considered to have been the earliest of the classical prophets of Israel (1 Sam 3:20).

III. PROPHECY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament represents the fulfillment of the words and oracles of the prophets of the Old Testament (Matt 1:22; 26:56; Luke 1:70, 18:31; Acts 3:21).

The prophets of old spoke words that have come to pass. Old Testament prophets are frequently mentioned or quoted, including Jeremiah, Daniel, Joel, Jonah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah, and especially Isaiah who is quoted or paraphrased nearly 100 times in the New Testament.

A. Prophecy Today

According to Vatican II, the gift of prophecy survives in the Church, for “all the holy people of God share also in the Church’s prophetic office: it spreads abroad a living witness to him, especially by a life of faith and love and by offering to God the sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips which praise his name” (Vatican II: *Dei Verbum* #11).

However, when Vatican II says that all Christians share in the prophetic office, it is speaking of prophecy as **witnessing to one’s faith**. This is a legitimate use of the term, but that is not what we mean when we talk about the **charism** of prophecy, which, “as a distributed grace,” is not given to all, but to some members for the upbuilding of the whole body.

The **charism** of prophecy should be distinguished, on the one hand, from that “sharing in the prophetic office of Christ” which, as Vatican II teaches, characterizes the whole people of God, and, on the other hand, from the prophetic vocation, that is, the calling to be a prophet.

So the three forms of prophecy are:

- Sharing in the prophetic office of Christ – in which all Christians share, through Baptism, by **witnessing to one's faith**;
- The **charism** of prophecy, which, “as a distributed grace,” is not given to all, but to some members for the upbuilding of the whole body.
- The **prophetic vocation**, that is, the calling to be a prophet.

To be sure the prophetic vocation involves the charism of prophecy, but not everyone who receives the charism of prophecy is called by God to be a prophet.

IV. THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

There are 16 prophetic books in the Biblical canon: Four major and twelve minor – minor being a distinction referring only to length, not importance.

- Four Major Prophets: **Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel** and **Daniel**.
- Twelve Minor Prophets: **Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah,** and **Malachi**.

The prophets whose names are associated with these books lived in the following periods:

- Eighth century BC: Amos, Hosea, **Isaiah**, and Micah;

- Sixth century BC: Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel;
- Persian period: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi;
- Later period: Obadiah and Jonah (it is difficult to be more specific as to the period).
- Dating of Daniel: There are two theories regarding the dating of the book of Daniel – one theory places it in the sixth century BC and the other in the second century BC.

Jewish and Christian tradition holds to the sixth century date.

V. ISAIAH THE PROPHET

In Hebrew, the word ISAIAH means “the Lord is salvation,” or “the Lord saves, helps.”

A. Public Ministry

Isaiah probably began his public ministry at the age of 20 and prophesied from around 742 to 701 B.C. in Jerusalem. He held the post of royal adviser to the Kings of Judah.

B. Mission

As a prophet, Isaiah was given a mission to proclaim the fall of **Israel** and the chastisement of **Judah** due to their flagrant violations of the Lord’s covenant.

He was a contemporary of the prophet **Micah** during a time of immense political and social upheaval, and his prophetic ministry spanned the reins of three Kings of Judah: **Jotham**, **Ahaz**, and **Hezekiah**.

VI. THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

The book of Isaiah is the first of the four Major Prophets and is important for the following reasons:

- It is the Old Testament book most quoted in the New Testament;
- Of the prophets, Isaiah offers the most significant teaching on the Messiah and the Christian plan of salvation.
- Its length and location in the Bible.

A. Authorship and Date

The unanimous view of **tradition** holds that Isaiah was the author of the entire book of prophecies that bear his name.

Many scholars in the modern era, on the other hand, suggest that multiple authors are responsible for the book. In their view,

- Chapters 1–39 are the writings of Isaiah himself (765-695);
- Chapters 40-55, by another anonymous prophet called Deutero-Isaiah (Second Isaiah), who wrote towards the end of the exile; and
- Chapters 56-66 are oracles written after the Babylonian Exile, either by the author of Deutero-Isaiah or by a later disciple.

For these reasons the book of Isaiah can be taken as having three parts, in line with the content and the historical background of each part.

The first part (First Isaiah) covers chapters 1-39 and has to do with the times of the kings of Judah from **Uzziah** (d. 742 – the same year Isaiah began his prophetic ministry) to **Hezekiah**.

Note: So long as one is open to the possibility of true prophecy, chapters 40-66 need not be disassociated from the eighth-century

B.C. prophet, even if his oracles look forward to significant events destined to take place in the fifth century and later.

VII. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As with most of the OT books, a knowledge of the historical background of the book of Isaiah is essential to understand its message.

One of the unique features of Isaiah's book, and one which has led to the theory of multiple authorship, is its address to three different historical settings.

- The first of these is during Isaiah's lifetime, from 739 to 701 B.C. This time span is covered in chapters 1-39.

The second and third periods are long after Isaiah's death.

- They are the periods of exile (605-539 B.C.), chapters 40-55,
- And of the return (the total period is 539 – 500/400 B.C.), chs. 55-66

As we shall see, Isaiah appeared at a critical moment of Israel's history.

B. Assyria's Expansion and Conquest

The second half of the eighth century B.C. - from 739-701 B.C. - saw the emergence of Assyria's last period of greatness. Israel and the entire region lived in fear of the Assyrian armies, and some kingdoms formed coalitions in an attempt to keep them at bay.

The Assyrian homeland was located in what is now northern Iraq along the Tigris River. Two great cities, Asshur and Nineveh, were at the heart of the Assyrian empire.

Judah, too, was under threat, and it was in two minds whether to enter into alliances against Assyria or put its trust in the Lord.

In the year 722 BC, the Assyrians conquered Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, marking the end of Israel (the northern kingdom).

Jerusalem itself was besieged by the army of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, in 701 B.C.

- This siege was broken by divine intervention.

In the year that Uzziah, king of Judah, died (742), Isaiah received his call to the prophetic office in the **Temple of Jerusalem** (the call is described in Isaiah, chapter 6).

During his lifetime, Isaiah witnessed a devastating series of Assyrian invasions resulting in the destruction of most of the major cities of Judah's northern neighbor, **Israel**.

The cities of **Judah** were the last to fall but Jerusalem survived – only just – in 701 BC.

VIII. MESSAGE

The book of Isaiah deals with the great themes of God, man and salvation.

The two main themes that run throughout the book are the transcendence of God, and the grave offense that man's sin causes him.

The specific theme for each of the book's three sections is:

1. Part One: The Messiah that is to come (chapters 1-39);
2. Part Two: Salvation for the whole world (chapters 40-55);
3. Part three: Hope in regard to the End Times (chapters 56-66).

A. The Moral Decline of Israel and Judah

Isaiah speaks out:

- Against the moral conditions in the kingdom of Judah - against the idolatry, corruption, indifference to the suffering of the poor, and growing oppression that flourished in this time.
- To promise hope and salvation for those who remain faithful to the covenant with the Lord, and
- To bring comfort and consolation in the face of the mounting threats to the kingdom and God's Chosen People.

B. God Revealed in Isaiah

Isaiah writes about the holiness of God – the fact that he is above all created things, visible and invisible.

But this God, the Lord who reveals himself to Israel as being almighty and above all things, the author of creation and of human history, is not an abstract of being.

He is a **personal being**, having attributes and qualities that can be described in human terms.

The Book of Isaiah – Part One

Indictment of Israel and Judah (Is 1-5)

I. BACKGROUND

In Isaiah's time, the Assyrian empire - the superpower of its time - was expanding rapidly across wide stretches of the Middle East, conquering many nations/kingdoms.

The entire region lived in fear of the Assyrian armies, and some kingdoms formed coalitions in an attempt to keep them at bay.

It was a time of crisis for **Israel** and **Judah** facing almost total destruction because the people of God had rebelled and turned away from Him.

Isaiah lived in Jerusalem throughout most of the second half of the eighth century BC (c. 765-695).

According to the heading or title (Is 1:1), Isaiah's prophetic visions took place over a period of some 40 years - from the reign of Uzziah (died 742 B.C.) to that of Hezekiah (727-698 B.C.).

During Isaiah's early prophetic ministry, the relative peace of Judah had encouraged a decline in the religious life of the people. Idolatry, corruption, indifference to the suffering of the poor, and growing oppression had flourished in this time.

Into this toxic and threatening situation, God calls Isaiah to denounce the sins of the people and to bring them to conversion.

II. THE PROPHET'S VISION (IS 1:1)

Read: Isaiah 1:1

[1] The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

A. The Vision

The heading has a very important purpose. It describes the enormous collection of prophecies, the longest in the Bible, as a “vision,” the “vision” of an eighth century B.C. prophet by the name of Isaiah, son of Amoz (not the prophet Amos).

As previously mentioned, there are good reasons for dating parts of the book to the seventh and six centuries, possibly even later.

Some commentators suggest that many of the later chapters in the book were probably first written in the time of the Babylonian exile in the mid sixth century B.C.

- (However, see **“Note”** under “Authorship and Date” regarding predictive prophecy).

In any case, the book is a “vision,” and so regardless of when the prophet lived, his “words” go beyond the immediate historical circumstances of his day.

They are addressed not only to the citizens of the eighth century B.C. Jerusalem or to the Babylonian exiles in the six century B.C., but to “us who are all here alive this day” (Deut 5:3).

III. ISRAEL'S CONDITION (ISAIAH 1:2-9)

This opening section of the chapter gives the charge against Israel: She has forsaken the Lord, and is, as a result, broken and desolate. God himself opens the proceedings and makes the charges – charges of rebellion (v.2) and corruption (v.4).

Isaiah concludes (v.9) that only because of the mercy of God does the land continue to exist at all.

A. Prophetic Denunciation of the People

Read: Isaiah 1:2-3

*[2] Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:*

*"Sons have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me.*

*[3] The ox knows its owner,
and the ass its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people does not understand."*

The first section begins with a call to **"Hear the word of the Lord."** Heaven and earth are summoned like witnesses to hear the charges against Israel.

This law-court scene, in which **Israel** (not the northern kingdom, but the entire chosen people) stands accused before God, is a very common legal style of writing often found in the prophetic literature of Israel.

It has the effect of emphasizing the justice of God and at the same time provides an opportunity for arguments and appeals.

The passage begins by calling on heaven and earth to witness how wickedly the people have acted, and by accusing them of forsaking the Lord vs. 2-3.

It is significant that the very first oracle calls not for justice or love or piety or faith, but for reason (cf. v.18). Even the dumb animals (***the ox knows its owner***) have more sense than Israel: they can recognize their master, while the people of Israel have ignored their own Father.

- It is stupidity as much as disobedience or rebellion that is being condemned.

IV. A SINFUL NATION (IS 1:4-9)

A. Overview

The prophet then turns to address the evil doers themselves. Keep in mind that he was concerned more with the **leaders** of his city, rather than with the ordinary people.

This is evident from the specific reference to “rulers” (v.10), “princes” (v 23), “judges” and “counselors” (v 26) the “nobility” (5:14) as well as to their victims, the fatherless and widows.

Read: Isaiah 1:4

***[4] Ah, sinful nation,
a people laden with iniquity,
offspring of evildoers,
sons who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the LORD,
they have despised the Holy One of Israel,
they are utterly estranged.***

B. Affluence and Iniquity

The citizens of Jerusalem were for the most part well off, the owners of “large and beautiful homes” (5:9), their wealth and security built up over the previous 100 years or so.

Affluence and **iniquity** need not be connected, but it is evident from the examples singled out for prophetic attack, in chapters 2-5 especially, that they were in eighth century B.C. Jerusalem.

- Wealth was used to finance foreign soothsayers and idols, drunkenness and greed, wantonness and the perversion of justice.

C. Arrogance and Hypocrisy

Above all it was **arrogance** and **hypocrisy** that Isaiah denounced; the arrogance of those with the power to oppress the poor, while at the same time religiously observing the festivals and rituals of the Temple.

These are the sins and iniquities to which the opening prophecy refers. Verse four uses no less than seven terms to describe the terrible state of the “nation.”

The final three phrases refer to the religious implications of what they were doing.

- ***They have forsaken the LORD,***
- ***They have despised the Holy One of Israel,***
- ***They are utterly estranged.***

V. THE CONSEQUENCES OF FORSAKING GOD (IS 1:5-8)

A. Overview

The prophet laments over the desolation and pain that those who neglect God experience and he upbraids them for turning away from God.

God, always the Good Shepherd, looked after his people but received only ingratitude.

- When they rejected God, everything went wrong for them.
- Judah was laid waste and Jerusalem was besieged by the armies of Assyria.

This was meant to bring about a change of heart.

Read: Is 1:5-8

***[5] Why will you still be smitten,
that you continue to rebel?***

***The whole head is sick,
and the whole heart faint.***

***[6] From the sole of the foot even to the head,
there is no soundness in it,
but bruises and sores
and bleeding wounds;
they are not pressed out, or bound up,
or softened with oil.***

***[7] Your country lies desolate,
your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence
aliens devour your land;
it is desolate, as overthrown by aliens.***

***[8] And the daughter of Zion is left
like a booth in a vineyard,
like a lodge in a cucumber field,
like a besieged city.***

A. Images of Disease and Devastation

In 1:5-8 Isaiah uses two graphic images to depict the nation's spiritual condition. The first (vv.5-6) is that of a bruised and wounded body suffering from a hideous, untreated disease, the second of a land destroyed by enemy invasion (vv. 7-8).

- These illustrate the devastating consequences of sin.

Why will you still be smitten, that you continue to rebel?

God is saying to the one already covered from head to foot with a revolting, untreated disease, "where else would you like to be stricken if you continue in your rebellious ways."

The image is that of a slave covered with untreated, infected wounds inflicted by outraged master.

B. More Images of Desolation and Transience

Isaiah introduces a new image (v. 8) to depict the condition of Israel. He uses the images of harvest shelters to symbolize the kinds of desolation, helplessness, and transiency which he sees resulting in Israel because of her rebellion.

Since the farmers customarily lived in villages and walked out to their fields, and since time was too precious during harvest to waste walking back and forth, the families built little sheds in the fields and camped there until the harvest was over.

Those abandoned and falling-down little shacks made a forlorn picture when after the harvest was over.

C. Suffering is Due to Sin

These verses teach us that suffering is due to sin; it is divine judgment upon those who rebel against the Holy One of Israel. Thus the catastrophe of 701 BC is interpreted as punishment on Jerusalem, at the hands of the Assyrian army.

Obviously this is not the only explanation of suffering in the world, whether natural or manmade, but in 701 B.C. there could be no question of “What have I done to deserve this?” especially when the sin and the suffering was there for all to see.

The peoples' sin, their rebellion against God, lay not so much in a deliberate intention to offend Him as in their “**not knowing,**” and “**not understanding**” (cf. 1:3) that everything they had come from the goodness of the Lord.

- They could not claim personal credit for it.

The word translated “smitten” in verse 5 means “smitten by God.” A normal word for “plague” or “affliction” comes from the same root. The whole idea of reward and punishment, portrayed in these

graphic terms, is perhaps best summed up in the words of Deuteronomy (28:58-60):

"If you are not careful to do all the words of this law . . . that you may fear this glorious and awful name, the LORD your God, then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting. And he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, which you were afraid of; and they shall cleave to you.

VI. A REMNANT WILL SURVIVE

In verse 9 we come to a theme that recurs throughout the Bible. It is the notion or theme of the **“remnant”** - a common Biblical term for “those who are left” of a people or nation.

Normally, this is either a **faithful** minority who refuses to join the apostasy (rejection of God) of a majority, or it is the **fortunate** few who survive a catastrophe that overtakes the majority.

Sometimes the remnant is both faithful and fortunate.

It is often the case that the remnant is “chosen” by God and is the object of His special blessing and protection. Verse 9 speaks about this remnant.

Read: Isaiah 1:9

***[9] If the LORD of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we should have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah.***

The prophet is saying, “All is not lost; there is still cause for hope – a remnant will survive (v. 9); they can still mend their ways and have hope of salvation.”

In Romans 9:27-29, St. Paul quotes verse 9 in the context of insisting that God will never revoke his election of Israel; in spite of all the peoples' sins, God will keep a faithful remnant safe.

God kept a remnant in existence, otherwise total destruction would have resulted, and Christ would not have come. For it was through that remnant, in the fullness of time, that he planned to bring the Redeemer into the world.

VII. APPLICATION

A. Rebellion has Consequences.

Consequences for spiritual choices are as certain as consequences for physical choices.

While we cannot deny that there are largely inescapable consequences for physical behavior we insist there are no comparable consequences for spiritual behavior.

We're not offended by the "law" of gravity. We do not feel that our essential freedoms have somehow been infringed upon by the fact that if we jump off a forty-story building, we will do irreparable damage to our selves.

Yet if someone has the nerve to suggest that there might be a comparable "law" in the spiritual realm such a person is treated as if he or she is profoundly evil.

Just as a bruised and wounded body will die if left untended, and a nation may suddenly be destroyed by enemy invasion without God's protection, so if we rebel against the Creator of the universe and reject his ways, spiritual corruption and death will follow.

As intelligent human beings, we should be able to understand that. But Isaiah says that even the dumb ox and the ass seem to know what's best for them, yet humans do not.

Israel does not seem to know as much as the dumb animals and persists in turning its back on God even when it's turning away results in its destruction.

Preparation for Week 2
